

Bessarabian Agriculture

Translated by Darla Lee with special assistance given by Dr. Elvire Necker-Eberhardt for some specific words in this article. Translation project coordinated by Dwayne Janke.

Translated from the book, Wie's Daheim War—Der Schicksalsweg der Bessarabiendeutschen, by J. Becker, published 1950.

(Originally published in the Bessarabian Newsletter, Volume 7 Issue 2, August 2003)

Our homeland was farmland, and the Bessarabian farmers were outspoken farmers. Many that came from the old homeland to Bessarabia were craftsmen. This is evident from our old church records. When they were given the opportunity to own property, they gave up their crafts and became farmers.

There was enough land at their disposal and it is clear that they made use of the Russian government's offer. Their children also became farmers. Naturally, in the early years, it was extremely difficult. They had only wooden plows. Even these were of little help without draught cattle. They had to clear and trench the land by hand, enduring the hardest work, in order to put seeds in the ground. In a few years things got better, with cattle or horses pulling the wood plows. The colonists made complete farm implements in their living rooms during the long winter evenings. The seed had to be scattered by hand. It was a difficult and arduous farm duty. With time, things improved. The plow had originally only a wooden Grindel.⁽¹⁾ By and by, this also disappeared and was completely replaced by the iron plow.

In later years, the farmers had the famous Eberhard plow from Wuerttemberg. The farmers mostly made the harrows themselves. They were wooden at first, but later were made of iron. Seeding was done by a driller instead of by hand, and eventually by tractor. In the early years, mowing was done with sickle and scythe. Later this was accomplished with rake and reel machines. For threshing one used a flail brought from the homeland. A threshing stone place was prepared, the grain was spread out; horses were tied to the "threshing stone" and made to go around in a circle. Thus the grain was threshed. In later years a threshing machine was used. The "Wiesbaum" wagon evolved into the "harbie" wagon, a big cart with a sparred frame. The broken grain was originally cleaned with a winnowing shovel. This was replaced by a cleaning mill.

The first settlers had only primitive farm implements at their disposal, so they had to leave much of the land unplanted in the early years. In these "Heuschlag"⁽²⁾ pastures, the big herds of cattle, horses and sheep were grazed. The horses that were not needed for farming were also brought to the pasture. Later more and more land was farmed, as the farmers improved their equipment. The pastures became smaller. In order to maintain the number of their herds and be able to bequeath their sons a relatively good farm, they began to buy land outside of the village district from their foreign neighbors. In those days the government-apportioned land was no longer sufficient, the land that they had greatly enlarged despite difficult times, pestilence and epidemics.

About 8,000 persons in total came to Bessarabia during the settlement times. Some 92,000 people returned to Germany in 1940. Added to this were about 15,000 who emigrated to Dobrudscha and 20,000 that moved to America ⁽³⁾. The emigration occurred in the years between 1857 and 1927. We can see from these numbers how prolific our ancestors were. There were families with 12 to 14 children, even up to 18 children.

To get a better idea of the population mixture and the rise in population, I present the following statistics (from Pambook's *The Homecoming of the Bessarabian Germans*):

| | |
|-----------------------------|-----------|
| Total population in 1861--- | 1,026,346 |
| 1891— | 1,641,559 |
| 1897— | 1,935,412 |
| 1919--- | 2,631,000 |
| 1936--- | 2,863,409 |

| | |
|------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| German (population) | 1861---33,501 1891---42,681 1897---59,998 1919---79,000 1936---2.8 % ⁽⁴⁾ |
| Rumanian (population) | 1861---692,000 1891---1,089,995 1897---921,256 1919---1,683,000 1936---52.2% |
| Ukrainian (population) | 1861---162,252 1891---223,251 1897---379,341 1919---254,000 1936---11% |
| Russian (population) | 1861---162,252 1891---34,473 1897---158,704 1919---134,000 1936---12.3% |
| Bulgarian (population) | 1861---25,684 1891---85,361 1897---102,577 1919---Not available 1936---5.8% |
| Jewish (population) | 1861---91,590 1891---141,175 1897---228,379 1919---267,000 1936---7.2% |
| Gypsy (population) | 1861---18,983 1891---16,415 1897---Not available 1919---Not available 1936---0.5% |
| Various (population) | 1861---336 1891---8,208 (3,283 Armenians, 3,283 Greeks, 1,642 Poles and Swiss) 1897---85,157 (36,127 Gagauz ⁽⁶⁾ , 3,806 Poles, 23,224 Others: Gypsies, Greeks, and Armenians) 1919---214,000 (147,000 Bulgarians and Gagauz, 67,000 others) 1936---4.9% (Polish: 0.3%; Gagauz: 3.5%; Gypsies: 0.5%; other 0.4%) |

| | |
|------------------------|----------------------|
| Density ⁽⁵⁾ | 1864---Not available |
| | 1891---36.9 |
| | 1897---43.5 |
| | 1919---59.2 |

The above clearly indicates that the Rumanians in Bessarabia had the greatest population.

Our forefathers received 147,705 hectares of land from the Russian state. They acquired land totaling 182,295 hectares. Besides this amount, they leased a considerable amount of land (24,177 hectares). The land was generally very fertile. The condition of the soil differed. As well as the rich humus (black earth), a small range of soil with salt peter, clay and sand was also found.

Farming

During the immigration years, our forefathers planted mainly summer wheat (Arnaut, red rotation wheat) and rye. Later they went to winter wheat, barley, some oats and a lot of maize (field corn), because these types of grain produced well here. The "six-row barley" brought an especially high yield. This was also true of the maize. The barley and oats served as food for the horses. The colts were raised mostly on oats. Maize was the best fattening diet (for animals).

In the final years that we were there, the export trade had intensified and soybeans, sunflowers, and sugar cane were also planted. These things brought the most money into the household. One must not forget the wonderful water and musk melons. Rapid development was also experienced in wine growing and it became a major industry for the Germans in South Bessarabia (Schabo).

The "three-field harvest" system was used. In the first year land was seeded with maize (also called Welshcorn or "Popschei"). Afterward, barley or winter wheat usually followed. In the third year, oats, winter wheat or barley was planted. Then without fail maize was planted again in order to keep the land free of weeds.

Because of frequent crop failures, the so-called "Magazine" was soon built. These were high grain elevators that were erected by the people. In record years, grain was stored there for protection against poor harvest years. Manure was not used. The virgin earth was fertile enough without it.

Tree Growing

Trees were highly regarded by many of our ancestors. They were used to them back in their old homeland of Wuerttemberg. When someone who was born and raised in the Steppes experiences spring in the old homeland, he will well understand this love of trees, because spring in Schwabia is a garden; indeed, a paradise! Everything is blooming. Trees border the streets, farmyards, fields and meadows. Can anything else be so beautiful? From this garden our ancestors came to the almost treeless region of Bessarabia. It is understandable that they immediately reserved a large area of land near the village for woods and fruit trees. Just as in other areas, the trees were planted in an orderly fashion. The orchard had apple, pear, plum, apricot, peach and cherry trees. In the "little forest" there were primarily acacias, elms and alder trees. The orchards were especially well cared for. They were regularly pruned and weeded. The trees were trimmed, sprayed, and the trunks whited, so that no harm could come to them. In time the old trees were replaced. The young fruit trees grew under the care of the people. In the later years, the trees were surrounded by wire net to protect them from vandalism by senseless youths or adults.

A different fate befell the "forest" trees. After many years the people stopped weeding there. The couch grass took over and before long the "forest" became a wilderness. Many farmers went to their "piece of land," their "parcel" for needed wood. Later plantings were not successful. In all too few years, the "little forest" disappeared.

During the later years, some community members decided to appoint new land for the purpose of planting trees. As a result, a new "small forest" was planted. It grew well because the trees were looked after, but during the last war, when we were away, the trees were neglected. Would this be the

case today? The woods and the orchards were indicative of our neighborhoods. One did not find them in non-German colonies.

Much care was devoted to trees planted in the yard. The acacia grew the best. Poplars were also often planted in front of the doors of the houses. The large, leafy crown provided protection against the high heat of summer, which rose to more than 104 degrees. The blooming of spring was a lovely time. A pleasant scent permeated the area. Bees buzzed through the air, gathering honey. The acacia honey was the favorite and the most expensive.

As with all the previous sketches, we see that our homeland demanded hard work. The abundance with which it blessed us, however, made us forget the difficulties and hardships. We loved the soil of our homeland. It was our native land.

Translator's notes:

(1) Although the context of this sentence seems to indicate that "Grindel" is a part on a plow, the exact meaning of this word is not known.

(2) "Heuschlag" pastures were the original uncultivated "steppe" land of Southern Russia (similar to the prairies of North America). These pastures were used to graze big herds of cattle, horses and sheep.

(3) It is not known if the original author meant "North America" in using the term "America." This is sometimes the case in Bessarabian-German writings. If so, then this emigration figure would relate to both the U.S. and Canada. Other sources for emigration statistics may help clarify this figure.

(4) The original German version of this article used the figure 28%. However, comparing this with the rest of the figures for other years and nationalities, this appears to be a simple typographical error (i.e. it should read 2.8%, not 28%). This figure would translate into a population of 80,175 Germans in Bessarabia in 1936.

(5) It is not clear exactly what information this section on "density" is trying to convey. In the original article, all of the population statistics are organized in a table. The "density" figures 36.9, 43.5 and 59.2 (without percentage marks) are listed under the figures for 1891, 1897 and 1919 respectively. If these figures are meant to be population densities, they are likely conveying the number of people per standard area of land (i.e. square kilometer, hectare, etc.). It appears that these numbers may be population density figures *per hectare*, since using the square-kilometer figure from the original *Heimatbuch der Bessarabiendeutschen* in German results in figures that are less than half of those listed here, and since hectares are used in other places in this article.

(6) The name of a Turkish ethnic group.

Bessarabian Agriculture—Autumn

*Translated by Ellen Hardy-Birt, with special assistance given by Dr. Elvire
Necker-Eberhard for several specific words in this article.*

*Translated from the book, Wie's Daheim War—Der Schicksalsweg der Bessarabiendeutschen,
by J. Becker, published 1950.*

(Originally published in the Bessarabian Newsletter, Volume 7 Issue 3, December 2003)

Vine-growing and Vintage

Already during the first few years of settlement vine-growing prospered. They used the precious old species, which yielded a superb wine. Every village had a wine tavern, called a “Schänke” (Inn). The old folks told many stories about these “Inns.” Many Rubels were spent there on drink, but many good times happened there as well. In the course of time, these wine taverns closed. Between 1899-1907 the most beautiful and most successful vineyards were destroyed by the vine-louse, phloxera. Vintages were getting scarcer and scarcer. The price of wine shot up quickly and reached enormous levels. Many farmers had no wine at all. By good chance it happened that by that time the wild American vines arrived in the land, the ‘Saiber’ and the ‘Taras.’ Many breathed easily again as they now had their ‘grape-juice,’ which would save them from drying out completely. It was only after the First World War that these vines became naturalised. After a few years they were grafted with the French vines.

The year of 1929 had a bitterly cold winter, which caused very heavy damage in the vineyards.

After the vineyards were hoed four to five times during summer, autumn arrived and the time for the grape harvest. Everybody looks forward to it, especially the children, who look forward to the sweet wine!

The grape stands are put onto the wagon. Everybody able to walk must help. Every one receives a grape knife to be able to cut the clusters. Everyone has a bucket or tub standing next to them. When full it is emptied into the grape basket. The strongest must carry the basket to the wagon and tip the grapes into the vats. One of the vats also contains the grape pestle, which is used to pulp the grapes so it can take more grapes. The children particularly enjoy the cutting of the grapes. They can eat as many as they are able. “The good ones in the crop, the bad ones in the pot.” In this case into the bucket. When they are grapes growing on an original vine plant (a), the children soon get a completely blue mouth. At the grape harvest—known here as cutting the grapes—various jokes and stories are told. Everywhere the laughter of boys and girls can be heard. The most beautiful folk songs resound. For example ‘*Uf em Wasa graset d’Hasa*’—‘*Kein schöner Land*’ and more.

Evening falls. Throughout the whole valley you can hear the happy laughter and singing. Close by the village many grape wagons gather. A friendly and hearty welcome is exchanged by waving or nodding to each other.

Back at home, the grapes are then crushed with the grape mill. Soon the most delicious sweet wine can be tasted. Sometimes the wine ferments on the husks of grapes or it is immediately drained. The last produces the so-called ‘Schiller’.

Pressing of the husks of grapes is very hard work, a work that is mostly done during the night so that one gets enough room in the vat. Almost everybody owns a vineyard. Many harvest 5000-6000 litres

and more. This is a very good source of revenue. They are continually trying to improve the quality of the wine and also to increase quantity.

The farmer doesn't neglect to prepare some wine for himself, a barrel for winter and another for summer. Many become rather loquacious and affable through the use of their loveable grape juice. And many remember the saying:

Oh, you lovely grape juice,

How do you make my limbs stronger!

Where the dirt is deepest,

That's where you fling me most often.

The Corn

A thousand busy hands stir,

Help each other in a lively group,

And in fiery motion

All forces are known. (Schiller)

The planting of the corn has already been reported on. What a wonderful picture we get of hoeing the cornfield. Men, women, boys and girls are scattered all over the field as they hoe. The men and boys have their straw hats on their heads; the hatband is often threadbare or totally missing. The older women are usually wearing dark, and the girls, light or coloured scarves as head covering. From afar this looks almost like a field of flowers. Already in the early morning the heat is noticeable. As it gets even hotter at midday, everybody stands around barefoot. Sleeves and trouser legs are usually turned up. The younger ones even get rid of their shirts and work only in their shorts. Entirely tanned, able to offer resistance to the heat, they stand in their row and hoe in order to be the first to reach the end. The one to reach it first can rest until the others have caught up. The small, tender corn stalks may not stand too close together. Between the rows is ploughed with the *Welschkorn*-plough. A horse draws it. The father is mainly the one to control the *Welschkorn*-plough. A little boy sits on the horse and guides it. He may do that this year for the first time. He is very proud about it. That means for him that he is no longer the smallest. It gives him a lot of self-assurance. With his head raised high, he rides past the hoeers. On this occasion he also learns two new expressions '*Huescht*' and '*Hott*' (i.e. "on the left" and "on the right"). He must absolutely know this, so that he always remains in the centre between two rows. Otherwise the small corn stalks will be ploughed under. After the corn is hoed twice, it needs to be staked, so that the large stalk, at which 1-2 corns have set, cannot be pulled out by a possible storm. The row is repeatedly ploughed deep with the '*Welschkorn*-plough.' The pillar of the plough-blade is now taped with rags, so that even more earth is thrown onto the stalks.

These times are often unforgettable for the large and small children. During the long winter evenings one still tells this or that story about the hoeing of the corn.

The sun becomes hotter from day to day. The corn leaves and stalks change colour, becoming yellow and dry. The leaves, which cover the corn, are darker coloured. Initially the corn kernels are soft and milky, but now they get a more yellow colour and become perfectly hard. The corn is ripe.

As long as the kernels are milky, the children find great pleasure in knowing that they can cook or roast the cobs. The cobs then taste much better. That is a particularly fine delicacy for them. In addition, the small children also play gladly "Hutscherles" ('Hutsch' meaning "small foal"). They pull down the leaves of the cobs, but don't tear them right off. They use a cord, which is usually twisted and made from the corn leaves, to pull the horses around on the yard or the road. They also make sure that they have 'speckled,' red or yellow corn horses. When they finish their play, they bring their horses into their stable built from cobs.

When the corn is perfectly ripe, the next step is the corn harvest. More boards are fixed to the 'box wagon.' One bag is carried for each person riding along.

Once at the field everyone ties their bag together, so that they can hang it over the right shoulder. The bag opening stays on the chest. The left hand holds the opening open, while the right hand breaks off the cobs from the stalks and puts them into the bag. As soon as the bag is full, it is emptied. All pickers empty their bag in the same place.

One of them is assigned to chop off the stalks of some rows. He must put the chopped-off stalks into heaps, so that later another can drive through with the wagon, in order to load the broken corn.

Evening comes. The horses are harnessed; driving from corn heap to corn heap and the corn is loaded. The box of the wagon is full. Now the boards are placed on the side of the cart's box. When these also are filled, one or two rows of cobs are then stuck in. Thus one gets still more on it. Now all the bags are filled and put on top. Because each farmer had planted many hectares, the corn harvest takes several days, even weeks.

The corn brought home is unloaded into a barn. Frequently, two, three, four or more cartloads are brought home in a day. Then the most pleasant time of the corn harvest comes: stripping the cobs.

Other Autumn Work

Also at this time, the potato harvest is due. Generally few spuds were cultivated because we do not know it as a main staple food. It has also found little use as fodder. For most fodder, corn is used. Nevertheless, it was a pleasure for the children to be allowed to gather potatoes. It was fun to see one bag after another being filled. On leaving for home, they were allowed to sit on the full bags. The potatoes were kept in the cellar over winter. They were only rarely stored in clamps or stacks.

A more pleasant work was the fruit harvest. Apples, pears, plums, peaches, apricots, etc. would be picked. In the German colonies there was less fruit grown; it was more common in the villages of the foreigner in the proximity of the Dnjester River. The nut harvest sometimes brought beautiful yields. The boys enjoyed a greater pleasure in the knocking down or 'stupfeln' of the nuts. When the people were finished, on Sunday afternoon the small boys carried long sticks to get down the nuts remaining on the trees. In the evening they came home and had possibly collected or knocked down a few hundred. The nut trees were to be found almost exclusively in the vineyards. Frequently the Sunday trousers

were torn. The boy came home with a long tear in them. Although he sought to conceal it, it was noticeable nevertheless, because his mother, after brushing them thoroughly, had to put them into the wardrobe. He had to endure a thrashing. Despite that, nothing could take away the joy. Was there anything else more joyful?

In addition, the last watermelons and melons were collected. Mother had waited long for this. She wants to preserve them. Some days ago she was also in the "Kraeutergarten" (grocers) and bought tomatoes, paprika, cucumbers, cabbage, etc. in order to 'preserve' the melons. She must also have pickles for the winter.

She has already prepared "Gsäls" (pickled food in salt brine). In addition, she also bought several glasses of bee's honey.

The farmer, however, does not allow himself to stop. The corn stalks are still outside. These must still be brought back home. For this he again makes his carts 'big' and brings them home one load after the other. The corn stalks, however, are not stored in a large, long rick, but are formed into round cone-shaped heaps at the threshing place. This is so that the farmer can access smaller stacks more easily to get the fodder. The corn stalks and corn leaves serve the cattle as fodder. The cattle eat the leaves; the remaining stalks serve as fuel material.

Still the farmer cannot rest. He must hurry, so that he can still sow the autumn seed. 'Who does not sow, they also cannot harvest.' Again he scatters the seed, ploughs and harrows it. Again he puts his whole hope in God, the Almighty, and asks for favourable weather.

How pleased he is when he later stands in a field and can look over the germinating, greening winter wheat on his fields.

On the fields and pastures grow steppe grasses, mugwort, stone clover, sweet peas, goat's beard, flake flower, thistle, clover, sage, orach, plantago (rat's tail), thornapple, mallow, speedwell, field scabious, daisies, to name just a few.

Over the brooks and pools grow reed, rush, hard grasses, which form wild thickets.

Isolated acacias grow along the roads and drinking places. They are cultivated in the villages and are planted extensively so that they are to be regarded as Bessarabia's character tree. Therefore, Bessarabia is often sung of as the "country of the acacia."

Arrangement of the country in the year 1930 ¹⁾ in Bessarabia:

| Type | Hectare (ha) | Percentage |
|--------------------|---------------------|-------------------|
| Cereals/Wheat | 2,532,634 | 72.10 |
| Fodder cultivation | 64,812 | 1.84 |
| Vegetables | 83,811 | 2.39 |
| Industrial plants | 218,681 | 6.23 |
| Fallow | 16,003 | 0.46 |

| | | |
|-----------------|-----------|--------|
| Natural meadows | 38,988 | 1.11 |
| Pastures | 40,321 | 11.65 |
| Fruit gardens | 41,269 | 1.17 |
| Vineyards | 106,976 | 3.05 |
| Total | 3,512,495 | 100.00 |

The most important harvest results for the year 1930 ⁽¹⁾

| Crop | Total harvest in dz²⁾ | Cultivated area in ha³⁾ | Yield per 1 ha |
|-------------------|---------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Wheat | 5,970,732 | 602,918 | 9.9 |
| Rye | 1,466,030 | 133,272 | 11.0 |
| Barley | 8,269,349 | 787,887 | 10.4 |
| Oats | 1,142,115 | 129,945 | 8.7 |
| Corn | 7,554,744 | 870,197 | 8.6 |
| Potatoes | 2,182,257 | 35,078 | 62.2 |
| Sugar beets | 1,234,833 | 6,652 | 185.6 |
| Melons | 952,557 | 9,567 | 99.5 |
| Pumpkins | 1,007,387 | 88,767 | 11.3 |
| Sunflower kernels | 1,288,372 | 154,972 | 8.3 |
| Wine | 2,580,556 hl ⁴⁾ | 93,759 | 27.5 hl |

In the meantime the steppes became grey. All splendour, all life dies away. It remains completely empty. One can look for miles and see no humans. No animals move about the fields.

The storks, swallows, larks and other migratory birds have left the country. Everything is deserted and empty. Nature seems to die. As in nature, so it is in the life of humans. A large, uncanny isolation surrounds it. The Bessarabian German poetess Ilse Mayer sings of the autumn as follows:

The wide steppes are lying bare,
which still recently saw so many industrious hands,
where the larks rejoicing warble rang out,
there the birds now leave on their migrations.
The summer's step lies still in a golden light,
like a child tired of playing,
on deserted steppe country quietly gone to rest,
when still the bird's last songs sounded,
and bidding farewell the steppe looks after,
the quiet and serene last summer day.
Drops fall... or are they tears,
which feel full of misgivings the autumn proximity?

The soils, barns, corn houses and cellars are full of the richest goods; the benediction of God was large and rich. To Him belongs the thanks, praise and honour into all eternity!

"Yes, now all thank God with your hearts, mouth, and hands!"

Original Footnote:

1) Handwoerterbuch des Grenz- und Auslanddeutschtums S. 392/393 (Heimkehr der Bessarabiendeutschen von Pampuch)

Translator's notes:

(a) In most Bessarabian vines, better kinds of grapes were grafted on. For some reason, this results in the plants not being attacked by the "Reblaus," a pest. If nothing was grafted on a vine plant then they were "Direkttreger," i.e. the grapes that grew on the original (usually wild) plant.

2) Dz = Doppelzentner; 1 Zentner = 100 lbs. or 50 kgs; 1 Doppelzentner = 200 lbs or 100 kgs.

3) Ha = hectare = 100 sq. metres or 2.47 acres.

4) Hl = hectolitre = 100 litres or 22 gallons.

Bessarabian Agriculture—Winter

*Translated by Ellen Hardy-Birt, with special assistance given by Dr. Elvire Necker-Eberhardt for several specific words and sections in this article.
Translated from the book, *Wie's Daheim War—Der Schicksalsweg der Bessarabiendeutschen*,
by J. Becker, published 1950.
(Originally published in the Bessarabian Newsletter, Volume 7 Issue 3, December 2003)*

Winter

The transition from late autumn to winter is generally abrupt. Overnight it becomes cold. The eastern wind, which comes from Russia's far steppes, is not stopped anywhere. It is called by the Rumanians "Erivaez" and brings an icy air. The autumn mornings are wonderful! All the trees look like Christmas trees. The branches are covered with hoarfrost. How wonderful they shine in the bright sunbeams! It takes only a few days for winter to complete his arrival. Winter now strews ice and snow around. Villages and fields are wrapped in a white dress. The smoke rises from the chimneys. Everywhere is heated. Everybody looks for their fur and hide hats. They need these, so that they do not freeze. The hide hats are made from the skin of the Karakul sheep. When out driving, the farmer pulls his large driving fur over his clothing. This is large and long so that he also can cover his feet. On this occasion he also wears his felt boots. He spreads a cover over the legs. Thus the farmer or any traveler sits down on the sleigh, which is pulled by two large horses. They are the pride of the farmer. Everyone calls four, six, ten or still more horses, his own.

For trips made outside the village, only the best and most enduring horses are used. For many kilometers they drive at a trot.

He loves his horses. One of our proverbs shows us how far this love goes: "Woman dies, no one cries; horse breathes its last, man aghast." During a journey not much is spoken. With a crack of the whip, the tempo is increased.

Far more beautiful, however, are the sleigh outings through the village, which are mostly done in the afternoon.

The young farmer harnesses the horses, so that they can get some exercise, because in winter they do not need to work. They stand in the stable and get the best fodder: hay, chaff, oats, barley, and corn. Rarely, perhaps in scarce, lean years, they also get straw. In high spirits, they do not know what they should do. If one leads them from the stable, they are hardly to be held. Some of them even stand on their hind legs and bolt upright. The farmer's wife often stands beside and smiles, joyful and proud. She also prides herself somewhat with her husband's horses.

Thus the farmer and the farmer's wife sit on the sleigh. Off they go down the road. One must firmly hold the reins, so they don't run away. Parents and relatives are visited. When the horses are tired, they are driven home.

The male youth is likewise mad about horses. They must be so big that they have "flowers."⁽¹⁾ The young man enjoys it most when he must lay in the sleigh to keep the horses firm; then he is full of pride. He also permits himself to drive the sleigh with some of his comrades or some village-beauties or perhaps even his "future bride." His bride is also extremely proud of him when he has such a trotter in front of the sleigh.

These evening excursions are absolutely marvellous, when the moon and the stars shine high in the sky. The snow glitters like diamonds. Everything is quiet and calm. Only the snow crunches when we walk across it. The roads are empty.

From time to time one sees two to three young lads with their girls sitting on the sleigh, dashing along the roads. Attached to the horse's harness, which is often adorned with shining rosettes, are many little bells. From afar one can hear them ringing.

The children have small sledges. They romp in the yard. The larger ones use ice skates on the frozen river that meanders through the nearby valley. These afternoons will be for many, unforgettable days in their old age. Some perform true feats. It is dangerous for the one who breaks through the ice. He must be brought home very quickly because in this icy weather he can catch a very bad cold.

The farmer does not have much to do in winter. He can rest and gather his strength. He feeds and maintains his horses, not forgetting that cleanliness is the first obligation. Once or twice daily the horses are rubbed down with a currycomb and brush. He also constantly has the broom in his hand and sweeps the horse stable out. Some stables look like a room. The cows are fed the best. Many farmers have four, six, ten and more in a stable. They also possess 20, 30, 40, 50 sheep. These also need care. Those, however, who have 100, 500, even 1000 sheep in their possession need their own shepherd, who maintains and feeds them meticulously.

Most farmers have servants, their farmhand. He does the work. He is regarded and treated as if he were "one of the family." He always eats at the farmer's table. Often he selects his sleeping place in the stable. He is always 'hired' for one year. The handshake is more valuable than a work contract. Only in the rarest cases is the employment broken.

During the day, the farmer visits his friends, neighbours and acquaintances. They meet and converse about the daily news of the village, over questions of the village administration, over working of the soil, about the contents of the newly arrived newspaper, etc.

It is much more difficult for the woman. She is at home in the household and always has something to do. Cooking, washing, knitting, patching up, cleaning, etc. is all normal work that must be performed. If she did not have to do anything else, it would be good. However, in the summer she "stripped" hemp and flax. This must be processed during winter. The daughter helps her. Their spinning wheels vie. In front of the door one already hears the hum. They already talk about what they want to make from it. This year straw bags, bags, large sacks (*Plachten*) for the threshing place must be woven and sewn. Eventually the spinning is finished.

Next, the weaving loom is set up in the kitchen. Weaving begins. The daughter must also learn because each housewife must know how to do it. The loom runs almost continuously. The "weft" must match the "warp." It may not be too thin or too thick. When this work is done, then the things stated above are sewn. The daughter must do this alone, so that she can make them independently.

But sheep wool still lies around. It was washed already in summer after shearing. After it is 'carded,' it is spun according to requirements. The most marvellous blankets are woven. The patterns are diverse. From year to year they come out with new ones. Each daughter must have at least a dozen of these blankets in her dowry.

The younger generation started to crochet. The most magnificent and wonderful things come from their hands.

The largest part of the 'carded' wool is left this year, as this is made into quilts. Both the son and especially the daughter must have these in their dowry. Everybody must be equipped in such a plentiful manner that they do not need to buy anything for at least 10-15 years.

The most beautiful woven materials are also made from the wool. Because people have already become more fashion-conscious, these hand-woven materials are only used for work clothes.

The girl's needlework is done with company in the evening. Everyone wants to make more beautiful and more expensive things. In some villages lacework is produced.

Runners, carpets, etc. are also made during winter, among other things.

The winter evenings are wonderful. Neighbours, friends and acquaintances visit each other. The mothers take the spinning wheel or their knitting with them. The fathers sit together and tell of good, old times, of their economics and so on; daily events are also discussed and 'bratzelter mais' (popcorn) or sunflower kernels are eaten for a change—'Kerna kiefert'. Yes, bratzelter corn! Then corn grains are poured in a big kettle filled with sand and heated up. When heated up "they burst open." They look like foam, taste marvellous and besides which are very nutritious. Frequently the ones present deplore the high taxes, the hard lot they have to live in foreign lands; talk of different personalities of church and schools, of pastors and teachers, of village mayors and others of the colonists and what these have done for them. Frequently jokes are told and the whole room breaks off into bright laughter. Between 10 and 11 o'clock they go home, knowing they spent a beautiful evening. However, before they part, one song or another is still sung.

The whole year I am happy.

In spring, the field is plowed.

Then the lark flies up

And sings her happy song to me;

And when the dear summer is coming,

How my heart is happy

When I am standing in front of my field.

And can see so many ears (on the wheat).

In fall I look at the trees.

I see apples, pears, and plums on them.

When they are ripe, I shake them off.

In such a way, God awards man's toil.

And when cold winter is coming

My house is covered with snow.
The whole field is white like chalk
And on the ground nothing but ice.
That is how my whole year goes.
I thank God for it
And I am always in a good mood
And I think, God does all things well!

Winter wants to make its exit soon. The farmer already thinks of his business. And again the work begins. Above all he remembers to select his seed and to sieve it with the large sieve. A single seed of weed must not remain. It must be as if selected by birds. Then it is stored separately. He now calculates how much he needs in total. He must already know where and what he will sow and how much he needs for the next year as food for his family. This quantity is left untouched. He can sell the remainder. He tries to find the best time to do this. If he feels prices have risen to their highest, then he sells the grain left for sale and even drives it to the station. He can also earn the cartage.

The wine too is converted into money. Only corncobs remain. However, he must carry out still more hard work. With help of the *Maisreppler* the kernels must be 'shelled.' In this work there must be at least three more persons involved to help him. The first one takes the corn from the "*Welschkornhaus*" to the *Maisreppler*, the second inserts it and the third turns it. Usually it's a small boy that removes the corn flashes and corn from behind the Reppler. The work is difficult, but must be mastered. The farmer also plans everything here. In any case, a sufficient reserve is retained. The corn is mainly taken off and sold only when the farmer sees that he will have sufficient harvest.

The horse's harness is repaired. This is a job that the farmer does himself. For this purpose he uses an upholsterer's chair, so that he can screw the harness to it when repairing it. All the farm equipment will now be repaired. He can make everything himself, because he, a working encyclopaedia, is in his kingdom. He takes the machines into the workshop early, so that they are ready when he needs them. He also checks the stables to see if he can keep all the foals, calves, and lambs. He must similarly also calculate his own space with the total. Everything he cannot keep will be sold, if he can get the price he wants. If one of his carts no longer comes up to his expectations, then he sells it and buys another. Carts for the whole of South Bessarabia are manufactured in Teplitz, Alt-Posttal and Wittenberg. As soon as everything is finished, he can rest again. He waits most impatiently for spring.

Translation notes:

(1) When horses are well fed and fat they get a kind of pattern "Blumen" (flowers) on their fur.

Bessarabian Farming: Spring and Summer Work

Translated by Ellen Hardy-Birt, with special assistance given by Dr. Elvire Necker-Eberhardt for some specific words in this article. Translation project coordinated by Dwayne Janke.

Translated from the book, Wie's Daheim War—Der Schicksalsweg der Bessarabiendeutschen, by J. Becker, published 1950.

(Originally published in the Bessarabian Newsletter, Volume 7 Issue 1, April 2003)

A. Spring

Sowing

The icy cold winter is nearing its end. With renewed strength the sun is getting warmer. She is appearing earlier on the horizon during this season. As usual she is making her way along the blue sky. Bright red and also later than usual is she disappearing. The days are getting warmer. The few trees and the lilac trees are starting to blossom and bloom. The meadows are getting greener when the sun is dispensing her rays. All the plants are starting a new life. They are sucking up the water from the ground thereby speeding up the growing cycle. It doesn't take long and soon everything looks like a colorful carpet. Sheer splendor, a paradise, God's garden on this earth!

The lazy days are at their end for the farmer. He is putting his farming utensils in order. Everything is fixed or repaired. The barn doors are opening. The plough is taken outside. The ploughshares are sharpened and the harrows are renewed. The harness is being polished to make it more resistant. The horses, the pride of the farmer, are taken out of the stable and tied to the trough, which stands in the middle of the barnyard. The carts are being inspected from all sides. Anything missing is replaced and possible damages are fixed. The farmer is doing everything himself, except anything to be forged, which he must leave to the blacksmith, who is overrun with work at this time.

When all is done in the barnyard, the farmer goes into the loft. Here he inspects the grains, which are destined for sowing. He lets them run through his fingers. At the same time he thinks of where he is going to sow it and where he will need it. And of course, he's thinking also how much it will yield in the future. Sometimes he carries it down in front of the barn and cleans it again in the grain-cleaning machine (Putzmühle), to take out even the very last grains of weed because 'what man sows, he is going to reap.'

While the farmer gets everything ready for his work, the farmer's wife is getting restless in her home. She is getting ready the chicken, duck and goose eggs as well as their nests, because this year she has to pay for everything the household needs. If the farmer has bought land, he must pay the remainder out of the yield of the year. She also has to look after the pigs. She is not breeding them primarily to sell but rather for slaughter. "He who works, should also eat." And the food must be good and plentiful.

Besides this work she also has 'the small garden in front of the house.' This is the pride of the farmer's wife. Only a few vegetables are planted in it, the majority consists of flowers. The children are playing around her. The older children, though, must help. Already at an early age they are made accustomed to work, as it is said, 'Accustomed to work when young, it comes easy when old' (Jung gewohnt, alt getan).

When the father approaches, he looks with pride at his assiduously working wife and children, the foundation of the old folks.

Before evening he loads up the cart with grain to be sown. The horses are receiving better and ample fodder on this evening. The plough is either hooked up to or loaded onto the cart. Next to it stands the water cask. The harrow is put on the top.

At about 4 o'clock the next morning the farmer is already on his feet. His field quite often lies some kilometers away from the village.

As the fields are divided into "strips," he might have them at various positions around the village

boundary. When the farmer's wife has served him a hearty and nourishing breakfast, at which the main staple is the home-baked white wheat bread, she gives him the vesper--the meals for the whole day. He cannot be home for lunch. Firstly, he cannot expect his horses to walk the long way and, secondly, it would take an enormous waste of time. The wine jug or wine bottle is not forgotten.

When the cart starts moving, he must hold the reins very firmly in his hands this morning because the horses have become mischievous during the long rest. On the way he is meeting other farmers from the village. They exchange a cordial "Good Morning" and a few other friendly words and continue in a slow trot. Arriving at his "strip," the plough is taken to the right spot and the horses are harnessed to it. Now it starts. The farmer feels very happy! Again he can breathe the fresh smell of the soil; an earthy odor is escaping from the ground. He hears the song of the lark again. Again he is experiencing such a beautiful sunrise over his land. The dewdrops on the grass are shimmering like crystal. The horses are going their usual pace. He continues like this until about 9 o'clock. Arriving back at the cart, he stops. The horses are given a drink. He eats. Today everything tastes a lot better.

Following this, he ploughs until almost lunchtime. Then the horses get their good fodder and the farmer eats up his lunch.

After a short rest, the work continues until it is finished. He unharnesses the horses and again they get their fodder. As long as the horses eat he is taking the sack with the seed and is sowing. He is walking with slow but still strong strides through his field. Each time after placing his left foot he takes a hand-full of grains with his right hand and scatters them around. When he is finished sowing, the seeds are harrowed under. However, mostly it is sown in the morning, so the seed can later be ploughed under.

Now he is finished for today. Again he loads up his cart, harnesses it and drives home. In the evening it goes slower because his horses are tired. On the way home he looks over his fields and pastures. The sun sets bright red in the west. It wants to become evening. He is driving through the village where some chimneys are already smoking promisingly, and he approaches his farm. Suddenly he sees his children, who are running towards him. He stops and they climb onto the cart. The oldest boy may take the reins. He sits blissfully, smiling, on his father's lap. The cart turns into the yard. The farmer's wife comes joyfully from the house and greets them as they return.

When the horses have been unharnessed and received their water, they are taken to the crib with the fodder, which the farmer's wife had already prepared. A few words are exchanged. The children are still sitting on the seat of the cart, with the whip in their hands and are "driving." At the same time they are consuming their father's leftover bread--the "Hasenbrot," because he told them that he has taken it away from a rabbit in the field. The farmer's wife runs back into the kitchen. The farmer is preparing the seeds for the next day.

After supper the horses, cows, sheep and everything else are again cared for. The children are taken to bed. Each one has to say a prayer. Now it is also time for the farmer and his wife.

Outside night has already fallen. A clear starry sky covers the earth. Life continues like this, day in and day out until the farmer has finished sowing. But he must hurry as his vineyards are already waiting for him. In autumn he had not cut the grapes, as he feared that the cut vine would freeze. Usually, he takes a few helpers for this kind of work. The farmer's wife comes often, as well, as she also can cut the vines. The hoeing of the vineyard (Weinberghacke) worries him a lot, as well. No sooner has he finished there, than he must start planting the corn.

Either he takes someone to help or he takes his corn-planting machine (Maissetzer). In the latter case, he doesn't need any helper. Only a few potatoes are planted. There is no market for them, and furthermore, he only eats very few. They are used for fodder only in the very rarest case. Sowing and planting are his spring labor. Whoever comes through our villages in these spring days and whoever drives through our fields, can hardly imagine how happy the people are during their work in the fields! He can satisfy himself that our homeland is a farmer's land and our Bessarabian-German Schwabs are farming people.

One of the first jobs in spring is the preparation of fuel for the fire made out of dung. During

winter, every morning and evening, the dung from the horse stable and cattle shed is taken to the dung heap. A wheelbarrow is used to do this. There are one- and two-wheelers. A bed of straw is used as litter. The more that is used, the better it is for the fuel. After the straw is taken from the sheds, it is thrown onto the dung heap, which is mostly situated in the back of the farm. The heap is piled up in a neat square. Every day the area around it is swept, so that the farm is kept clean. In spring the heap is almost as tall as a man. The dung box is set up on the cart, sitting more towards the rear wheels. A long pole is sticking out towards the front. The box is loaded with dung. The cart driver drives onto the threshing yard. Here he takes the pole, which is sticking out, lifts it, and the dung lying in the box slides down. Again he drives back to the dung heap. There, his helpers are awaiting him. They are loading up. Meanwhile, the dung lying already in the threshing yard is spread out with the help of a dung-fork. When the whole dung heap has been spread out on the threshing yard, everything is harrowed so that it is lying evenly. In general, it is left there for a few hours in the spring sun until it has dried a little. The threshing stone roller (Dreschstein) is used. The dung is rolled so that it gets pressed together. It may not lie around loose. Every second day it is rolled again. In the course of a few days it gets firmer and firmer. And soon it is dry on top. Then it is cut into squares, which are mostly 25-30 centimeter squares.

These pieces are set upright and one corner is leaned against another. They dry quickly in the warm spring sun and the wind. They are nearly dry in a few days so that they can be set up into a few cross-shaped heaps. After a few more days they are rearranged. This time they are set up into rounds, which taper to the top and hollow inside. When they have stayed like this for one or two weeks they are totally dried out. Finally it is time to get them stacked in the dung stack.

Thus fuel prepared like this is of relatively good quality, whereby the sheep dung is an even better product, which after processing can be compared with peat.

Meadows - Mowing

As the warm spring sun burns down, the meadows shimmer again in fresh and living green. She lets the strength in the soil come alive again. The grass is getting thicker. The innumerable grasses are growing higher and more upright. Like waves in an ocean, the blades of grass are moving in the wind. It is soon blooming. The sun also awakens the variety and splendor of the flowers. All looks very much like a well-groomed garden. God's omnipotence speaks through her. The Bessarabian farmer thinks that he has to mow his meadows. He also needs to do some preparatory work for this, which he can perform only in the early evening hours. Above all he gets his sharpening utensil (Dengelstuhl) and his scythes. His son fetches the hammer to sharpen the scythe. He now starts to hammer. The scythe is little by little flattened with the hammer. When he has finished one, he takes the whetstone and sharpens the blade until it is sharp enough to mow. For this work he employs a few more mowers or he mows together with other farmers.

Early in the morning he drives to the meadow. He must start early because the grass mows more easily as long as it is still wet. The whetstone in its cover is buckled on. The farmer is the first to start mowing. The others are spaced out with 2-3 meters distance between them. He holds his scythe firm and draws the blade evenly and in a flat arc through the grass. Again and again is he drawing the same flat arc through the thick and dew-fresh grass, which forms thick swaths (Mahden) behind him. When the scythe goes far back it touches slightly on the grass. The scythe sings every time. As the scythes of all the mowers are drawn far back, all at once, a wonderful "music" arises. The small children, who may sometimes go with them, like to imitate all this. It is a delight and fun for them. Grass and flowers are trembling as if they are scared of the scythe.

In spite of that she hisses again and again through the grass. The water droplets shimmer like diamonds. From time to time the mowers stop to rest. During this rest the handle of the scythe is stuck into the ground. The blade stays up and is sharpened. The sweat is wiped from the forehead.

At the same time he spits in a lofty spirit over the scythe. He gazes upon the sun. By the way she is positioned, he knows almost what time it is. They take an afternoon meal break. The vine

invigorates him with renewed strength. After a short break, it's time to continue until they are done. This work is repeated often until everybody has finished. It is customary that the boys turn the mown swaths (Mahden) so that they dry more quickly. When they have been turned a few times they are as dry as they get so that the dried hay can be arranged into bigger heaps. The father loads the wagon high and guides it home. There the hay is stacked in a big barn. The farmer's wife can stack it with great skill. In the whole village the hay can be smelled. The children's biggest joy is when they can accompany their fathers. The raking is left to them, as well as treading the hay down on the cart. In a few days all meadows are mowed and cleared.

B. Summer

The pastures

In spring the meadows look like green carpets stretching along a brook which meanders very slowly through the valley. Hotter and hotter the sun burns down on them. The flowers that adorned are gone. Green and luscious is the grass in rainy years. In dry summers the green carpet is transformed into a red one. The foot lightly touches the meager grass with a silent rustle. However, looking far ahead one can see various herds grazing. Every farmer owns a small flock of sheep. He has no time to guard them himself. For that reason he hires a shepherd from the shepherds master ("Schaefer Schulzen"). [Translator's note: a "Schaefer Schulzen" was a person (usually elected) from the village responsible for matters relating to sheep.] They are mostly Moldauer ("Moldawaner"). They are known to be the best shepherds.

The shepherd stands by his grazing flock with his cloak hung around him, the elongated skin hat on his head and "Papuschen" on his feet, and he leans on his shepherds-crook. We can see that the sheep have been shorn, which indicates that the shearing of the sheep is over. There are a large number of little lambs in the flock. They are hopping and jumping. The ewes are watching them contentedly. Again and again are they coming to be suckled. It is midday and the shepherd drives them to the river, the well or spring (Steppenbrunnen) to let them drink. During lunchtime, the sun sends down ever-hotter rays. The sheep huddle closely together with their heads hanging down. It is too hot for them or the flies, which are called "midges" ("Mucken"), torment them too much. The shepherd has to drive them apart again and again so that they don't become ill in this heat. In the afternoon when it is no longer too hot they start grazing once more. The little lambs are playing again. Not far away from the flock of sheep are the herds of cattle and horses. They also are standing in the midday heat. Evening is falling and the shepherds bring their herds back to the village.