

*I dedicate this to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ,
and to my darling husband, Edward, who has never
failed to believe in and love me.*

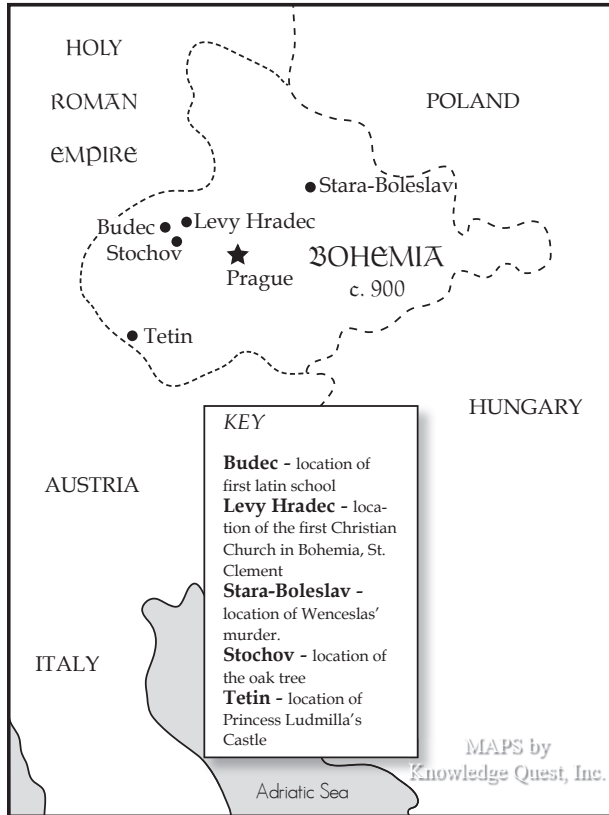


GOOD KING WENCESLAS

Duke of Bohemia

by Karla Akins





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4 GOOD KING WENCESLĀS

Duke of Bohemia

907 - 935 A.D.

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now fell in tiny flakes and the wind blew as soft as a baby's breathing. Glistening wisps of sparkling white crystals danced around the tops of the trees. It was St. Stephen's Day in Prague, the day after Christmas. A crowd had gathered at the square to gawk and point at the sight before them. Some shouted, others whispered, and many ran to and fro, waiting for a chance to bid on their favorite item for sale.

"I'll give ye this pelt of otter and a bottle of mead for that lad there," a rickety little man with matted, gray whiskers shouted.

A young lad named Viktor sat on the ground in front of him trembling. His face was pale and his lips were chapped. Tears stung his cheeks in the cold winter air. He was tied to a post in the middle of the square, surrounded by other young boys, girls, and women, all bound to one another with leather

straps. Each of them sat on the ground with sad, tear-stained faces in front of a large, raucous crowd.

Viktor was for sale and he was scared. His father had died two weeks before and now he and his mother were to be sold as slaves to people from the Middle East and Africa. He sure hoped they would buy his mother along with him. He could not bear to be without her, and he knew she was more scared than he.

"This fine lad is worth a good sight more than that lousy pelt of yours and your stinking mead." The slave trader, a large, muscle-bound man with lustrous umber skin turned to Viktor. "Stand up boy," he sneered. Viktor stood and the slave trader ripped the thin tunic from his body. "See here?" he said to the little man pulling at his grimy beard, "This lad is healthy as an ox, and not a spot nor scar on 'im. Never a broken bone, and," the man looked through Viktor's curly locks of blond hair, "no lice, neither. He'll make the finest slave in your master's house!"

The man pulled again on his whiskers, squinted his eyes and looked over at his mother. The trader knew good and well slaves weren't nearly as valuable as cattle, and healthy or not, he was not going to pay more than a few pelts to get one of those puny slaves for his master.

"What about that wench there?" he nodded toward Viktor's mother, Ivana. "She's been hangin' on to the lad since the beginnin'. He her boy?"

"Aye," the slave trader said. "But she's not as strong as he is. Look at how scrawny she be." The slave trader lifted his mother's chin and his mother stared blankly back at him.

"Looks added to me, and not too smart."

"She's smart enough!" the boy yelled, struggling to get free. "She goes where I go!"

"Aye, a feisty one I see," said the bearded man. "Okay, ye got yerself a deal. Two pelts and a half-bottle a mead."

"Ye give me one of them auroch pelts, a knife and three bottles of mead and ye got yerself a deal," the slave trader said sternly. "He be a lusty, healthy lad, with a lot of years ahead of 'im."

A voice came up from the crowd: "I crave your pardon! I'll do ye better! I've two pelts of auroch, three swans, a blackbird pie and one skein of wine to give ye in exchange for the lad and his tunic!"

"Sold!" the trader said immediately, turning toward the familiar voice. It was that crazy Duke of Bohemia again, come to fetch another boy.

"And the maiden too!" the Duke shouted.

"The maiden too, aye," the trader said. "I doubt I can trade her elsewhere for such a fine price."

The man with the whiskers scowled and walked on, studying the other children and women for sale. That boy and his mother weren't worth what the Duke had paid, and it was more than he could afford today anyway.

The Duke gave the slave trader all that he had bid, and then walked over to Viktor and his mother with a twinkle in his eyes and a smile on his lips. Viktor looked into the face of the Duke as he untied the straps on his wrists. He wondered what fate had in store for him now. The Duke went toward his mother to untie her.

"Don't touch my mother!" he screamed. He was too afraid to jump on the Duke's back to stop him, even if he wasn't tied up, but he wanted to.

The Duke looked up at the young lad and smiled gently as he untied the ropes around his mother's wrists.

"Relax, lad," he said gently. "I will not harm your mother." Then he reached toward the boy and touched his shoulder. "Nor you. I am here to help you – not harm you."

He finished untying their feet and gave them each a crust of bread from his pocket.

"Thank you," the boy and his mother whispered, grateful for the bread and freedom from their bonds.

"Come hither," the duke said. "Follow me. We have but a short journey to the castle for more bread – and pottage as well. And then, lad, we'll find ye a new tunic."

Viktor's mother looked at him, frightened, but he tried to act brave for her. He was the man of the house now, and it was up to him to take care of her – even if they had no house of their own anymore.

"It's okay, Mum, the gods be watchin' that be sure. I said extra prayers today."

His mother nodded hopefully and they followed the kind Duke through the forest uphill to Prague castle. It was a long walk and the winter wind, though soft, was biting. Viktor was shivering, and the kind Duke put his cloak about his trembling shoulders.

"Anon you will be sitting in front of Katiana's fire, drinking warm milk and eating swan pie," he said. "Perchance a good washing down is in yer future – I could smell ye from

miles away!"

The Duke threw his head back and laughed at his own joke. Something inside of Viktor told him he didn't need to be afraid of this kind man. But he was still afraid. He sniffed at himself. He smelled just fine. The Duke must smell something else.

"What are ye going to do with us?" Viktor asked boldly, trying not to let his chin quiver.

"What do you suppose I should do with ye?" the Duke asked, his eyes twinkling.

"Let us go home," Viktor said.

"Pray thee, lad, what happened to cause ye to be standing in the slave trader's square?" the Duke asked gently.

"My father, a worthy and skilled candle maker was attacked by a wild boar," the boy said. "No matter how hard we prayed to the gods, the attack of the boar made his leg sick and he died. He couldn't do the candle making, and we couldn't pay our debts, so we were sold by our debtors to pay what we owe."

The Duke nodded. It was a common story these days. He hated seeing the children tied like animals to beams in the middle of Prague each week. The Arabs from the Middle East had an insatiable appetite for white slaves from Bohemia,¹ but not if he could help it. He bought as many children as he could each week. If only he could buy them all.

"Verily, young lad, tonight ye be not a slave. Tonight, ye be a guest of the Duke of Bohemia for the feast of St. Stephen's.

¹ Now Czechoslovakia

Ye and yer mother will dine at his table and eat his food. But not until ye get a new tunic!”

“Is the Duke a nice man?” Viktor asked meekly. “He doesn’t eat children and their mothers does he?”

The Duke threw back his head and laughed.

“Nay, he won’t be found eating children, lad. Ye won’t be the Duke’s dinner this night.” The Duke laughed loud and his voice echoed among the trees and fell like eiderdown into the freshly fallen snow. Ahead was the grand castle. Soon they would be at the bridge to cross the moat and then they would be inside. Viktor’s stomach rumbled impatiently. His toes were numb and his ears ached from the cold. He had never eaten swan pie. He could hardly wait.

“Ouch! I pray thee, stay! Stop it! Mercy!” Viktor wiggled and pulled away from the large, bulbous woman wiping at his face and ears.

“Settle down, Lad! I can’t clean ye when you’re wigglin’ so!”

When Viktor and his mother had arrived at the castle, they were ushered into an enormous kitchen, where servants bustled about plucking geese, pheasants, swans and a various assortment of other fowl. Mutton and pork were basting on spits, and bakers were kneading dark dough and baking breads. Other servants were decorating scrumptious meats, already roasted, to make them look as they did before butchering. One young lassie carefully placed a pheasant’s feathers back into the succulently roasted bird. Viktor’s nose nearly burst with joy

at the variety of delicious scents — aromas his nose had never before experienced or relished.

In front of a giant hearth — bigger than the cottage he and his mother had lived in before his father died — blazed the hottest fire Viktor had ever seen or felt. The woman washing him poured a pot of hot water over Viktor’s head and he howled even louder.

“Mama! Mama!” he cried. “Help!”

He had never taken a bath in his life! His mother had told him to never get wet. It could mean getting sick – and to get sick with even a cough could bring certain death. So why was his mother allowing this woman to do this to him? He was terrified and annoyed. He did *not* like the feeling of that hot water in his ears!

He wiped furiously at his eyes and opened them only to find his mother giggling with a young girl Viktor’s age. She was helping his mother put on a fresh tunic. Another girl was combing his mother’s hair. What was going on? Why was his mother giggling like that, and why didn’t she help him?

“The Duke deserves ye to be clean at his table, Lad,” the big woman named Katianna said. The more he wiggled the harder the woman scrubbed so he decided it would be better to stand still. But it wasn’t easy. This was his first bath – and he didn’t like it one bit!

“It will be okay, Viktor,” his mother spoke softly through her giggles. “I think we are safe now.” Then she began to cry. His mother had not acted like her real self ever since his father died. He could hardly figure her out these days. For so long she had taken care of him – but now he felt he needed to take

care of her.

“Pray tell — the duke — what is he like?” Viktor asked as the woman put a clean tunic over his head and helped put his arms through the holes.

“The Duke is the finest man in all Bohemia,” Katianna said. “He is kindly, good and generous.”

“Aye, that he is,” one of the young servant girls said. “And a Christian, too.”

“A Christian? What is that?” Viktor asked.

“It’s a long story,” Katianna said. “But, since it will take a while longer for the swans to roast — perhaps I can tell you. Do you like stories?” she asked.

Viktor nodded eagerly.

“Well, then, if ye sit very still and let me clean yer toes — I’ll tell ye the story of our good Duke Wenceslas.”

Viktor loved stories almost as much as he loved bread, so he sat on a stool and plopped his foot onto Katianna’s fluffy lap as she sat across from him. Her lap was soft as a pillow and he liked the sound of her smooth liquid voice as she spoke. Her cheeks were scarlet and her eyes shone with happiness in the reflection of the fire. He was feeling sleepy, but he fought to keep his eyes open by staring at her round cheerful face. He wanted to hear the entire story.

“Long ago, there were three beautiful sisters that ruled Bohemia. They were the daughters of Pace, the prince who started a school that taught religion, hymns, prophecy and magic. In those days, there was no writing, so the princesses had to memorize everything. In those days, magic was the highest form of learning.”

“And it is, indeed,” Viktor said, his eyes wide with attention.

“Says who?” asked Katianna, grimacing at the young man’s dirty feet.

“Why, says anyone ye ask, of course,” he said.

“Well, it’s not what the Duke would say, were ye to ask him,” one of the young girls named Dora said. “So don’t be sayin’ so at his table.”

Viktor crinkled his brow. *Why on earth would anyone not think that magic was the most important thing there was?* He looked at the lady cleaning his feet as she began again to speak.

“When the sisters’ father died, he had no sons, only his three beautiful daughters to take rule. There was Kazi, who used herbs and magic incantations to heal the sick. There was also Teta who was a pagan priestess, and Libuse a very wise pagan prophetess.

“The wise and beautiful Libuse ruled as a judge along with twelve of the wisest men in the realm. They sat under that Linden tree ye passed when ye came here. You know, the big fat, tall one with the gnarled arms?”

“Aye,” he said. “I saw that tree. Tis ugly and old it be.”

“Aye,” she said. “That be the one. And holy it was in those days for ‘tis where people married and worshipped the goddess, Freya.”

The lad nodded. He knew of that goddess, and all the others he and his mother worshipped.

“One day, when Libuse was judging an argument between two brothers, she decided in favor of the younger, and the older was made furious. He began to shout and bellow, ‘Why do

we men listen to a woman when we all know women have no brains!?"

"Have they none?" Viktor asked. He really didn't know. All his life he had been told women and children were worth less than cattle – perhaps it was a lack of brains that made it so.

The big woman slapped his leg with a thick hand. "Nay! They have as many brains as any man, and don't ye be forgettin' it!"

The women all laughed and Viktor rubbed his leg. It burned a little where the woman had slapped him, even though she had done it playfully.

"When the pretty and wise Duchess Libuse heard this, and saw that the crowd did not come to her defense, she said, 'Yes, I rule like a woman with kindness and mercy. But you think this means I'm weak. You want a harder, crueller ruler? Then your wish shall be granted.'"

"She sent for her sisters and they talked all night long. Then, she went into her secret garden and fell before the gold and wooden idol, Perun, who had a head of silver and a beard of gold.

"A few days later, a meeting was held between all the leaders of the clans. Every man wondered if he would be chosen as the husband of Libuse.

"'You did not appreciate your freedom while I was your ruler,' she told them. 'So I shall no longer be your ruler. Instead, my husband will rule you. He will demand the best of your herds and children for taxes whenever he feels like it and you will pay dearly for it. Would you like to choose my husband for me, or would you like my advice?' the Duchess

Libuse asked.

"'Advise us!' shouted the crowd. So the Duchess Libuse rose and with a far-away look in her eyes said to them, 'Go to the small stream called Bilina, and to the little village of Stadice. In the field you will find a plowman with two oxen. He is to be your Duke.'"

"And," one of the servant girls kneading dough said, "that's when she handed them clothes fit for a Duke to give him to wear."

"Yes," Katianna said, still cleaning between Viktor's toes. "And then she told them to follow her white horse. The white horse led them straight to a man named Premysl. She told them they would find him eating off of an iron table."

"And they did!" one of the other ladies in the kitchen said. She was basting venison over a fire in the other hearth.

"Yes," Katianna agreed, "and Premysl is the ancestor of the kind Duke Wenceslas. Now hold still. I have just one more foot to do, you little toad."

Viktor giggled. He had to admit that being clean was a feeling he liked very much, and seeing his mother smile made getting his toes cleaned all worth the while.

"When do we eat?" the lad asked the kind woman. He was beginning to like Katianna, and though she pretended to be harsh and mean, she really liked Viktor, too.

"Here," she said, handing him a crust of bread, "this will tide ye over. Now, let me see the nails on your hands." She reached for her knife and went toward him.

"Nay!" he screamed, and dove under the table. A large hairy boar's head fell off the table and fell right beside him on the floor. The dead boar's eyes stared right at him, and Viktor screamed again and scrambled out from underneath the table and into the apron of Katianna.

"What ye be screamin' for, lad?" Katianna asked. "I ain't gonna hurt ye none. I aim to clean out yer fingernails is all."

He looked at her sideways. His fingernails? Why on earth would anyone care if his fingernails were clean or not? And where was that scary hairy boar that had terrified him and what was it doing in the kitchen?

"Is it dead?" he asked.

"Is what dead?" Katianna asked.

"The boar. Is it dead? I don't want it to eat me the way it ate me father's leg!"

"Shhhh, hush now child," the woman said, gathering him into her arms. "That boar is quite dead. Shhhh. Let me see your fingernails now, and we will finish our story. The Duke likes his boys clean at his feasting table," she said.

"Now, sit still here on me lap and let me have a look at ye. Ye want to hear the rest of the story don't ye?"

The boy nodded. He was shaking, but he did very much want to hear the rest of the story.

Katianna plopped him on her lap and began to tell him more about the Duke's family.

"Now, listen to me closely. Several generations later, in the year 859 AD, another Prince was born into the Premysl family named Borivaj I. And at the same time in the land of Serbia, the prince Slavibor's wife had a beautiful little daughter

named Ludmila. And even though they were 450 miles apart, when Ludmilla was a very young girl, she came to live in the kingdom of Bohemia for she was promised to prince Borivaj. When they were 14 years old they were married in the year 873."

"Soon they were the proud parents of a boy named Vratislav. And Vratislav is the father of Duke Wenceslas."

"At about this time two men named Cyril and Methodius, who spoke our language, came to tell the Duke and Duchess about the King Jesus, the One True God. They made our first alphabet, and that is why it is called Cyrillic - after St. Cryil.² They wrote the gospels in our language and the Duke and Duchess learned about the good King Jesus, and began to pray to Him instead of idols and other gods and goddesses. They wanted everyone in the kingdom to pray to King Jesus, too."

"King Jesus? Who is He?"

"He is a good King who loves us all."

"I would like to meet this King!" Viktor said eagerly.

"You will," the woman smiled. "If Duke Wenceslas has anything to do with it!"

"Anyway," Katianna said, carving Viktor's nails into a smooth arc. "The pagans did not like worshipping only this King Jesus. They liked being able to worship many gods and goddesses and being able to do magic and marry more than one wife. They caused much trouble for the Christian Duke and Duchess and for anyone who loved King Jesus.

² It is interesting to note that many civilizations developed written language after a missionary desired for the people to read God's Word.

“When Vratislav was 14, he married a pagan princess named Drahmoria. Drahmoria refused to pray only to Jesus, and instead preferred to pray to her idols and all the gods and goddesses of the old days. She gave birth to two fine boys – our good Duke Wenceslas and his brother, Boleslav.”

“Now, Princess Ludmilla loved her grandsons, and she wanted them to learn about King Jesus. But Drahmoria wanted her sons to pray to the pagan gods and goddesses and them only. This worried the Princess Ludmilla, so she took Wenceslas away from her and raised him in the castle with her. There she had her priest, Paul, help him learn the holy scriptures.”

The lad looked at his mother. “The Duke must have missed his mother very much,” he said sadly.

“Perhaps,” the lady said. “But he loved his grandmother very much, too, and she gave him an excellent education. He learned to read. He practiced his letters by writing in wax, and he even learned Latin, the language of the Romans. He gave his whole life to learning about serving the new God, Jesus Christ. But his brother did not. To this day his brother hates the Duke and will not pray to Jesus.” She clicked her tongue and shook her head sadly.

“But why? Why does his brother hate him if he is so good?”

“Just because you are good,” she said, “doesn’t mean people will like you. They didn’t like the King Jesus, either, and even killed Him in the end.”

The lad nodded. Even in his young life, He had seen many people die. Children saw many ugly things during the Middle

Ages, so it came as no surprise to him that the King Jesus and the Duke had enemies, too.

“Duke Wenceslas’ father died when he was only 13 years old,” the woman said. Viktor interrupted her.

“Aye?! As my father has died?! The poor Duke! He lost both his mother and his father, too?”

“Aye, yes,” the woman said. “So his grandmother had a very strong influence on him and they had a very close relationship. He loved his grandmother very much, and she taught him everything she could about being kind and serving King Jesus. But alas, his mother was evil, and she hated his grandmother. So she ordered the government to kill Wenceslas’ grandmother, the dear Duchess Ludmilla, so she could be on the throne until the Duke was eighteen years of age.”

“Nay!” he cried.

“Aye, it were bitter days then. But when Duke Wenceslas became the Duke in charge, he built church buildings for the One True God. He is a brilliant architect and builder. No one has ever seen buildings of such advanced design. The rotunda of St. Vitus, right here at the castle, is the most remarkable building anyone has seen. I will have Tatianna show you later.”

The woman just kept working on Viktor’s nails. Viktor could not stop staring at the round face as it spoke of such amazing things.

“He also built the church of St. George, and had his grandmother’s body moved and buried there.³ And he wrote the first book ever written in our own language about his

³ Princess Ludmilla is still buried at St. George’s Basilica in Prague.

grandmother.”

“I have heard of books. I would like to see one,” the lad said.

“If you are here long, the Duke will see to it that you see a book or two,” she chuckled.

“Aye,” one of the youngest girls said.

“Tell him about the miracles that happen at the Duchess Ludmilla’s grave,” one of the younger girls whispered.

“Aye, ‘tis true,” an old, wrinkled woman clucked. She was plucking a big black bird whose dark feathers flew to the floor and in her lap. They were even sticking to the wrinkles on her face.

“Well, I have heard,” Katianna said, “that people are healed at her grave, and that a sweet scent comes forth from it.”

The boy’s eyes were large. He looked at his mother and she was sitting as still as he was, with wide eyes, listening to the story. She loved stories, too.

“In yer travels, do ye remember seeing a huge old oak tree beside our border castle?” the woman asked, her arms around his waist.

The boy nodded. “Aye.”

“Well, they say that the Duke’s grandmother, Ludmilla, planted that tree after he was born, and that the nannies of Duke Wenceslas used his bathwater to water it. That is why it is so tall and still stands there today.”⁴

⁴ The fabled oak tree still stands in the grounds of what was once a border castle, Stochov, where according to legend, Duke Wenceslas was born.

“Ayyyyyye,” the boy said. He had often admired that tree and had even hidden up in its branches when running from slave traders.

“As Wenceslas grew up, he also attended a Latin school in Budec. He prayed and worshipped God. He loved God so much that he had even thought of being a priest himself. He considered giving the kingdom of Bohemia to his brother. But his brother is a pagan, and the Duke wants to tell as many people about King Jesus as he can. His grandmother had taught him that a ruler has great influence on the people he rules.”

“He has always been a hard worker,” one of the littler girls said. “He likes to help in the vineyards and at threshing time so he can help prepare the fruits of the harvest for Holy Communion.”

“Yes. And the very priests that the Duke’s mother tormented and tortured – the Duke now uses as his advisors,” the woman with black feathers on her face said.

“He is a goodly Duke,” said Katianna, still working on his nails. “He provides shelter to orphans, buys children from slavery, and is always giving to the poor. Once, when the Duke Radslav wanted to go to war, the Duke instead challenged him to a duel, just to save lives.”

“And no matter what time of the day or night, if word is brought to him that any of his subjects is ill or in need, he sends help at once,” a little girl said, handing him a small cup of milk.

“Just like he sent help for us,” the boy said to his mother. “Aye, what a good man he be.”

“Aye,” they all said.

“We, all of us here in this room, were once on that slave

block. And the Duke bought us all.”

All the women and children nodded. No wonder they all enjoyed their work so much. It was easy to work hard for a master that you loved.

Young Viktor could not believe his eyes. He was escorted by Katianna, into a long hall full of people laughing and singing, where the Duke sat at the middle of a heavy long table so full of food, that Viktor strained to see it all at once. His eyes wandered up and down the table that stretched from one end of the room to the other, and he wondered how there could ever be so much food in one place.

“Welcome, welcome!” the good Duke Wenceslas said, motioning for the lad to sit beside him. “Come, sit with me at my table, young man. You and your mother, come, sit here beside me.”

Everyone in the room stopped talking and looked at the young man and his beautiful young mother. It was no secret to anyone that the Duke often rescued orphans and the poor. But to have them sit at a table fit for a king? What kind of nonsense was this? Duke Wenceslas’ brother rolled his eyes and the women standing with him looked scornfully at Viktor’s mother, Ivana. Thankfully, she did not notice. Her eyes were on the Duke and the roasted boar’s head sitting in front of him with an apple in its mouth.

“Come, come. Let us all join in a prayer of thanksgiving to our King for this bounty,” the Duke said, motioning for everyone to take their seats.



"You are the *Duke*?" Viktor gasped. It was the same man who had bought him from the slave trader!

The Duke laughed merrily. "Yes, my son, it is I! Duke Wenceslas. And I do not eat children and their mothers." He laughed again. "Are ye not hungry? Come here lad, and sit!"

"I'm starving!" Viktor said. "Can we eat now?"

"In good time. First, we must give thanks to the King of Kings for our bounty."

"The King Jesus?" Viktor whispered to the Duke.

"Yes!" he said. "Do you know Him?"

"No, not yet," Viktor said. "But I would like to."

"Very well," the Duke said. "I shall introduce you to Him very soon."

"Let us pray!" the Duke said, and motioned for an old priest sitting near him to begin the prayer of thanks.

Then, food was passed and tossed and eaten with fingers, for in those days, it was the mannerly way to dine. Viktor ate until he felt as if he had swallowed a large bag of stones. He had never been so full in all of his life.

"And now," the Duke said. "Let us, on this St. Stephen's Day, tell the story of the good martyr Stephen, who gave his life as a martyr for Christ. In honor of his bravery, we share our bounty with the poor. It is in his memory I have invited young Viktor, and his mother, Ivana to our table."

Viktor's mother blushed and looked down at her hands, but Viktor beamed and smiled brightly as the Duke began to tell about the Saint Stephen. He told how Stephen died telling others how to give their hearts to Jesus, who died on a Roman cross for all their sins. Viktor admired Stephen's courage but

he could hardly wait to learn how to give his heart to Jesus, too, and he wanted to learn more about Him.

"Even now," the Duke said. "There are those right here in the great land of Bohemia, that would like to see the Christians conquered and stoned as Stephen was. But thanks to my dear Grandmother, Ludmilla, one day, all of Bohemia shall be Christian."

Everyone except for the Duke's brother, Boleslav, raised a glass to the Duke. Boleslav did not want a Christian Duke to rule Bohemia, and he and his mother wanted him out of the way.

After much laughter and singing, the Duke walked Viktor to his sleeping quarters. They stopped to look out of a window and admire the moon shining crisp and clear on the sparkling winter snow. It was a bitter cold night, and the Duke was troubled to see a peasant in rags collecting twigs to make a fire.

"Do you know that man, Viktor?"

"Aye, I do," Viktor said. "He has three wee babes and a wife who has been ill. There is no one to care for the lot of them."

"Where does he live?"

"A long way hence, Sire, by the St. Agnes Fountain in a little cave of a house."

The Duke took Viktor by the shoulders and said, "Go back to the hall, gather up as much food as you can, along with plenty of pine logs. We will take these to him and his brood. Go on now."

Viktor did exactly as he was told, and with his mother's help, took all that they could carry back to the Duke. The Duke

strapped much of it onto his own back, and helped Viktor attach the rest of it to his.

“Let’s go lad. It is St. Stephen’s Day!”

Viktor was tired and he didn’t want to go back out into the cold, but how could he not do this kind Duke’s bidding? The Duke had done ever so much for him. He followed him out into the bitter night.

They hiked for a very long time, and Viktor could no longer feel his toes they were so cold. He felt faint and wanted to stop and sleep.

“Good Sire,” he gasped. “I can’t go on. It is so dark and cold and I am so weak.”

The Duke turned to the lad and touched him on the shoulder.

“Step in my footprints, Viktor, and they will warm ye. We are almost there.”

Viktor walked in the footsteps of his Duke. And somehow, he was indeed warmed by them. How could he know, tromping through the snow on that cold wintry night, that nearly a thousand years later, a man named John Neale would write a poem about him⁵ and the good Duke Wenceslas. It was set to the music of “Tempus Adest Floridum,” a 13th Century spring carol first published in the Swedish *Piae Cantiones* in 1582. From the time of its beginning, Christians around the world would sing this song at Christmastime.

Irony surrounds this hymn we sing each Christmas. First, it was written to the tune of a *spring* song, and it is not

⁵ Viktor is a fictitious character.

a Christmas carol at all, but a St. Stephen’s day song! And secondly, King Wenceslas was not really a king; he was a Duke. But he imitated his King Jesus by caring for the poor, building shelter for widows and orphans, and through helping others in need. Today, a statue of him on his horse stands at Wenceslas Square in Prague. Some people in Czechoslovakia believe that St. Wenceslas will return on a white horse and bring his people everlasting peace.

Paganism and Christianity have been mixing in the Slavic⁶ lands for centuries. It is intriguing that the return of Christ and the “return” of the Good King Wenceslas are described so similarly!

Good King Wenceslas

Words by John Neale, 1853

To the tune of “Tempus Adest Floridum”

*“Good King Wenceslas looked out on the Feast of Stephen,
When the snow lay round about, deep and crisp and even.
Brightly shone the moon that night, though the frost was cruel,
When a poor man came in sight, gathering winter fuel.*

*“Hither, page, and stand by me, if you know it, telling,
Yonder peasant, who is he? Where and what his dwelling?”
“Sire, he lives a good league hence, underneath the mountain,
Right against the forest fence, by Saint Agnes’ fountain.”*

⁶ It is interesting to note that the word “slave” actually comes from this word. Slave trade of Slavic peoples – mostly women and children -- thrived during Wenceslas’ time.

*"Bring me food and bring me wine, bring me pine logs hither,
You and I will see him dine, when we bear them thither."*

*Page and monarch, forth they went, forth they went together,
Through the cold wind's wild lament and the bitter weather.*

*"Sire, the night is darker now, and the wind blows stronger,
Fails my heart, I know not how; I can go no longer."*

*"Mark my footsteps, my good page, tread now in them boldly,
You shall find the winter's rage freeze your blood less coldly."*

*In his master's steps he trod, where the snow lay dinted;
Heat was in the very sod which the saint had printed.
Therefore, Christian men, be sure, wealth or rank possessing,
You who now will bless the poor shall yourselves find blessing."*

Epilogue

The life of Wenceslas came to an abrupt and tragic end. When the Duke was just 28 years old, his brother Boleslav tricked him into going to church for prayers and had him murdered in front of the door of the church of Sts. Cosmas and Damian. His statues and the story of his life and death are still displayed there.

About the author:

Karla Akins has over twenty-five years of combined experience as a homeschool educator, pastor's wife, author, singer, pianist, composer and speaker. Her two oldest children have graduated from their family's homeschool program and are now married with children. Karla loves being a grandmother! She resides in North Manchester, Indiana with her husband, Eddie, and their three youngest sons. Her hobbies include Bible study, blogging, and reading. Karla has a tender heart toward animals, and especially enjoys her three dogs: Oskar, a lazy Dachshund; Frankie, a comical Pug; and Gretchen a very friendly, happy Rottweiler.

