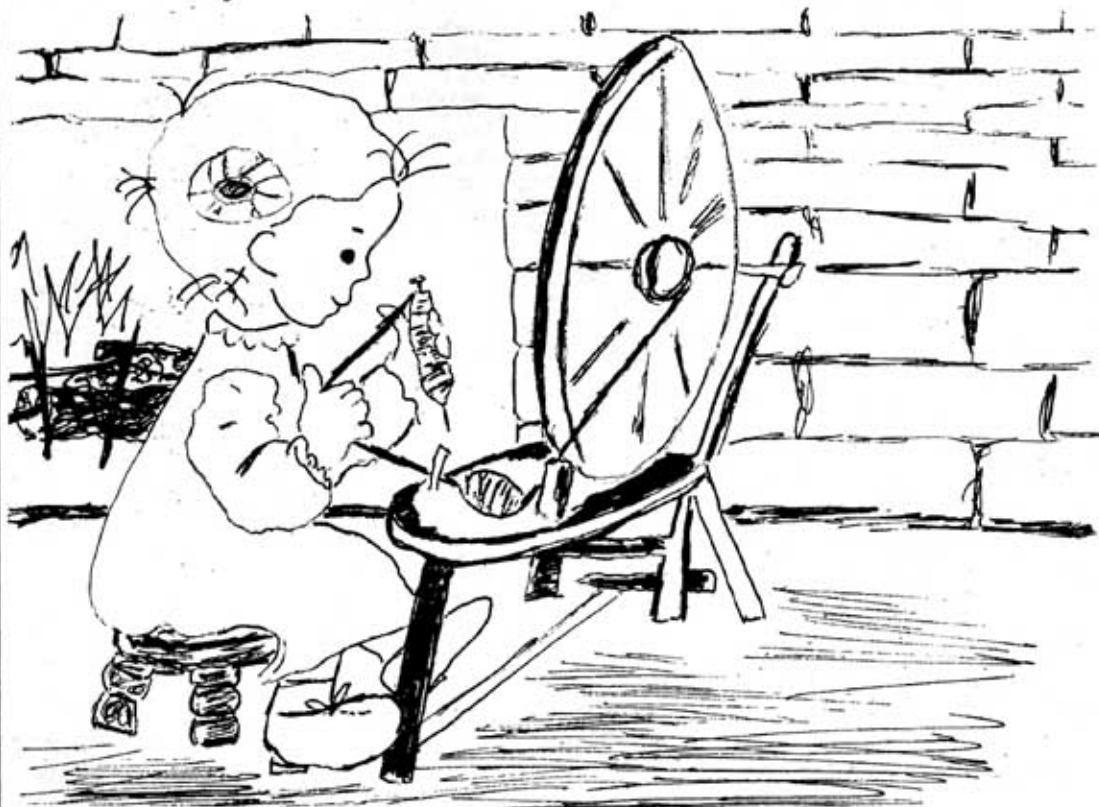


# A Russian Christmas

By Warren Overlie

Fröhliche Weihnachten in an Odessa Village

How was the grand holiday of Christmas celebrated by the German colonists in Russia during the 19th century? With cakes and prizes — and tales of trepidation — as this story relates.



Tina worked quietly by her mother's spinning wheel. She did not know that her naughty brothers were sneaking up to scare her and make her cry.

**C**hildren in the German colonies of South Russia in the 1800s celebrated Christmas in a way that was both merry and frightening. It was a time when obedient boys and girls were rewarded, but the disobedient could glumly look forward to stern lectures and perhaps a spanking. Here is how it happened:

On the night before Christmas Eve when the sky was red from the setting sun, an excited mother gathered her small ones around her and told them stories about the time when Christ was born in a stable a long, long time ago. The children became very happy because they knew that soon Christmas Day would arrive. Then they would eat many delicious cakes and nuts. Friends of their parents would also visit in the house throughout the day, and there would be much laughter and even the exchange of gifts.

The children could barely sleep that night. They were too excited. But then, finally, their little eyes grew weary, and they fell fast asleep, dreaming of the morrow's excitement. When the sun peeped its gold webs across the still-dark sky, one of the children awakened the others with a shattering shout: "It's Christmas Eve morning!"

A pitter-patter of little feet echoed on the stairway, making a tardy little mouse scurry about in terror as he tried to comprehend all the sudden noise in the house. The children scampered and followed their noses to the delectable aromas wafting out of the kitchen, where Mutter was already busy baking pies and cakes and bread and pudding.

Oh, what an exciting time of the year! the children thought.

"These pies and cakes are rewards for your good behavior," said the mother, laughing.

That made the children cheer and cheer.

But then she asked, solemnly: "Do you know who is coming to our house tonight?"

"No!" shrieked some of the little toddlers.

"Yes!" yelled Helga, the oldest child. "I know who is coming to our house tonight. Christkindlein will be here."

Helga was most certainly correct. Christkindlein was coming.

Helga's little brothers and sisters silently absorbed this startling new information: Christkindlein. Who and what was Christkindlein? They asked over and over again. Throughout the entire day, the questions about Christkindlein remained frozen in their minds, interrupting every other activity.

Finally, when the crimson red sun began to

*So majestic was  
Christkindlein as he  
leaped into the room,  
ringing a golden bell  
and singing merrily.*

slowly sink in the heavens, and darkness crept across the land, the children heard unfamiliar sounds at the door.

Knock, knock, knock! came the loud rapping.

Helga, who was the oldest, and hence the bravest, slowly opened the door. Who should her dreamy blue eyes behold? Yes! At last! It was Christkindlein!

How beautiful he appeared, so tall and white in a flowing gown! Yet there was something oddly familiar about this glorious personage. Helga could not quite fathom it.

"Won't you please come in?" she finally managed to gasp, timidly.

The other children drew back with shy oh's and ah's as Christkindlein grandly pranced into the room, ringing a bell and singing. What a happy sight he was! He carried a big bag, and the children gradually recalled from their mother's earlier coaching that Christkindlein was the bearer of wonderful presents.

Not one of the children recognized that Christkindlein was really none other than Katharina, the 14-year-old girl who lived at the other side of the village and who sometimes helped their mother with her cooking and other household duties.

"Have you been a good girl this year, Helga?" asked Christkindlein in a booming voice. "And how about you, Gotthilf? And you, Tina? And you, Reuben? And you, little Elisabeth?"

It was amazing how Christkindlein knew so well the names of all the children.

"We've been good," answered the children quietly, their eyes big and round like the saucers in their mother's kitchen.

"I am glad to hear that," replied Christkindlein. "I am always happy when I learn that little boys and girls have been obedient to

*Pelznickel was a rough, shaggy-looking creature. His name literally meant 'Nicholas-in-fur.'*

tried hard to keep the tears from rolling down her cheeks.

"I cannot let you children do such naughty things," continued Christkindlein in a very serious voice.

Suddenly, there was another loud rapping at the door. Christkindlein opened it, and into the room leaped an athletic figure all covered with fur.

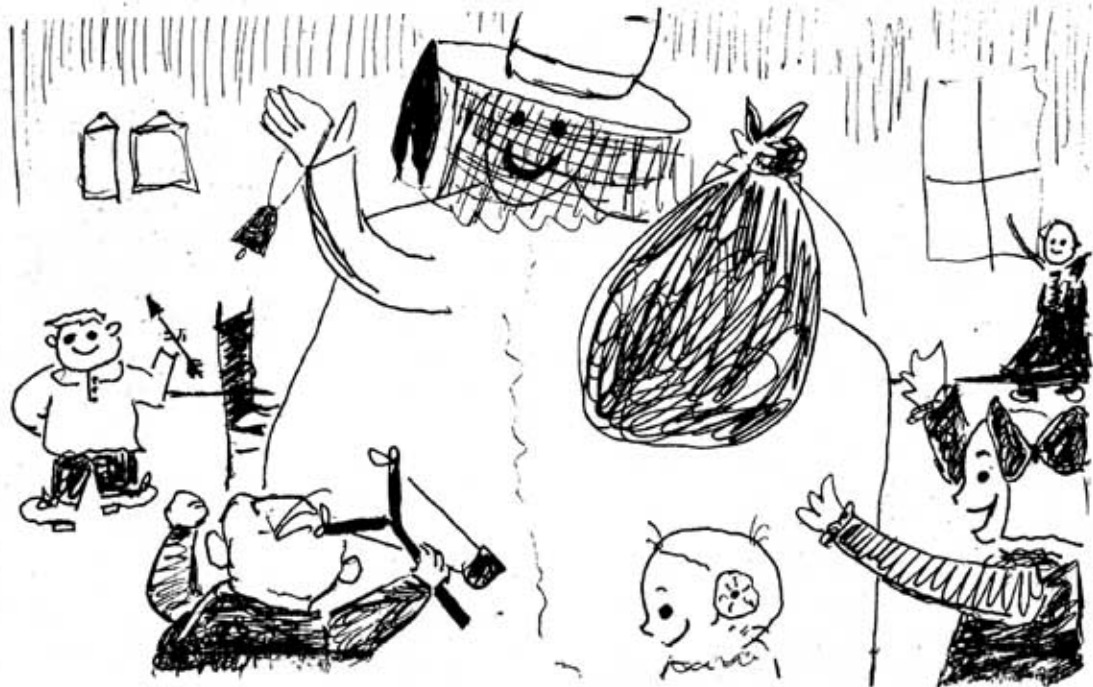
"Pelznickel!!" shrieked the children, terror-struck.

Yes, indeed. Here he was, the avenger of all mean deeds committed during the past year, the terrible Pelznickel himself!

If the children had looked more closely they might have detected that this roaring, stomping, angry apparition was only Oskar, the young man who worked in his uncle's blacksmith shop two streets away. But Helga, Gotthilf, Tina, Reuben, and Elisabeth were too startled to see through his clever disguise. He wore the heavy, sheepskin coat which belonged to the children's father, except that the coat was turned inside out, making Pelznickel a rough and shaggy demon. To make matters worse, he also wore a big and bushy

their mothers and fathers. But tell me, Gotthilf. Didn't you run away from the house last week when your mother asked you to carry out the ashes from the stove? And you, Reuben, didn't you sock little Tina in the nose about a month ago so that it even started to bleed?"

The little children's eyes grew wide with horror. How did Christkindlein know so much about them? It was very frightening, and little Elisabeth



"I have treats for all the obedient boys and girls," laughed Christkindlein, who wore a billowy white robe.

# GROWL!



Pelznickel rushed into the room with chains around his shoulders and evil horns on his head, roaring like a ferocious bear.

beard. On top of his head loomed a big cap with horns, and around his neck clanged a banging chain. In his left fist, he carried a dangerous stick, its evil purpose all too obvious.

"We're sorry," wailed the children in unison. "We'll try to be good from now on," they whimpered, so terrified they could hardly breathe.

At that moment, as Christkindlein and Pelznickel sternly gazed down at the awe-struck children, it was so silent in the room that the only sound to be heard was the teapot shushing and

sputtering on top of the hot stove. The two strangers seemed hesitant. Then, with a sorrowing face, Christkindlein reluctantly pulled out a whip from under his robe, and sadly gave it to Pelznickel.

Pelznickel knew what to do. He grabbed the whip, dashing about the room as if he were a lunatic. The children, the mother, and even the pots and pans and dishes and cups trembled and shook at Pelznickel's deafening roars.

"Why have you children been naughty?" he yelled in a gruff voice that sounded just like the growl of an angry bear. "Why have you refused



Pelznickel's whip lashed across the room while the frightened children cowered meekly in a corner. "When are you children ever going to learn to be considerate of other people's feelings?!" shouted Pelznickel, angrily.

to be kind to one another? When are you ever going to learn to consider the feelings of other people?"

Pelznickel's righteous rage was dreadful to behold. He lashed the whip so that it cut into the air, making evil swishing noises that immediately made the children's hearts plummet into their boots.

Gotthilf and Reuben (who indeed had both been quite disobedient the past months) were white as sheets. "We're very sorry. We'll try to behave better," they promised.

"All right! See that you do! Otherwise, next year my whip will do its work!" replied Pelznickel, scowling.

The boys quivered so much they almost collapsed. Their lower lips were as unsteady as milk slapping about in a bucket when carried from the barn into the kitchen. The mother pulled her apron to her face to hide her grin. She hated to see her boys so frightened, but she did not like all the incorrigible tricks and misdeeds Gotthilf and Reuben had been guilty of during much of the autumn and winter. She knew that if they per-

sisted in their wrong behavior, everyone would be sorry in the end.

"Well, I do believe that everyone has learned his lesson," said Christkindlein in a soothing voice. Pelznickel calmed down too, and both Christkindlein and Pelznickel now tried to get the children to relax. They even succeeded in making Gotthilf laugh (but just a tiny bit).

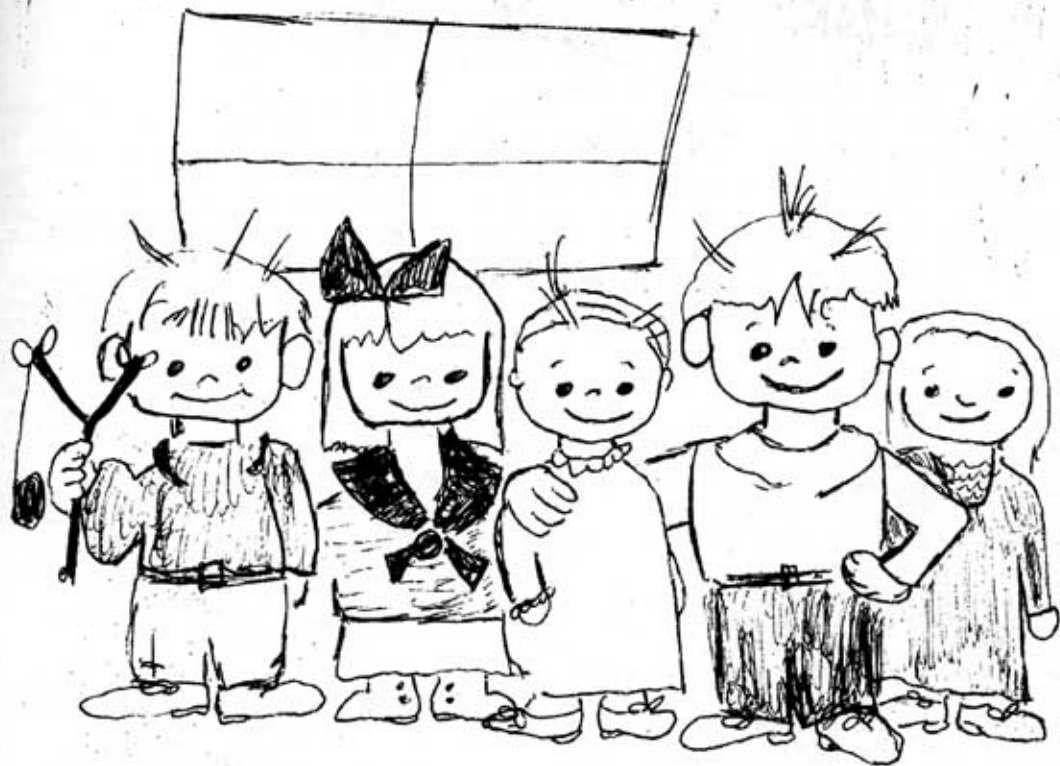
"Who can recite some Bible verses?" asked Christkindlein, coaxingly. "Does anyone know John 3:16?"

Reuben shyly raised his hand, and then softly repeated the well-known verse.

"Das ist sehr gut," said Pelznickel, clapping his hands and patting Reuben on the back. "I am very proud of you."

Then Gotthilf happily said a Bible verse. And he was followed by Helga and by Tina. Even little Elisabeth was brave enough to chirp: "Do for others what you want them to do for you."

The children's knowledge of the Bible made Christkindlein and Pelznickel beam with joy. They grabbed the hands of the children, and all



The children told Pelznickel they would surely try very hard to be kind to other people.

merrily danced around the room in one big circle, laughing and singing and joyously thumping each other on the back!

Then Christkindlein said, "We have treats for you, dear children!"

To the delight of all, he presented each child with an orange and apple, a raisin cookie, a big piece of blachinda, some zucchini bars, and an enormous prune kuchen.

How happy everybody was! Then Christkindlein and Pelznickel said it was time for them to leave because there were other children they wanted to visit.

"Yes," muttered Pelznickel, frowning. "I want to see a little boy named Ross. I understand he has been up to some mischief. And I shall certainly want to ask Carrie and Kirsten why they were playing with matches when they were ex-

plicitly told not to do so."

As Pelznickel and Christkindlein walked to the door, they were hugged by Gotthilf, Reuben, Helga, Tina, and Elisabeth.

"Oh, thank you for coming to our house," they chirped in unison. "We will help Mutter and Vater, and we will try to think about other people's feelings and not just our own all the time," they promised.

And that is the story of how Helga, Gotthilf, Reuben, Tina, and Elisabeth grew up to be such fine, helpful, and considerate people. When neighbors and other acquaintances would compliment them, they would always reply with a grin: "There were two strangers who came to our house at Christmas-time when we were children. They had odd names, but they taught us a lot." □