

Each December 6th, children in Germany celebrate 'St. Nikolaus Day'. But why does the Santa look-alike come so early and why do all the children place their shoes outside their front doors on the evening before.

Is Nikolaus the same as Santa Claus?

Though they have similar outfits, Nikolaus is not to be confused with Santa Claus, who Germans call the Weihnachtsmann, or Father Christmas. They are two different people. In fact, many religious families try to focus more on Nikolaus earlier in December to ensure that Christmas is actually about Jesus' birth, and not presents from an Americanized and commercialized Santa.

Who is Nikolaus, then?

Each year on December 6th, Germans remember the death of Nicholas of Myra (now the Anatolia region of modern Turkey), who died on that day in 346. He was a Greek Christian bishop known for miracles and giving gifts secretly, and is now the patron saint of little children, sailors, merchants and students. Known as Nicholas the "Wonder worker" for his miracles, he is also identified with Santa Claus. Beliefs and traditions about Nikolaus were probably combined with German mythology, particularly regarding stories about the bearded pagan god Odin, who also had a beard and a bag to capture naughty children.

Why do children set their shoes out on the night of December 5th? Doesn't he have any?

Of course Nikolaus has shoes. The custom began because the historical St. Nicholas had a reputation for leaving secret gifts, such as coins, in people's shoes overnight. Kids traditionally put out their boots, though shoes or stockings will suffice for those without boots.

As the Statista infographic based on data collected by YouGov shows, St. Nicholas will likely visit almost every home in Germany this year; 99 percent of Germans want their boots to be filled with treats.

43 percent of respondents in the survey said they wanted their boots filled with sweets, 44 percent with gifts and sweets and 10 percent with gifts.

And the boots have to be polished first?

Definitely. Dirty boots are unacceptable. Children polish their boots to show they've been good. They usually place just one boot outside their door so they don't appear too greedy, though.

One polished boot: Check! What happens next?

According to the legend, Nikolaus comes in the middle of the night on a donkey or a horse and leaves little treats – like coins, chocolate, oranges and toys - for good children.

What do naughty children get?

This depends on different family traditions. Sometimes Nikolaus only leaves a switch (of wood) in the boot, ostensibly for spankings, to show that the child doesn't deserve a treat. In other families, a man disguised as St. Nicholas will visit the family or the child's school alone or with his sinister-looking alter ego Knecht Ruprecht to question the children about their behaviour.

In the YouGov survey, 51 percent of respondents said they generally believed Knecht Ruprecht belonged to the Nikolaus tradition whereas 47 percent said he did not.

Crikey. What does he do if the kids admit to being naughty?

Depending on how strict the children's parents are, St. Nicholas will give them a verbal warning or even a pretend spanking with a rod.

Hey, he's a Saint isn't he? Saints can't spank little kids.

Well, the rod is more an invention of parents who wanted to teach their children a lesson over the years.

That spoils the fun a bit, doesn't it?

Certainly! Children were often quite frightened of being questioned about their behaviour because they've been told that St. Nicholas will hurt them with his rod or even put them in a sack and take them away.

Though the custom is in decline, in more Catholic regions, parents inform a local priest of naughty behaviour. The priest then pays a personal visit wearing the traditional Christian garb to threaten the little rugrats with a beating.

What does his outfit look like?

He is usually pictured with a long white beard, a bishop's mitre and a red cloak, sometimes with a sack over his shoulder and a rod in his hand.

Does Nikolaus come again on Christmas Eve then?

No. Santa Claus, or the Weihnachtsmann, usually comes to German homes – often in person – on the afternoon of Christmas Eve.

Frohen Nikolaus!