

Christmas with the Krampus

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December 2019



The celebration of Christmas was very different in the late 1940' and early 1950's. I spent Christmas of 1949 in Chicago with my mother's family. They were a very traditional German family and celebrated with many of the old country customs. This is a real story of a visit from St. Nicholas. On Christmas Eve. We gathered with the family at my Grandfathers house on the south side of Chicago. While the children scurried around the living room and through the hall, the adults meandered between the kitchen and the basement. I would try and peek down the stairs to the basement but it was packed with family drinking and reveling in the holiday mood. When we heard the first knock at the door we expected just another family member late arrival. Then a rapid and firmer knock and the sound of bells jingling. Some of the parents began shepharding the children to one side of the room. This was strange. Then as the door was opened we could see it filled with a hug figure, a man dressed in Red and gold robes. He had a white beard and a pointed hat that bent as he walked through the door. He filled the room as he entered and walked immediately to the center of the room. We were all so commanded by his presence that we scarcely noticed the dark shadow dancing behind him. Grandfather had us

stand in a line and introduced us to Saint Nicholas. We were instructed to bow and stay at attention. St. Nicholas reached behind him and swung a huge red velvet bag onto the floor in front of us, it fell with a thump. In a deep voice he looked at us and asked if we had been good children, before we could answer the dancing shadow bounced between us and the bag. We weren't sure what it was but we knew it wasn't good. It was half the size of St. Nicholas and thin and jittery. St. Nicholas introduced us to Krampus a devil demon who he brought with him to help find the bad little boys and girls. I kept my eyes half closed and tried not to look straight at him. Krampus carried a small black bag in one hand and a willow switch in the other. He made this horrible screeching sound and I thought I saw fangs when he would growl. I was sure he might eat me or at the least take a bite out of me. As he danced around the back of us he would whack his switch across the back of our legs and ask again if we were good or bad children. One little boy was singled out by him and he reached into his bag and pulled out a lump of coal. Before he could give it him, St. Nicholas in booming voice commanded Krampus to "Be-gone". And as quick as he came in he bounced out the door and was gone. Suddenly the room glowed with relief. St. Nicholas reached into his bag and began to hand gifts to each of us.

The Germanic culture and heritage has been rooted in the stories and folklore of the Austrian alpine countryside. The Krampus half goat half demon was used by many parents as a way to control children's behavior. The Grimm's Fairytales became a useful tool in parenting. My entire Christmas experience that year has stayed with me more than any of the other 74. So always remember Saint Nicholas is checking his list to see who has been naughty and who has been nice and Krampus is waiting outside.

