



GOOD KING WENCESLAS

Who was Good King Wenceslas? Has he ever existed? A rather curious, strange Christmas Carol, don't you think?

The text comes from an early Victorian poet John Mason Neale, 1818 - 1866. The tune comes from the springtide song: "Tempus adest floridum", first published in 1582 . The story itself is much older. In fact , the oldest surviving manuscript of the story dates from the 13th century in the legend "Ut annunciatur". The tale may be older still. It has been rewritten many times, for example by Enea Silvio Piccolomini , later to become Pope Pius II, in his "History of Bohemia", and by an English Jesuit named Tanner in the 17th century.

So who was Good King Wenceslas? He was indeed a Czech prince who was born in AD 907 and some say he was only fifteen years old when he started to rule his native Bohemia (which is the western half of present Czech Republic with its capital Prague).

There were six royal Wenceslases all told. One of them ruled under his confirmation name of Charles (IV). His daughter Anne married the English Richard(II) and is buried with her husband at Westminster Abbey as Queen Anne of Bohemia. Rather confusingly, the numbering starts with Wenceslas(I) in the 13th century, yet the earliest Wenceslas, referred to as Saint Wenceslas, the patron saint of the Czech nation, dates from the 10th century.

He was pious Christian and under his rule St.Vitus Cathedral at the Prague Castle was founded. When he was still young, on 28.September AD929 (some say AD935) he was assassinated on the order of his younger pagan brother Boleslas the Cruel who became his successor. Wenceslas (Latin form of Czech name Václav) was soon after proclaimed a saint, (similarly to his grandmother Ludmila, who brought him up), and he became the symbol of Czech statehood and of its continuity, the ideal and eternal ruler of the Czech lands as well as their heavenly patron. His statue in centre of Prague on Wenceslas Square bears an inscription, a part of prayer to him, saying in Czech: *St Wenceslas, do not let us perish, nor our descendants* .

Throughout history and as recently as under the German or later Russian occupation in the 20.century people often gathered defiantly, lit candles and prayed at the foot of the statue. On 19. January 1969 a Czech university student of philosophy Jan Palach set fire to himself near the statue of St. Wenceslas at the top end of Wenceslas Square and as a human torch burned himself to death in protest against the Russian invasion of what was then Czechoslovakia.

The question is how the story of the 'footprint miracle' from the above mentioned historical medieval legend got into the wording of the traditional English Christmas carol. I am offering one possible explanation: The Emperor Charles (IV) founded Charles University in Prague in 1348. On his official signet of Prague University there is the image of St.Wenceslas with Charles(IV) kneeling in front of him. At that time there were lively contacts and exchange of students, teachers and ideas between the universities of Oxford and Prague. It is quite possible that the story from the legend was brought to England by some of the English students or the like.

The above mentioned Enea Silvio Piccolomini offers a 'natural' explanation of the marvel. He reports as fact (not his opinion), that the saint went barefoot in penance, and his feet bled – cut by the ice, so that the servant was able to warm his own feet on the fresh blood in the footprints. (Alternatively we may imagine that the servant's sensation of warmth might be easily created by suggestion.)

Eva Pinkava. , West Hagbourne Village History Group,

picture by Jan Křesadlo (V.J.K. Pinkava)