

“Bei uns ist immer was los!”

VORWEIHNACHTENSITTEN (PRE-CHRISTMAS CUSTOMS)

bringer of gifts: der Gabenbringer, die Gabenbringer

Santa's Many Relatives

Was hat dir der Nikolaus gebracht?“ (“What did Nicholas bring to you?”) German children are asked on the morning of December 6, St. Nicholas Day. Proudly, they will show the sweets or little presents they have found in the shoe or stocking which they carefully placed on the window sill or in front of the door the evening before. Nowadays, mothers often just buy ready-filled red little plastic boots in a candy shop, as the chocolate industry has long taken advantage of the custom. It has even succeeded in reviving it in Protestant regions of Germany, where the observance of customs connected with Catholic saints has receded since the Reformation.

Modern German children, of course, are just as skeptical as their American counterparts, and they will tell you with a knowing smile that “es gibt keinen Nikolaus” (“There is no Nicholas”) if you explain to them that Nikolaus, accompanied by his rugged helper *Knecht Ruprecht*, comes riding on a sled at night and climbs through the chimney to bring them their presents. This story may indeed be hard to believe if you live in a modern high-rise apartment with electric heating and no chimney; yet the same child, smiling so skeptically before, will jump up and down in the morning, when finding the filled boot, and will happily tell his mother that “Nicholas found me after all!”

Weihnachtsmann gaining ground

Children's don't mind either that Nikolaus and the *Weihnachtsmann* (Christmas Man), who brings the presents on December 24, look so very much alike these days — jolly old men wearing red coats with hoods and lined with white fur, long white beards, and carrying bags on their backs. The two personages seem to be gradually merging into one single figure. And, it may happen that the *Christkind* (Christ Child), who has been the traditional gift-bringer in the western and southern parts of Germany for a long time, is going

German Christmas Figures

to recede into the background, sooner or later, in the popular Christmas observances, because the *Weihnachtsmann* is gaining around all the time. It is somewhat difficult to tell what the *Christkind*, or *Christkindel* in South Germany, looks like, and this may prevent it from being used for those commercial purposes to which the *Weihnachtsmann* lends himself. Generally, the *Christkind* is believed to be angelic, and sometimes — in Advent plays, for instance — he is portrayed by young, blond girls dressed in white gowns. However, he makes few “concrete” appearances. He is not really identical with Christianity's new-born redeemer either. In the northern tradition, the *Christkind* has been a male figure, *der heilige Christ* — the Holy Christ. The American name “Kris Kringle” is, of course, derived from the German *Christkindel*.

It was the reformer Martin Luther who substituted the Holy Christ as gift bringer for the Catholic saint, St. Nicholas, reminding everyone that Christ gave himself to mankind. But Luther succeeded only in part, for in the people's imagination the *Christkind*, although accepted as gift bringer, came to be accompanied by other, mythical figures, such as the *Weihnachtsmann* or *Knecht Ruprecht*.

Spooks and demons

In the various Christmas observances, Christian and pre-Christian beliefs have mingled almost extricably, and have produced countless customs and traditions in different regions, the origins of which cannot be traced anymore, because they reach too far into pre-historic times. But everywhere, the glad tidings and bright figures of the Christian festival stand in sharp contrast to the dark, demonic, and sometimes grotesque elements of older beliefs.

Take *Knecht Ruprecht*, the helper of the *Christkind* or of Nicholas (sometimes, to make matters even more complicated, Nicholas and the *Weihnachtsmann* are called *Knecht Ruprecht*, too!). He is a dark, rough, noise fellow, clad in pelts and carrying a rod with which he is believed to punish bad children — today's kids don't take him seriously anymore, but, in the past, they were often downright terrified by him. *Knecht Ruprecht's* name is believed by some researchers to have developed from *rouhperath*, meaning “shining with glory,” an epithet applied to the old Germanic god, Wodan. Others say that it comes from *ruhknecht*, rough fellow. In various parts of Germany, he is also called Ruklas (Rough Nikolaus), Hans Trapp, Bercht, Polterklas, Hans Muff, Pelznickel. Pelzmärtel (a name derived from *Pelz* — fur and St. Martin, whose feast day also falls in this time). There can be no doubt that in all these figures, pre-Christian elements (winter demons, wood goblins, The Wild Chase at midwinter, etc.) play a big role. Researchers prove this by citing countless strange customs which formerly were observed in connection with their appearance reaching from all kinds of noise-making to the various costumes — straw wrappings, pelts, masks — worn by them. Nowadays, most of these old customs have disappeared, but in some places you still can find traces of them, although often hidden under new meanings and distorted almost beyond recognition.

Patron saint of children

The history of Santa Claus, or the *Weihnachtsmann*, himself is equally complicated. St. Nickolas, bishop of Myra, Asia Minor, lived in the 4th century AD and became the most popular saint of oriental Christianity. In the 10th century, worship of St. Nicholas spread to Germany, too, probably introduced by the wife of Emperor Otto II, who was a Byzantine princess. At first, he became popular in the Rhineland, then all over