

“Bei uns ist immer los!”

VORWEIHNACHTENSITTEN (PRE-CHRISTMAS CUSTOMS)

bringer of gifts: der Gabenbringer, die Gabenbringer

Does Nikolaus come again on Christmas Eve then?

No. Santa Claus, or the *Weihnachtsmann*, usually comes to German homes – often in person – on the afternoon of Christmas Eve.

story whenever possible, including one appearance as the figurehead of a ship.

Fictitious celebrations were included and St. Nicholas, pictured as a jolly fellow wearing a broad-brimmed hat and huge breeches and smoking a long pipe, rode over the treetops in a wagon and dropped presents from his pockets down chimneys.

Irving's book proved very popular and was still in current circulation and people's thoughts 20 years later when Dr. Clement Clarke Moore wrote the little poem, "A Visit From St. Nicholas," for his children. He was the second of the three men most responsible for Santa Claus. His description of the jolly elf solidified Irving's, in whose work St. Nicholas had not been the central figure.

Moore's poem served in its turn as the inspiration for the man who finally drew a picture of Santa Claus for us. By the 1860s, the old Dutch mispronunciation of St. Nicholas as "Sinta Claes" had gained popular acceptance and "Santa Claus" replaced the saint's name as Americans cheerfully mispronounced the Dutch mispronunciation. Santa appeared frequently in children's books but his appearance varied widely – sometimes tall and thin, sometimes dressed in buckskins.

Nicholas today

Anyone who travels through Germany in early December in the hope of encountering Nicholas will meet with many figures that are vaguely reminiscent of the holy Bishop but are often anything but children's friends. It is not therefore surprising that in the big cities the influence of liberal circles, of other countries, of television, and not least of the large department stores has transformed the Holy Man (as he is called in the Rhineland) into Father Christmas. The latter has now taken over the role of bringer of presents. In some families and in some places he still distributes his gifts on December the 5th but he increasingly takes the place of the two original bringers of gifts in a child's heaven — Nicholas and the Christ Child. In Heinrich Hoffmann's "Struwwelpeter", the great Nicholas may still duck bad boys in the giant ink-pot but his dress and appearance reveal that he has already become Father Christmas.

Around that period, the time of gift giving moved from the 6th to Christmas Eve. Nowadays in Germany, which is half Catholic and half Protestant, children's boots are filled on the 6th and presents under the tree are opened on the 24th. A good solution, if you ask the kids.

Though many of these old traditions are still visible in Germany and other parts of Europe, more and more American traditions of Santa are moving back across the Atlantic and mingling with European traditions. In some parts of Germany, different versions of Santa exist side by side: fat, skinny, with or without Ruprecht.

One advantage German kids have is: They don't have to wonder whether there really is a Santa or not, because instead of sneaking through the chimney in the middle of the night, Father Christmas knocks politely at the door after supper and introduces himself before passing out the goodies.

The drawback is that one of the first traumas of German childhood is the shock when a kid first realizes that the man in the Father Christmas costume is really Dad.