

Czech Christmas and New Year Holiday Traditions



Svatý Mikuláš (St. Nicholas), by Josef Lada, 1932

It is a bit strange how Czechs love and follow most of the Christmas traditions although many Czechs do not profess a religion. Since Christmas has Christian roots, one could easily jump into conclusion when watching the Czech people around Christmas time that the whole country is very religious. However, the opposite is true.

Nevertheless, everybody just loves Christmas! Even Czech atheists. Czech Christmas are accompanied with many nice traditions that are still alive. You can see it on your own eyes for example on the Old Town Square. There is a big Bethlehem manger scene – little baby Jesus with his parents in a barn. Little version of this scene is in all Czech flats on the Christmas Eve, no matter if you believe in God or not. It just belongs to Christmas.

Another tradition that belongs to Christmas is cutting few branches of a fruit tree on December 5th and bringing them home. If those branches come into flower on the Christmas Eve it means that a girl in the family will get married within a year.

A favorite tradition is the Christmas Eve dinner. Czechs eat carp, not turkey or anything else, but fried carp. When preparing the food you have to clean it from fish-scales and that is when Czech tradition

comes in handy. If you put one clean fish-scale into your wallet it should bring you more money into your wallet in the new year.

Czechs celebrate Christmas on Christmas Eve. This day is the most important day not only for children but for parents as well. Yes, Czechs open their presents on this day and not on Christmas day, as in many countries.

It all starts in the morning on December 24. Television is switched on in most families because the program is simple and beautiful – all day long only fairy-tales!! Czechs are proud on their fairy-tales. All members of the family watch those fairy-tales while decorating the Christmas tree. Typical breakfast on this day is a special Christmas cake with raisins and almonds called vánočka ('VA-noach-ka') in Czech.

However, if you decide not to eat all day till the big Christmas dinner you will not suffer. According to the Czech tradition, if you fast, you will see a golden pig! Now you decide whether it is worth trying! If you don't want to see the golden pig, there is usually only little lunch. You can eat Christmas sweets.

Christmas dinner is huge though! It is a great social event too. Everybody dresses up nicely in their "Sunday best" – women in dresses, men in suits, children too. It starts at around 5pm with a fish soup, followed by potato salad and fried carp. Every family has a slightly different potato salad. The recipe is sometimes a family secret and might include: ham, pickled gherkin, egg, mayonnaise mixed with white yogurt (so it is not as caloric) and of course potatoes.

After big dinner at about 7pm, when children turn their attention back to the Christmas tree, it is surrounded with presents. Opening presents in Czech Republic is therefore very different – firstly, Czechs open them in the evening on December 24, secondly, everybody is dressed in their finest clothing.

December 5th and Saint Nicholas

If you find yourself in Prague on December 5th, you have to make sure you will be outside when it gets dark – preferably on some big street or square, the best is of course the Old Town Square. And why? On this day you may meet in the streets of Prague face to face the St. Nicholas with the Devil and the Angel!

As soon as it gets dark out, St. Nicholas walks with his helpers in the streets of Prague handing out small presents to children. He is tall with a long white beard, dressed in long red robe, mitre on his head, with a golden bishop's staff. He is a very wise man who knows everything. And that is why all kids are so nervous on this day! He even knows whether this or that child was good during the past year!

If the child was behaving well, he or she will receive a present from him, usually some candies, nuts or fruits. However, if he or she was not behaving well all year, the Devil will put the child into his sack and take him or her to Hell! That is why all Czech children are unusually good on this day.

This is very educational for the children. On this day, all children think about what they have done in the past and usually come into conclusion that they could be better – clean their rooms, eat the vegetables, brush their teeth, listen to their parents and so on. So when it comes to the question of St. Nicholas: "Have you been good this year?" they usually promise to the St. Nicholas that they will be better from now on.

If St. Nicholas wants to make the child to think about his or her behavior, the Devil with a tail and horns will rattle the chains and open his sack. At this moment, Angel, who acts as a counterweight to the Devil, dressed in a white gown and with wings will start pleading for the child. If St. Nicholas is still unsure, children usually sing a song or say a poem and that will convince St. Nicholas that they are good.

Czech parents sometimes hire "St. Nicholas and his helpers" to come to their home to threaten a bit their fractious children. It is a good one-day-job for students mostly, or some family friends who dress up and play St. Nicholas. This "St. Nicholas" is well informed by the parents and therefore the performance is very effective.

When unseen, St. Nicholas leaves his presents in the children's room based on their pre-behavior. Good Czech children receive above all a chocolate calendar, which is a special calendar – there is a chocolate for every day till the Christmas Eve. Bad children usually receive potatoes or coal.

In Prague, streets are filled with Devils rattling chains, beautiful Angels and of course St. Nicholas himself. It is recommended that you to visit the Old Town Square around 4pm. Every year about this time, there is a contest for the best St. Nicholas, Angel and Devil. So hopefully you have been good this year... If not, have some poem or song ready at hand!

(Source: <http://www.prague.net/blog/category/czech-traditions>)

Mluvíte Česky? Do You Speak Czech?

Veselé Vánoce! (Merry Christmas!)

Hezké svátky! or **Krásné svátky!** or **Příjemné svátky!** (Happy Holidays!)

Šťastný nový rok! (Happy New Year!)

Veselé Vánoce a šťastný nový rok! (Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!)

Píšete Česky? Do You Write Czech? Write a holiday card:

Veselé Vánoce a šťastný nový rok přeje [Judy]! (Merry Christmas and Happy New Year from [Judy]!)

Příjemné svátky a hodně štěstí v novém roce přeje [Judy]! (Happy Holidays and good fortune in the New Year from [Judy]!)

Remember:

- If your card is coming from more than one person, just change "přeje" to "přejí" - like this: ...přejí [Judy a Jerry]! (...from [Judy and Jerry]!)

- Czech Christmas cards often include wishes for a happy and successful new year

- "Nový rok" with a capital "N" means New Year's Day (January 1st), while "nový rok" with a lower-case "n" refers to the whole upcoming year

As a rule, you should always stress the first syllable of a Czech word!

©2013 Anthony J. Kadlec. If you have any contributions or suggestions for topics for future columns, please contact me by email: tkadlec@gmail.com or call me: (651) 271-0422 or send your letters to my attention: 1136 Fairmount Avenue, St. Paul, MN 55105. See this article online in the Pavučina Corner Archive at: www.kadlecovi.com Děkuji! Tony Kadlec