

Disillusion – Austria 1940

By Hans Ternes

Translation from German to English by Connie Dahlke

Many years ago, when our entire village was relocated from Romania (Bessarabia) and resettled in Germany, we lived for a short time in a castle in Austria. At that time, we celebrated St. Nicholas' Day on December 6, as Geschenktag. Unfortunately, St. Nicholas, also called Father Christmas, was always accompanied by his companions, Knecht (the servant), Beelzebub (the one traditionally dressed in black and usually wearing a tail (a switch)). St. Nicholas had a List whereon all the misdeed were written.

As a child, I was not particularly good (obedient), and so my list of offenses (misdemeanors) was rather long. Therefore, I naturally had an incredibly large fear of Geschenktag, because I knew what awaited me.

In my memory I see myself all alone in a large room in the middle of which a huge tiled Kachelofen (bake-oven/furnace) stood. Somehow I thought I could get behind that Kachelofen and hide. But then the thought occurred to me that Beelzebub, the evil one, would discover me behind the Kachelofen and would pull me out. In desperation I grabbed a piece of kindling wood from a nearby bucket and was ready to defend myself against the man dressed in black (Beelzebub).

The door opened, and as I expected it to be Beelzebub, I threw the piece of wood with all my force at the person entering. But it was not Beelzebub who entered, but, unfortunately, it was St. Nicholas. And, believe me – this is true - the wood met with Santa Claus in the middle of the forehead! It gets even worse! Blood dripped from the wound. The list of my (past) misdeeds was never read. Beelzebub laid me over his knee and gave me a good thrashing, which I really deserved this time. The surprise came the next day when my mother had a barely healed wound on her forehead. I knew then that there really is no St. Nicholas or Christmas-man. What a pity, is it not?