

Sinterklaas and Zwarte Piet Mark Dutch Christmas

by Adriana de Waal

Not everyone knows how Santa Claus, that fat, jolly, whitebearded old gentleman in the red, fur trimmed suit, came into being.

He was born in the ancient Lycian seaport of Patara (near modern Kalamaki, Turkey), and was once one of the most celebrated saints commemorated in Eastern and Western churches. His uncle, the archbishop of Myra (near modern Finike, Tur.) ordained him and appointed him abbot of a nearby Monastery. At his death, Nicholas was chosen to fill the vacancy, and he served in this position until his death.

Under Diocletian he was imprisoned for preaching Christianity but was released during the reign of Emperor Constantine. He attended the first Council (325) of Nicaea (modern Iznik, Tur.)

In the 6th century, abbot Nicholas of Sion, near Myra is believed to have written his biography and accounts of numerous miracles, of which the best known deal with saving of children and sailors. Many charming stories relate Nicholas' charity toward the poor.

He was chosen patron saint of countries such as Russia and Greece, of charitable fraternities and guilds, of cities such as Fribourg, Switz, and Moscow. His miracles were a favorite subject for medieval artists and liturgical plays. His traditional feast day is December 6th.

The transformation of Nicholas into Father Christmas or Santa Claus first occurred in the country where the Reformed churches were in the majority, Germany. Dutch Protestant settlers in New Amsterdam (now New York) are credited with introducing St. Nicholas in America. Sinterklaas (Sinter Claes) later became Santa Claus, contributing further to the spreading of this folklore as a festival for the family and especially children, when presents are exchanged.

In the Netherlands, this festival is still celebrated on the 6th of December. Sinterklaas, helped by Zwarte Piet (Black Peter) arrives several weeks before by steamboat from Spain, where he is awaited on shore by a marching band, many children and adults who will play and sing:

Zie ginds komt de stoomboot
uit Spanje weer aan
Hy brengt ons St. Nicolaas,
ik zie hem al staan
Hoe huppelt zijn paardje
het dek op en weer
Hoe waaien de wimpels
al heen en al weer.

Zijn knecht staat te lachen,
en roept ons steeds toe:
"Wie zoet is krijgt lekkers;
Wie stout is de roe."

Maar jongens wat zie ik
een pop van speculaas!
Die heb ik gekregen
van St. Nicolaas.

Een tafel vol speelgoed,
Wie had dat gedacht?
Nog nooit heeft St. Nicolaas
zo ruim ons bedacht
En dan nog voor ieder
een letter erby.
Nog nooit was er iemand
zo gelukkig als wij.

Later in the weeks to come until the 6th of Dec. Sinterklaas (Sinter Claes) and Black Peter will visit schools where the waiting children chant:

Kom St. Nicolaas, kom St. Nicolaas
kom binnen met je knecht
Er zijn geen stoute kinderen bij
ze zitten allemaal still en recht.
Misschien heb jij vandaag gen tijd
maar voor je weer naar Spanje rijdt.
Kom dan nog even bij ons aan
en laat je paardje in de stal maarstaan.
(2 times) En we zingen en we springen
en we zijn zo blij
Er zijn geen stoute kinderen bij.

At home families prepare for the evening of St. Nicolaas, by placing wooden shoes, filled with food for his horse, in front of the fireplace. In some lucky homes Sinterklaas will personally pay them a visit.

Michel A. Cousineau

B.Sc. Com. Accountant

Accounting & Income Tax Consultant for corporations, Partnerships, Proprietorships & Farming Enterprises.

Box 88, R.R. 3, Russell, Ont.
(613) 445-5291 K0A 3B0



Help! seems to be written all over the face of 5-year-old Sandy Ris of Kenmore. She, along with many other youngsters enjoy skating lessons taught at the Metcalfe Community Centre every week. (Castor Review Photo)



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