

## VORWEIHNACHTENSITTEN (PRE-CHRISTMAS CUSTOMS)

### Brief an das Christkind / Letter to Christ Child

#### Letters to St. Nikolaus and Santa Claus Get Responses from Two German Towns

Christmas Post Office in St. Nikolaus Answers Letters



Each reply will be given a special Nikolaus stamp.

The Christmas post office in the town of St. Nikolaus in Saarland opened on Wednesday. Letters and wish lists from the whole world have been arriving for weeks, said a post office spokesperson. The replies will be sent out on Wednesday, the day before Saint Nicholas Day (December 6). Each reply will be given a special Nikolaus stamp. In total, 25 hard-working writers are at work answering children's Christmas letters in seven languages.

This year the number of letters the post office answers is expected to exceed the 17,000 mark for the first time. In 2011, almost 16,900 letters and wish lists were answered. Deutsche Post says it will pay for the costs of delivery as well as for the writing paper and the envelopes.

Fifty years ago, a young girl by the name of Bärbel Witt started a new tradition in Germany by doing something most children do every year – she wrote a letter to Santa Claus. She addressed it to "Himmel" ("Heaven") and what she got was a hand-written reply on embossed stationery sent from the town of Himmelpforten. It is a small town in Lower Saxony located between Hamburg and the North Sea, whose name literally translated means "Heaven's Gate." What the eight-year-old was not aware of was that the "heavenly" message actually came from an earthly post office. She told everyone that Santa Claus must live in Himmelpforten. Bärbel Rosendahl, as she is now called, thought back to that day she received the letter: "I must have been so happy," she said nostalgically.

Since then, the Santa letter answering service, known in Germany as the "Christkindpostamt," has given responses to thousands of letters from all over the world. Last year, they replied to roughly 44,000 letters. For the last nine years, postal employee Wolfgang Dipper and his 30-person team have been Santa's helpers "on the ground" serving to fulfill the wishes of children, but more often acting as a counselor or advisor. "The young letter-writers mainly want electronic toys, but also chocolate, stuffed animals or books," said Dipper knowingly as he pulls a few more of the newly arrived envelopes from the pile.