

## Zahradníček's blog for English speaking students

### Part twenty seven: St. Nicholas, or Devil?

5<sup>th</sup> December. That is the evening preceding 6<sup>th</sup> December, the St. Nicholas Day. Atheistic Czechs, not knowing, keep using the old Hebrew custom that the feast starts already at the sunset of the previous day.

In the evening of 5<sup>th</sup> December, streets start to be full of strange bodies. Some of them are costumed as a bishop, with a crutch, and the *mitra*, the special cap that gave the name to *valvula mitralis*, the mitral valve. Some have wings, as they should be angels. And some are black, with a black tail, and these are devils. They come to children. The bishop is not any bishop, it is Saint Nicholas (270–343 AD), “patron saint of sailors, merchants, archers, repentant thieves, prostitutes, children, brewers, pawnbrokers, and students in various cities and countries around Europe” as Wikipedia says. This saint comes from Myra, a small island at the coast of what is today Turkey. Myra itself is recently known under the name of Demre. In Czechia and a few more countries, St. Nicholas gives small presents (usually sweets) to children just in the evening of 5<sup>th</sup> December (or they find the sweets at the window in the morning of 6<sup>th</sup> December). St. Nicholas is “the honest one”. He reads the list of the child’s sins (or simply, bad thing done by the child – going to bed too late, not to be polite to relatives, to play with smartphones instead of having lunch... and so on). The devil reacts quickly – he is just ready to take the child to his bag and to send it to hell. But good luck, the angel with the St. Nicholas say “no, no, the child is not that bad” and finally, the child is not sent to hell, it even does not get coal instead of sweets (what is another usual idea of the devil). Sometimes the child is told to sing a song or to say a poem, and so the St. Nicholas is happy with this and so the child may get the present.

A funny thing: the same Saint Nicholas from Myra/Demre transformed during the centuries into the Dutch Sinterklaas and finally to the Irish/American Santa Claus. That is the bearded guy in red clothes that gives the presents to children during Christmas – in many countries, but not in Czechia. Czechs have another tradition, in fact, neither very old nor originally Czech: some German protestant churches disliked the cult of St. Nicolas and they suggested that the Christmas presents may be delivered to children by the Baby Jesus, *Christkindl* in German or *Jezulátko* or *Ježíšek* in Czech. Although some people suggest that it has no logic for Christmas presents to be delivered by a newborn, this tradition is now considered “the only good tradition”. Czech nationalists usually hate Santa Claus as “foreign and commercial guy” and they say that the presents should be delivered by Baby Jesus and not Santa Claus. Of course majority of them have no idea that the hated Christmas Santa Claus and the beloved 6<sup>th</sup> December Saint Nicolas is the same person. On the other hand, if they are disgusted by Santa Claus in red clothes, it is partially understandable. The clothes are the same as those worn by the Russian *Ded Moroz* (Дед Мороз), the “Father Christmas”, that delivered the Christmas presents during communist regime. The communists, obviously, hated both Saint Nicolas/Santa Claus and Baby Jesus, because both of them were connected with the religion; and religion (any religion – Christian, Jewish, Muslim or any else) was one of big enemies of communists.

A big hope in all this story are the children; they do not understand any fight between the supporters of “Santa”, supporters of “Baby Jesus”, or even “Father Christmas”. They are just glad that they get some sweets in the beginning of December, and later they get bigger presents in the Christmas Eve. They are happy because of having the presents, and they would never understand, why the adults argue, who it the one that should bring them these presents. Probably it is the best thing they can do.

Children are also happy to see the lights in the squares (in Brno they are now four places with markets and the programme). But adults have another big conflict: are these markets *Christmas markets*? Probably not – *Christmas* only starts by the Christmas Eve. So they should be rather *Advent markets*, as advent is the four-week season that is supposed to get Christian people silent and concentrated for the Christmas. But... are they really *silent*?