

## **Whatever Happened to Santa Claus?**

**By**

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**Why did Italy ignore that most celebrated icon of Christmas in Western Europe until the wars of the Twentieth Century when they were told about Santa Clause by Italian American soldiers? After all, it was to Italy that the body of St. Nicholas, the Greek Christian Bishop of Myra in Asia Minor, was moved to Bari in 1087 to prevent it from being destroyed during centuries long conflicts between the Arabs, the Normans and the Byzantines, for control of the territories around Asia Minor and the Adriatic. A Basilica had even been constructed over his tomb in Bari, and churches all over Italy (including in my grandparents' home town of Paternopoli) were named in his honor: San Nicola. So why did the Italians wait so long to honor him in the way the rest of Europe had been doing for at least a century, as the person who delivered toys and gifts to children on Christmas Eve?**

**Well, it seems that Italians had their own icon to help them celebrate the season: an old woman called Befana, based on the Greek term “Epiphany.” According to legend, Befana was sweeping outside her house around the time of the birth of Jesus when the Three Wise Men stopped and asked her where they might find the Son of God. She shrugged and said she had no idea.**

**She gave them shelter for the night and the next day they asked if she would like to help them find Him. She replied that she was too busy with her housework. But after giving it some thought she decided to do so. However, by then it was too late to join the Magi in search of the Christ Child, so she spent the following centuries flying about on her broomstick, delivering toys and gifts to children all over Italy on the eve of the Feast of the Epiphany (Twelfth Night) hoping to find Him eventually!**

**But Italy is nowhere near the route taken by the Three Wise Men to find the Christ Child (Asia to Bethlehem!) It seems this myth may have been an adaptation of the old Roman celebration of Saturnalia just before the Winter Solstice (the return of the Sun from the darkness of Winter). At the end of Saturnalia the Romans would go to the Temple of Juno on Capitoline Hill to have their fortunes read by an old crone. So this tale may be**

**the one that eventually evolved into the legend of Befana.**

**As far as we know, Christ was not born in Winter at all but in the Spring. The early Christians decided to shift their celebration of His birth to conform to the annual Roman celebration of the return of the Sun, so as not to arouse too much attention from hostile elements. So in Italy the Christmas season was superimposed upon the traditional honoring of the return of the Sun with a brief interlude of twelve days to keep them somewhat distinct.**

**In other words, Italy celebrated gift giving not on December 25<sup>th</sup> but on January 6<sup>th</sup>, the Feast of the Epiphany (when the Three Wise Men delivered their gifts to the Christ Child), as a diversion from the Saturnalia and Winter Solstice. And as far as I know, they still do! So, you may send Christmas cards and presents to your Italian relatives every year, but don't be surprised if you don't receive a reply until a month or so later! (Also, sometimes in the United States the Feast of the Epiphany is moved to the following Sunday since it is not as important as December 25<sup>th</sup> in this country!)**

**Oh Well! “Chacon a son gout” as they say in France.**

# BEFANA



## **The Basilica of St. Nicholas in Bari, Italy**

