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# HELVEVIA

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Helvetia is in its 78th year

April 2012

## Easter rabbits, hares or bilbies?



Easter is celebrated around the world in a surprising variety of ways - with traditions like chocolate eggs, wooden rattles, cod fish, and bonfires.

Many things about Easter are still pagan. For example, the English name "Easter" and the German name "Ostern" are both derived from old Germanic roots. Also, the traditions of having an Easter eve bonfire or burning Easter wheels and then pushing them downhill come from Germanic and Celtic sun worship. Even the popular colourful Easter egg has its origins in another pagan belief: It was considered a symbol of fertility in Ancient Egypt.

Easter egg hunts are probably one of the most popular Easter traditions. In many countries, parents hide eggs and sweets - usually outdoors - for their children to find. Sometimes community Easter egg hunts leading up to Easter are a fun way for local people to get together. The Easter bunny (actually a hare in Sweden, Germany, Austria and Switzerland as opposed to a rabbit in English speaking countries) is



known for delivering sweet treats to young children; so it's no surprise that Easter baskets often feature a chocolate bunny. As rabbits are a pest in Australia there's a strong campaign to give Easter bilbies instead. The bilby is an Australian endangered animal; it looks like a large mouse with long soft ears like a rabbit. In France, however, it's not the Easter bunny that children have to thank. It's the Easter bells, back from Rome, that are responsible for sending the chocolates everywhere.

### Religious Easter traditions

For Christians, Easter commemorates the resurrection of Christ after his crucifixion. In Austria you won't hear any church bells ringing from Good Friday till Easter Sunday morning mass, because according to religious lore, they all fly to Rome. Instead, the 'Ratschenbuben' (altar boys with rattles) walk through the streets, making a lot of noise with their 'Ratschen' (wooden rattles), saying prayers, and singing rhymes. In



former times this often led to terrible pogroms.

Many families follow the ritual of abstaining from meat on Fridays between Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. Some Catholic families give up meat and other special foods during Lent altogether. Some even give up their recreational activities. The money saved from giving up these luxuries is put aside in a little jar to be offered on Easter Day at the local church.

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