

Saint Nicholas - Sankt Nikolaus

St. Nicholas Day is celebrated on December 6th in Germany as well as in other European countries. On the evening before the 6th, children place their newly cleaned shoes in front of the door in the hope that Nicholas might fill them with nuts, fruits, chocolate, and sweets. If the children have behaved well, their wishes will be fulfilled. Children who have caused mischief will receive only a switch, which symbolizes punishment for their bad deeds.

The real St. Nicholas lived in the 4th century and was the bishop of a region located in present-day Turkey. Through stories and legends associated with him, he became known as the protector of children and the anonymous bestower of gifts upon them. Over the centuries, the life and deeds of St. Nicholas were celebrated on the saint's appointed day, the 6th of December. By the Middle Ages, the observance had already become a celebration of children and a day on which they received gifts. It was the German Martin Luther who sought to sever the connection between the saint and the gift-giving celebration for children, because in his Reformation theology, there was no place for the glorification of saints. Rather than abolishing the custom outright, Luther replaced the persona of Nicholas with that of the Christ child; in his Protestant teachings, not Nicholas but rather now the baby Jesus was attributed with bringing the children gifts, and not on the saint's day but rather at Christmas. Today in many regions of Germany, not Saint Nick, but rather the **Christkindl** leaves Christmas gifts for children on December 24th.

The adherents of the Catholic Counterreformation did not quietly accept the diminishment of their saint. They responded to the practices of the unorthodox Protestants by making Nicholas a figure who visited families' homes on his appointed day and stood in judgment over children. If the young ones could answer religious questions and said their bedtime prayers faithfully, they received a gift from the sack that Nicholas' companion, Knecht Ruprecht, had slung over his shoulder. Those that slacked in their religious commitments got the switch or were threatened with being hauled off in Ruprecht's sack.

Today children in all the German-speaking regions, regardless of religious denomination, celebrate **Nicholastag**. Ruprecht, who typically carries a basket filled with edible goodies for the children (and also the switches for the naughty children), has become Nicholas' constant companion. In German-speaking Switzerland, Ruprecht is known as Schmutzli.