

# There Were No Christmas Trees For Germans In Russia

On The Steppes, Evergreen Trees Were Scarce; Instead, People Used Cherry And Lilac Branches

There is no historical evidence that the German pioneer settlers in Russia set up a Christmas tree in their home. Some of them may well have known about the custom in their German homeland, but were not familiar with it in their villages. Indeed, there is a strong presumption that the Christmas tree did not make its appearance in the Russian colonies until about 1870, when it was introduced by pastors, priests, and teachers who had learned of it in the seminaries and institutes back in Germany. This presumption is confirmed by the evidence of the older Christmas custom that prevailed among the Volga Germans in the village of Anton, in the district of Balzer. Here it was the custom to cut cherry or lilac branches three weeks before Christmas and place the cuttings in water. Similarly, seeds of wheat or barley were planted in a box, so as to have lots of greenery in the house on Christmas Eve. The boxes with the green branches were decorated and set at the center of the dining table. There is no mention of a tree of any kind. This represents the earliest forerunner of the Christmas tree tradition.

Perhaps the most obvious reason why the colonists did not have a Christmas tree is the simple fact that no evergreen trees were to be found on the open steppes of the Volga and the Black Sea regions. When the custom finally came into vogue in the 1870s, Christmas trees were brought in by rail to the larger cities from distant coniferous regions. The earliest evidence of the Christmas tree custom in all of Russia goes back to the year 1828. On Christmas Eve of that year, Count Michael Voronzov, the governor general of Odessa, had a Christmas tree set up in his palatial residence. The tree is described by an English visitor as "a six-foot sapling (doubtless an acacia) that was planted in a box of earth and adorned by a variety of artificial flowers and gift packages. The salon in which it stood was illuminated

by a large number of lighted wax tapers that were placed on tables."

## The St. Nicholas tradition

The tradition of St. Nicholas as the bringer of gifts for children probably goes back to the Middle Ages. As an historical personality, St. Nicholas was the bishop of Myra in Asia Minor in the fourth century. He is said to have been a generous, kind-hearted man, and on one occasion helped out three young maiden sisters who were poor, by giving each of them a dowry that enabled them to get married. In the Middle Ages he was honored and loved as the patron saint of boys, and his feast day was celebrated on December 6. In subsequent centuries he became the most popular of all saints in the church calendar. In fact, there were over 2,000 churches in Europe that were dedicated to his patronage.

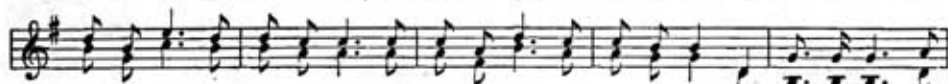
St. Nicholas Day became a very special day for all the children, and it was celebrated by having the good **Sankt Nikolaus** make his appearance in the guise of a venerable bishop with a flowing white beard and in full episcopal regalia, including mitre and crozier. He was accompanied by a bulking swarthy servant known as **Knecht Ruprecht**, who was garbed in a shaggy fur coat and headgear, with a heavy iron chain around his waist and a big sack over his shoulder. After St. Nicholas had read the record of the boy's delinquencies from a large open book, Ruprecht would seize the young sinner and give him a taste of the switch or have him chew on the chain, after which he was rewarded with an onion. When all the bad, but now penitent boys, had been suitably punished and all the children recited their prayers, he reached into his sack and began distributing nuts, fruit and candy. In those days, many a city, like Strassburg and Nuernberg, set up special open-air markets known as the **Nikolausmarkt** where all kinds of toys, gifts, special pastries and sweetmeats were sold. In

## O Tannenbaum!

Hoffmeister.



1. O Tan - nen - baum, o Tan - nen - baum! wie treu sind bei - ne Blät - ter! du



grünst nicht nur zur Som - mer - zeit, nein, auch im Win - ter, wenn es schneit. O Tan - nen - baum, o



Tan - nen - baum, wie treu sind bei - ne Blät - ter!

2. O Tannenbaum, o Tannenbaum!  
Du kannst mir sehr gefallen;  
Wie oft hat nicht zur Weihnachtszeit  
Ein Baum von dir mich hoch erfreut!  
O Tannenbaum, o Tannenbaum!  
Du kannst mir sehr gefallen.

3. O Tannenbaum, o Tannenbaum!  
Wie strahlst du so helle!  
Vom Fuße bis zum Gipfel schön  
Ist lauter Klang an dir zu sehn.  
O Tannenbaum, o Tannenbaum!  
Wie strahlst du so helle!

some places it was also customary to distribute gifts to the children at Christmas. The earliest known **Christescherung** in Germany goes back to 1584.

With the coming of the Reformation, the time-honored St. Nicholas tradition lost much of its appeal. In many areas, particularly in South Germany, the episcopal figure was replaced by the secularized figure of the uncouth demonic bugbear, the **Schreckfigur** that had played the role of servant of the kind-hearted bishop. He appeared under a variety of names, some which retained a garbled remnant of Nikolaus name, namely **Nickel** or **Klaus**. Indeed, in the Bavarian and the Alemannic areas, the term "**Klaus**" commonly designated the masked bogeyman who appeared in many of the popular folk festivals. Other names alluded to his shaggy appearance, for he was usually clad in bearskin, sheepskin, or goatskin, or they referred to his boisterous behavior which was characterized by the stomping of feet and the din of rattling chains. Thus we encounter various forms of the dread figure in different parts of Germany: in the Palatinate and in Baden, the **Belzenickel**, **Belezbock**, and **Beelzebub**; in **Alsace**, the figure of **Hans Trapp**; in Wuerttemberg, the **Pelzmaerte**; in the Rhineland, **Hans Muff**; in Switzerland, the **Zantichloise**; in northern Germany, the **Bullerklas** or **Ruklas**; and in the Netherlands, the **Sinter**

**Klos** or **Sente Kloas**—the historical forerunner of the American **Santa Claus**.

### Traditions have much in common

All of these secularized figures had much in common, but there is a significant distinction in their character and bearing. While the shaggy types of the High German area (in the Palatinate, Baden, Alsace, and Bavaria) were fearsome, even demonic "bugbears," the **Kloas** of the Netherlands and the **Weihnachtsmann** of the German Lowlands generally had a good-natured genial character. The Dutch **Sente Kloas**, whose name was a garbled form of the older **Sankt Niklaus**, was a jovial kindhearted figure who still had the long white beard of his remote prototype, but was clad in an attractive red suit. Unlike the fur-cloaked **Pelzenickel** of the Oberrhein, he appeared without clanking chain and punitive switch. He did not stomp into the living room on Christmas Eve to frighten the children out of their wits, but came silently and invisibly through the chimney in the dead of night and put his gifts into the wooden shoes that were set near the fireplace.

This Dutch **Sente Kloas** was the model of the American **Santa Claus**, whom the poet Clement C. Moore described in 1823 in his immortal poem, "The



Many of the Germans from Russia came from Alsace. Sketch above shows Christkindel and Hans Trapp. (Submitted by Theophil Schuler, in *Heritage Review*)

Night Before Christmas," as a paunchy, jolly little elf who rode through the sky in a sleigh drawn by eight tiny reindeer, and came through the chimney with his pack to fill the stockings that were hung by the fireplace. Santa's home at the North Pole and his reindeer-drawn sleigh were the only significantly new American features. Moore's pipe-smoking St. Nick has really never met with popular acceptance. Attempts have, of course, been made to enhance the image of Santa Claus by giving him a consort named "Mary Christmas" and by adding a "red-nosed" reindeer to guide his sleigh. But these are just whimsical fatuities. If Santa could make his way down through the American chimneys, he was obviously also capable of finding his way to the roof tops without a special guide.

Thomas Nast, who was born in Landau in 1840 and immigrated to America in 1846, became a talented illustrator and cartoonist. Besides the creation of the Republican elephant and the Democratic donkey, he also produced several illustrations of Santa Claus. In his earliest attempts he pictured Santa in costumes that were black or green trimmed with white fur. In a later sketch, which was published in the 1880s in *Harper's Weekly*, Nast depicted him in a red suit, which was obviously more appropriate to Moore's jolly characterization.

Many of the Christmas customs popular today have resulted from several of those early traditions. □

Article first appeared in December 1976 *NDHSGR Heritage Review*, reprinted with permission.