

“Bei uns ist immer was los!”

VORWEIHNACHTENSITTEN (PRE-CHRISTMAS CUSTOMS)

bringer of gifts: der Gabenbringer, die Gabenbringer

Central Europe. With the blossoming trade of the Hanseatic cities, the cult was carried to the northern and eastern European cities. Many pious legends are told about St. Nicholas, which led to his becoming the patron saint of sailors, merchants, and — primarily — of children.

It became customary on St. Nicholas's feast day, December 6, to bring small presents to children. Originally, there was no connection between this custom and Christmas. However, there was a connection with another custom, the medieval observance of “the children's bishop day”. On that day in early December, the pupils of convent schools used to elect a boy out of their midst to be “bishop” for one day — a custom believed to originate in the Roman

Saturnalia, the exuberant festival of Saturn. As early as in the 9th century, children's bishop day was suppressed because of its excessive frivolity, but it lived on in spite of official disapproval, and gradually St. Nicholas Day became a children's feast day.

After the Reformation, the observance of Catholic Nicholas Day was abolished in those German regions that had turned Protestant, and the customs connected with it came to be observed at Christmas time. Thus, the popular Nicholas figure turned into a more neutral gift bringer, the *Weihnachtsmann* or Father Christmas.

Old customs disappearing

“Morgen kommt der Weihnachtsmann, kommt mit seinen Gaben.” German children sing the day before Christmas. The *Weihnachtsmann's* present image first appeared in a drawing made in 1847 by the Romantic German painter Moritz von Schwindt for a very popular Munich picture sheet. In it, the *Weihnachtsmann* was called Herr Winter.

In Catholic regions of Germany, the Christian Nicholas tradition has been better preserved, although here, too, many old customs are now disappearing. It is remarkable, though, that in the Rhineland, St. Nicholas still appears in a bishop's attire. And it is a little known fact that the name of a traditional German Christmas cookie, *Spekulatius*, made of butter and almonds, is directly connected with him. *Spekulatius*, meaning supervisor, was the old Latin name for bishop.

The exchanging of Christmas presents, which takes a central position in the modern Christmas ritual, is a relatively new feature. Formerly, it was customary to give charitable gifts to the poor on this occasion, and children were given little presents for their singing or playing in processions. Children also received presents from their god-parents (not from their parents), but these were fixed obligations of the godparents and known beforehand. Farm hands and servants received practical gifts, mostly clothes, as part of their regular wages, due at Christmas. So there was no surprise effect and no reciprocity. Only since the Renaissance, when one began to attach greater importance to the individual, did one begin to exchange presents in the sense that we do it now. And, only in the 19th century, when the rigid social order began to dissolve and the family became more important, did Christmas become the intimate family which it is now. The charitable origin of the Christmas presents receded into the background, while equality and commercial advertising have turned the exchanging of presents almost into a social obligation.

Along with the Christmas presents, however, the legendary gift bringers took on greater importance, too. Whatever their names and origins, *Christkind*, *Weihnachtsmann*, *Nikolaus* or *Santa Claus*, they still remind us of the transcendent background of Christmas, lending color, fun, and a little mystery to an old, venerable festival that is now badly in danger of being reduced to just another commercialized holiday.