Christmas Markets

As the snow starts to fall over Hokkaido, many people in the Sapporo area begin to anticipate the arrival of The German Christmas Market in Sapporo. Held from late November until December 24th, the Market celebrated its eleventh year in 2012. The German Christmas Market in Sapporo was first held in 2002 as a celebration of 30 years of sister city relations between Germany's Munich and Sapporo. The two cities had first been brought together by their similar climates, population sizes as well as their citizen's love of making and drinking beer! However the 30th anniversary of sister city relations offered a unique chance for the city of Sapporo to bring more Munich and German culture into contact with the ordinary citizens of Sapporo. And thus, the German Christmas Market in Sapporo was born!

While the Sapporo's Christmas market has delighted the people of Hokkaido for over a decade, it is actually part of a larger and long standing tradition of German Christmas markets.

The first Christmas markets were held in Germany in the late middle ages. Some like the ones in Bautzen, Frankfurt, and Munich were held as early as the 1300's! The beginning of the season of advent (the time of preparation for the celebration of Christ's birth on Christmas) was marked by the presence of the markets. They were, as they are now, held in the town square, usually in front of an important church. Christmas markets are held all over Germany, with the largest drawing over three million visitors a year!

I was lucky enough to have a chance to visit one of Germany's most famous Christmas markets this year, the Christkindlesmarket in Nuremburg. The origins of the Nuremburg market are unknown, but it has been held for at least 350 years. One of the most visited in Germany, the market and its 200 stalls draw over 2 million visitors every year. Nuremburg is itself famous for traditional German craftwork and it shows in its market. Many of the stalls are beautifully decorated, and even more are selling traditional handcrafted goods and toys.

In this issue of the Red Brick Bulletin I am excited to be able to compare the two markets and show how Sapporo and Hokkaido are now part of the 700 years of German Christmas market history!

Crafts on display in Sapporo. Cute toys and small gifts are often sold are market stalls.

A display of handcrafted wooden figures. Especially beautiful are the nutcrackers which were popularised in the late 1800s (left). As well, lidded beir stiens are pictured right. The design of the traditional German beer mug came into being during the years of the Black Death. Orders to improve public sanitation mandated drinking vessels have lids to prevent insects from falling into beer. Now however the lids are purely decorative!

Traditional German cuisine from the Nuremburg and Sapporo markets. Pretzels (Sapporo, pictured right) while initially invented in France or Italy have been part of the German diet for hundreds of years. The bread is thought to look like a person with their arms crossed in prayer, so pretzels were often given out by the church as alms for the poor or to children who learned their prayers. Now the pretzel is a common snack food and is often eaten with toppings like cheese or honey and can be enjoyed alone or as part of a larger meal. Braised ox-cheek (Nuremburg, right) is a delicious German delicacy. The small sausages grilling (Nuremburg, bottom) are called Nürnberger Bratwürste and are a specialty of the Nuremburg region. Often they are served two or three to a small bread roll with lots of ketchup or mustard

A gingerbread man from the German Christmas Market in Sapporo (pictured below). Gingerbread men are now a common treat for children, but 400 years ago Elizabeth I of England had them created in the likeness of her important guests!

Gingerbread hearts (pictured right) called Lebkuchen in German hanging in a market stall in Nuremburg. Gingerbread is particularly famous in Nuremburg as the city's location was along important spice trading routes from the east during the Middle Ages. Invented by monks, gingerbread was originally associated with the Christian church. Letter shaped cookies were used as a treat to help children learn to read. If a child remembered a letter correctly, they were allowed to eat it! Gingerbread from Nuremburg became so famous that eventually royalty would present it as a diplomatic gift. Now the delicious cookies are a mainstay of Christmas markets. Gingerbread hearts are often given as gifts between sweethearts with messages like `I love you` or ` I think only of you` written on them. However these hearts are meant for children and read `Little bunny rabbit` and `My cute sparrow` respectively.