

“Bei uns ist immer los!”

VORWEIHNACHTENSITTEN (PRE-CHRISTMAS CUSTOMS)

bringer of gifts: der Gabenbringer, die Gabenbringer



Germany can look back on a long tradition of figures

A Whole Array of Mysterious Gift Bearers

Another regular part of the Christmas celebration is “Nicholas Day,” when German children receive little gifts in their shoes which they leave out over night. The 6th of December is set aside to commemorate Bishop Nicholas of Myra, who lived in the 4th century and who, according to a legend, gave endowments to the three daughters of an impoverished nobleman. According to another version of the legend he saved three scholastics from the clutches of a cannibal. During the Middle Ages the day which commemorated him was an occasion for charitable giving, or for rewarding industrious pupils, and giving children a chance to go out and collect gifts. The figure of Nicholas plays an important role in the history of the mysterious bearers of gifts which are brought on Christmas Eve.

In modern society, the importance of these mysterious benefactors — Santa Claus, the Easter bunny, etc., — increased because, as we have pointed out, the presents lost their connection with legal obligations and customs and instead became surprises. For adults, attributing the presents to a fictitious, anonymous bringer of gifts is a gesture of modesty — a way of stepping into the background. And for the children the educational aspect is increased. The gift bearers appear simultaneously as educational powers who dole out rewards and punishments.

Martin Luther substituted the “Holy Christ” (Heiliger Christ) for the popular Catholic Saint Nicholas, as the bringer of Christmas gifts. Today’s “Christmas Child” (Christkind) is a mysterious figure, who seldom makes any concrete appearances and who is thought of as resembling an angel, but not as being identical with Christianity’s new-born Redeemer. In the 1930s the “Christmas Child” took precedence over

many other bringers of gifts in most of western, south-western and southern Germany.

Lately under the influence of the advertising industry and the candy industry the figure of the “Christmas Man” (Weihnachtsmann, Santa Claus) has been steadily gaining ground, in Germany and elsewhere. The “Christmas Man” has always prevailed in middle, northern and eastern Germany. He somehow incorporates the figure of St. Nicholas together with older demonic winter figures like “Knecht Ruprecht.” At one time these mythical winter figures, also called “Hans Muff,” “Nickel,” “Krampus” or “Bercht,” were said to accompany Nicholas. While Nicholas rewarded the good children, his demonic companion punished the bad ones. To a great extent these two figures merged into one — the “Christmas Man,” Santa Claus. His general appearance, with the red fur-lined coat and hood, and his long white beard come from Moritz von Schwind, the Romantic painter, who portrayed “Herr Winter” in a Munich print in 1847. The figure he drew had the characteristics of the contemporary Santa Claus.

Nicholas himself continues to be “active” on the 6th of December when he surprises children with small presents, usually without appearing in person. In some southern regions, however, Nicholas, dressed like a bishop and accompanied by Krampus, appears in the evening of December 5. In this case, there is no appearance of Weihnachtsmann or Santa Claus at Christmas time. Generally, however, the difference between him and the “Christmas Man” is becoming increasingly unclear because in the time before Christmas, clubs, businesses, and various organizations have him make an appearance at their Christmas parties. He also plays an important role in pre-Christmas advertising.