

DB - 22  
Five times Christmas

Plockstrasse 8  
Giessen, Germany  
January 24, 1958

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Institute of Current World Affairs  
522 Fifth Avenue  
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

The 16th century theory that Christmas comes but once a year has been disproved enough times by American merchandisers. So you shouldn't lift an eyebrow at the news that Germans also tend to multiply the holiday.

It starts on the sixth of December. This is the Eve of St. Nikolaus, the continental version of Santa Claus. Tradition has it that this good man saved soldiers from execution, virgins from shame, sailors from drowning, and students from the grave - all this in the 4th century. Whatever the case, Bishop Nicholas had a good reputation, which spread far beyond the confines of his home in Asia Minor.

By the time his fame reached Germany, legend had made him a great and generous giver, surpassing even the Ford Foundation and the Marshall Plan. However, in order to appease the pelted roughnecks living between the Rhine and the Oder, he assumed certain teutonic characteristics.

For the Germans, a proper Nikolaus had to be tall, slender, somber-voiced, and possessed of a long unkempt beard. Furthermore, he had to keep company with a servant named Rupprecht (hardly from Asia Minor!). This evil looking brute was clad in a dingy cowl. His face was covered with soot, and he carried a fistful of switches. Rupprecht spoke only in grunts or growls. He appeared to come straight from hell. Indeed, some mythologists regard him as a relative of the German Wotan, who was known to commute between Valhalla and the underworld. None of that "bowlful of jelly" and jolly-jolly stuff for the Germans.

Apparently Nikolaus has mellowed with the passing of time. And perhaps the Germans have too. Knecht Rupprecht is seldom to be found in the big cities on December 6. You have to look for him in the peasant villages.

But I was bent on having a glimpse of Nikolaus. It was a rainy Friday night when I went to Number 30 in Giessen's Roonstrasse. St. Nikolaus was expected there at the home of Bettina Domogalla, aged 3.

Her mother had coached her for the big visit - a song, a prayer, and a ready confession of the things she had done wrong during the year. Bettina, blonde and nervous, seemed rather dubious about these goings-on. Nikolaus was due after the buffet supper.

A heavy knock on the door; Bettina rushed into the hallway to meet the strange guest. She opened the door and there was Nikolaus, with his heavy beard, his splendid bishop's robe and mitre. In his right hand was a long staff and in his left a sack. Although she is easy with strangers, Nikolaus took Bettina by surprise. She sprang back from the doorway and put her thumb in her mouth. "Good evening, Bettina," said Nikolaus, in a solemn basso.

Bettina reluctantly curtsied. With a supplicating glance at Frau Domogalla, she then led the stranger into the livingroom. He sat down heavily. "Well, have you been a good child?" he asked, ominously. "Ja," said Bettina, "the child was good." (German children tend to speak of themselves in the third person) "Have you done anything wrong during the year?" Nikolaus continued. "Nein," said Bettina, glancing at her mother again for support. "Where's the little sack?"

Nikolaus overlooked the request: "I've heard that you fidget before going to sleep at night and that you don't clean up your plate at meals." Bettina was obviously astonished that the stranger knew so much about her. She consulted her mother and then replied: "Yes, the child fidgets and doesn't clean up her plate." She paused. "The sack, where's the sack?"

Nikolaus admonished her: "You must be good! Otherwise I won't come again. Be on your good behavior," he repeated, waving a finger at her. "Good behavior," Bettina replied. Nikolaus then ordered her to sing a song with him, beginning "Merry, merry, merry." She complied. Following this she knelt at a safe distance from the bishop and accompanied him in a prayer.



"Now I have something in my sack for Bettina," said Nikolaus, and brought forth the bag. Bettina lost her shyness for a moment and rushed forward, nearly diving into the sack. Her present was a large package of candies, cookies, and chocolate figures of Nikolaus. She lined them up on the table, her eyes shining. Nikolaus departed after voicing one more warning about good behavior. Bettina accompanied him to the door. She seemed relieved to see him go.

"You must be good!"

This Nikolaus was performed by Weimund Domogalla, Bettina's father. He had borrowed the costume from the Catholic Church rectory. Later, Domogalla explained some of the other Nikolaus customs which are still popular in parts of Germany. In villages, for instance, the costume consists of a greatcoat turned inside out, and a night-cap. Nikolaus announces his arrival by thumping on the door and bellowing. The children, frightened, scamper to hiding places under the table. Sometimes Nikolaus turns up on the street with his sack and his hazelbranch switches. Hordes of children, emboldened by their numbers, flock around and taunt him. He chases them, snouting and thrashing about with his switches. The children try to grab at his ragtag clothes, and he repulses them with a sweep of the switch.

But when the odds are small, Nikolaus has a terrifying effect on children. "I was so scared once when I was little," said Domogalla's 48-year-old brother-in-law, "that when I saw Nikolaus coming I ran right out of my shoes."

Once inside the house, Nikolaus tests the children and sometimes even the adults, as Domogalla had done. Unsatisfactory answers or reports of mischief are punished with a stiff thrashing. The whipping is done by Nikolaus if he is working a single; by Rupprecht if that infernal figure is along.

Sometimes, Nikolaus reads the "good deeds" out of a golden book. Bad deeds are listed in another book.. The rewards are meted out accordingly. Domogalla said: "All this has no real effect for the whole year, but it means peace in the house at least until the holidays are over."

"Nikolaus tells them he'll come next year if he hears they're good. Otherwise, he'll send the parents a switch... That much is clear to them. Bettina is still too young for the switch. Maybe next year..."

This "you better watch out!" version of Santa Claus is not entirely unfamiliar to Americans. However, our St. Nick in his sternest mien is still a cherub when compared to the German Nikolaus. Looked at through our psychology-tuned eyes, the German representation seems a crude, somewhat perilous, obsolete usage: threat, punishment, reward. However mild Nikolaus has become in recent times, his net effect is a combination of joy and terror. Maybe that appeals to the German sense of humor and righteousness.

Bells tinkled in the December twilight; white lights glowed on the tall Christmas tree set up in the Ludwigsplatz; shoppers trundled up and down the Seltersweg past the airborne St. Nikolaus suspended above Kerber's Department Store. Here and there you could see balsam trees hanging from upper story windows - waiting for the Christmas Eve decoration ceremony. The odor of cookies was abroad.

On December 23, I drove up to Krofdorf to see the Christmas party for refugee boys from the Soviet Zone. There were about 60 youths at the new dormitory - all recently arrived from East Germany. Most of them had come alone; boys 15 to 18 years old. Back home on the other side of the Iron Curtain, their parents were preparing for Christmas, alone. For the time being, there is no prospect for reunion, although many of these lads live only 100 miles away. But it might as well be a million, because the East Germans have forbidden commuting between the zones.

The Christmas party had been arranged by the Hesse state refugee authorities from the Giessen Emergency Reception Camp. It took place in a spacious community room. The boys took their places at a festive table, candle-lit and loaded with presents. A brass quintet played Händel's "O Du Fröhliche." Then Hesse's minister for refugees, Heinrich Schneider, spoke a few words: "It's not easy to think about the Christmas message of peace when you've had to tear up roots and leave home..."

The boys looked very glum. Another refugee official stood up to wish the lads a "happy All-German Christmas." After a second solemn song the boys opened their presents - sweets, fruit, and books.



Glum...

Next to me was a 16-year-old who had been here a month. He escaped by hiding in the wash-room of an interzonal train. "I heard life was better here," he said. "I wasn't interested in any of that political stuff, but we had to take part." His next sojourn would be at another camp. The boy across the table was 18, an illegitimate child who had had trouble with his father. He came here to continue training and "to live better." How was the camp? "Fine." How about Christmas there? "Bad..." Outside, the thin layer of night snow was melting.

Later that afternoon, I went to another refugee Christmas party-- this time at Giessen's refugee camp. Some 280 fugitives from East Germany - aged 1 to 80 - were gathered in the camp's community hall. Again there were speeches, from an improvised stage. City officials and representatives of the churches joined the refugee authorities on the platform. The brass quintet played again, not quite drowning out the tubercular coughs of some of the carol singers. The speeches sounded a little hollow - "One asks, can Christmas be celebrated in a camp...?" "...This camp which you have come to stands between peace and subjugation..."



Christmas Dinner

Presents similar to those at the boys' party were distributed to each refugee. Charity workers like Netty van der Ven (DB - 9) had spent days preparing them. It wasn't much, but it meant a lot to people who had nothing. Most of these refugees had come out with only the clothes on their backs.



"...who had nothing."

Promptly at 6 p.m. on Christmas Eve I returned to the Domogalla apartment. Christmas dinner was waiting. Tangy odors wafted from the kitchen. Reimund and Gerti had planned a compromise supper - some of the traditional Christmas dishes from her native Suedetenland, and some from his native Silesia. Gerti was skipping only one piece de resistance - not buttered carp.

The table was crowded with plates and cutlery, red candles, and pine boughs. Fully recovered from the shock of Nikolaus, Bettina was playing helicopter in the livingroom.

The menu (where art thou, steaming turkey?) consisted of smoked sausage, bacon, smoked bacon, hot salami, hot dogs, potato dumplings, sauerkraut, tea, rum grog, Christmas bread, poppyseed pudding, and cookies. We were forbidden to get up from the table until it was all finished - as if any of us could have.

While we were clearing the table, Reimund turned on the radio to hear the "bell program", a half hour of bell recordings from the famous churches of Europe - the deep bells of Aachen, the high ones of Hersfeld, the somber ones of Breslau (now Wroczlaw), Notre Dame, Milan Cathedral... All tolling for Christmas.

"Now," said Reimund to his fidgeting daughter, "I think I'll go in the study and see if the Christ child has come to visit us. Stay here." Bettina ran around in circles for the next five minutes. The tingling of a little bell came from the study. Reimund stuck his head out the door. "Bettina, come here. The Christ child has come and left something for us." She went, like a grayhound.

The room was shimmeringly lit by two dozen candles on a freshly decorated Christmas tree. Beneath the boughs was a creche and a heap of packages. Bettina stood stock still, enchanted by the sight. "See what the Christ child has brought you," said Gerti. Bettina had seen. And in a short time she conquered the pile of presents - a sled, shoes for her old doll, a new doll, a game, two pairs of leggings.

Bettina took all her presents to bed, except the sled. After she was asleep we went to the midnight mass at St. Bonifatiuskirche. The service lasted 90 minutes, including carols. More than 2,000 worshippers had crowded into the building, filling the aisles so that there was scarcely space for the faithful to kneel. It was frosty and clear outside, and the stars were out. From all across the Lahn valley you could hear the bells pealing.

Next morning I drove up to Cologne to spend Christmas Day with old friends. The weather was brisk and beautiful, with the low winter sun licking at the rime on the winter wheat fields.

I had lunch with Gerd Scherhorn and his sister, Maria-lies. He is an assistant in a University of Cologne seminar, and she is a private secretary. They are both in their twenties.

After the tasty meal, we took a long walk in the city park that had been planned by Konrad Adenauer 39 years ago when he was Bürgermeister. Scores of families were out on similar wanderings - some trying out new Christmas bicycles and scooters. The sun shone brightly and so did the faces. That evening we sang each other's Christmas carols next to the Scherhorn tree, munched homemade cookies, and reminisced about past Christmases.

For the next two days, all stores and businesses were closed by law. So were half the Government offices in Bonn. Taking this as an excuse, the Scherhorns and I indulged in some holiday spirits, of which we had a complete set. All in all, we agreed, it had been a pretty pleasant Christmas.

David Rinder