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BIRTHDAY CANDLES AND THE GERMAN KINDERFEST

CANDLES ALL DAY

In Germany in the 1700s, a child woke up on her birthday to a CAKE already ringed with burning CANDLES. The party had a name of its own: a Kinderfest, a birthday party held just for children and not for grown-ups. Adults marked their own birthdays quietly, if at all. The candles were lit before breakfast. They were meant to stay lit the whole day, and nobody was allowed to touch them until the evening MEAL.

SPELL Spell: MEAL

MEAL

SPELL Spell: CAKE

CAKE

KNOWN What was already ringed around the cake, burning, when the child woke up on her birthday?

CANDLES

OPEN What would you want to do while the candles burned all day and nobody could touch them?

Open response - use practitioner judgment

MATH Suppose a child turns 7, and the cake gets one candle for each year of life plus one extra candle for the year ahead. How many candles are on the cake?

8

COUNTING THE CANDLES

The counting rule was simple. Each candle stood for one year the child had already lived, and one more was added for the year still to come. A child turning seven got eight flames. Some candles were made of tallow, a hard fat from animals. Richer families used BEESWAX, the wax that bees build their COMBS from. A parent replaced each STUB as it burned down. At supper the child blew out every flame in one breath and made a silent wish.

SPELL Spell: COMBS

COMBS

SPELL Spell: STUB

STUB

KNOWN What did richer families use for their candles instead of tallow?

BEESWAX

OPEN What would you wish for in the moment the candles go out?

Open response - use practitioner judgment

AN OLDER STORY

People often say the custom is much older than Germany. The story goes that in ancient GREECE, worshippers carried round honey cakes lit with small candles to the TEMPLE of Artemis, the goddess of the MOON. A glowing cake would look like the full moon. It is a lovely story, but historians have found little solid evidence for it. The written TRAIL for birthday candles begins with those German parties, not with the old temples.

SPELL Spell: TRAIL

TRAIL

SPELL Spell: MOON

MOON

KNOWN Where did the worshippers carry their glowing honey cakes?

TEMPLE

KNOWN In which ancient land did worshippers carry honey cakes with small candles to a temple?

GREECE

OPEN A glowing cake carried at night would look like the full moon. What would you carry through the dark to make it look like something else?

Open response - use practitioner judgment

ONE BREATH, ONE WISH

When you lean over a cake today, you are still following those old rules: one BREATH, all the FLAMES, and a wish you keep to yourself. Telling the wish is said to break it. That is a superstition - a belief that an action changes your LUCK even though nothing really connects the two. There is one real effect, though. Researchers tested cakes that had been blown on. They found far more GERMS sitting on the icing than on a cake left alone.

SPELL Spell: FLAMES

FLAMES

SPELL Spell: BREATH

BREATH

KNOWN Telling your wish is said to spoil what?

LUCK

KNOWN What did researchers find far more of on the icing of a cake that had been blown on?

GERMS

OPEN Telling a wish is said to break it. What is something you keep to yourself on purpose?

Open response - use practitioner judgment

MATH Blowing out the candles leaves about 15 times as many germs on the icing. Suppose an untouched slice had 2 germs on it. How many would the blown-on slice have?

30