



## MIKULÁŠ DAY, FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF CZECH FIFTH-GRADERS by Celieta Leifeste (USA)

**M**ikuláš Day ... one of those European traditions that leaves a first-time observer bemusedly scratching his or her head, trying to mesh what just happened with their previous Christmas season experiences, and wondering if what they think they saw is what actually happened. Rather than relying on an online search engine for answers, why not let Czech kids explain this holiday—in their own words?

My husband Larry and I both teach at Sunny Canadian International School, on the outskirts of Prague. Although the school's curriculum is completely bilingual, the observance of Mikuláš Day is definitely based on Czech tradition. On Mikuláš Day, Mikuláš, an angel, and the Devil appear at school and go room-to-room, providing each student an up-close-and-personal encounter of a very strange kind with these characters from European folklore.

Last year, Larry asked his Czech Fifth Grade students how they would explain Mikuláš Day to someone who had no idea what the observance signified. Here are some of their, largely unedited, responses:

*"Mikuláš is a story about a person (with an Angel and the Devil) who goes to different houses and gives candies to the good*

*children and takes the bad children to the Devil's home. Mikuláš Day is celebrated in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, and Poland. Mikuláš is very similar to Santa Claus. The most traditional sweets Mikulas gives are chocolates and candies (and in some countries nuts). Lots of kids love Mikuláš and the Angel, but are always scared of the Devil."*

A little historical perspective might be needed to set the stage...

*"Mikuláš was a man who lived a long time ago. He was a good man who helped old and poor people. I will tell you a story about it. One day there was a good and nice man named Mikuláš. He took a lot of money, and at night he went and threw the money into windows of old and poor families."*

The Mikuláš-Santa Claus connection is foremost in the minds of some—presumably the ones who have been "good"...

*"Mikuláš is a man like Santa Claus. He brings presents and sweet candies. He goes around on the night of 5 December with the devil and an angel. If you were bad, you go to hell and if you were good you go to heaven. Mikuláš has a book, and in the book is a name with a mark to show if you are bad or good."*

Of course, there are those children who don't seem so certain about how their behavior will rate, but still understand what Mikuláš Day is actually all about—the chocolate, of course...

*"Every year in December, late when it is dark, Mikuláš comes to your house with an*



*angel and the devil. First, Mikuláš takes a big book and he looks if you've been good. Then he asks you if you've been good. Almost everybody says, 'Yes!', because you don't want to go into the devil's big bag and have him take you into the underworld where he will eat you. If Mikuláš says that you've been good, he gives you chocolate and candy and they say they will be looking at you the whole year, and then they will come next year again, and it goes the same, again and again. Then, you're happy you survived this and you eat as much chocolate as your mom lets you."*

The images of Hell have obviously made a strong impression on some of the students...

*"On 5 December, the Devil, an angel, and Mikuláš come to scare you.. On Mikuláš Day, every good kid gets some sweet prize. If you say a poem or sing a short song, you will get a present. But the bad kids don't get anything, except sometimes a rock. If you have been really bad, you will go to Hell. The gate to Hell is opened only one day in the year. When the gate is opened, I do not want to be there!"*

This student may see through some of the threats, even at the ripe, old age of 11.

*"Mikuláš, an angel, and the devil come to our homes and they give us some fruits, chocolate, or a little toy if we had good behavior. But, if we had bad behavior, they (Mikuláš, the angel, and the devil) give us potatoes and coal. If we had very bad behavior, the devil will take us to Hell. This is what people say to little children."*

And, finally, a comment on growing up...

*"But now that I am big, Mikuláš, the Angel, and the Devil don't come to me, anymore."*

Sort of makes you want to get two friends, dress up, and pay him a visit, doesn't it? •