

Births, Baptism, & Confirmation

Translated by Darla Anhorn Lee

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

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A small citizen of the earth catches sight of the light of the world. Many preparations must be made. In the early years, a doctor was not available in each community, but there were midwives. Most of them did not have any formal training. The saying “through practice, comes expertise” was proven true by these midwives. When the baby came, there was happiness in the house. The midwife, the parents, and the father in particular, were the happiest of people. The father was especially proud and happy when it was a baby boy. When this was the case, the father would give the visitors, not just one, but two “schnaepse.” On another day he would put on his Sunday suit and proudly go to the town hall to record the birth of his son. Now by human accounting his family name would continue, his family line was secured. From the town hall he would go directly to the sexton. There he would also register the youngest member of the church and the date for the child’s baptism would be appointed. It was the custom for the mother of the newborn to remain indoors until the baptism day. After the baptism she could once again go outside and into other houses. The baptism day draws near. The parents decide who they want the child’s godparents to be and the father then asks them to perform this responsibility. At this opportunity he also makes known the day and hour of the baptism. The most beautiful baptism clothes and pillow are provided. For the father nothing was too expensive. He supplies the best and most costly beverages. He would be sure there was more than enough wine. A goose or a couple of chickens would be killed. The baptism day is almost here. Normally it was on a Sunday. With the first ringing of the bells, the godparents arrived. The family talked until it was time to bring the baby into the church.

The godparents and the father, sometimes also the mother, stand toward the back of the church during the baptism. After the baptism the child was immediately brought back to the parent’s house and delivered to the mother. The parents were again congratulated and good luck, happiness, health and God’s blessings are wished for the child. Afterward the baby was quieted, changed and placed in a cradle. Then the meal began because the chicken and noodles were steaming on the table. After grace was said, everyone ate. The godparents visited with their godchild and the parents until late in the evening.

After several months the pastor confirmed the baptism of this child along with others. The child continues to grow and when he reaches the age of seven, another event occurs for the parents, as well as for the child—he is of school age. The first day of school arrived. The mother went to school with him and delivered him into the care of the teacher. He is to learn in order to one day take over the farm and be able to run it well. The mother took him for the most part because the father had so little time. In spite of this, the father watched over the academic progress of his son and heir. He provided a role model for the son to follow. When the young man reached his 15th year, he was ready for confirmation. He was again entering a new phase of life. According to custom, his godparents were invited to the (confirmation) party. The whole house underwent a thorough cleaning. In the parlor, tables were pushed together. The day before the confirmation, a “test” took place. To prepare for this test, the children were taught by the sexton in religious studies for two hours each day for one month prior to the test. The pastor gave the last week of instruction. After this instruction, the confirmation candidates were tested in the presence of their parents, grandparents, and godparents. They all wanted

to hear what and how well their children had learned. Each candidate was to deliver a Bible verse, a song or something out of Luther's catechism. Each couple was anxious until after their child had finished speaking. Then they were joyful and relieved when all went smoothly. After the test everyone returned home.

Before the evening, candidates would decorate the church. The day before was also when the godparents were invited to the celebration. The confirmation took place the following day. After the church ceremony was finished, each candidate received a confirmation certificate. On the closing, the pastor, sexton and the confirmed youths were photographed. Each youth returned home, where his parents, grandparents, and godparents were expecting him. He was congratulated by all present and wished "good luck" for the future. The father and mother were proud that their child was now a "big boy." From every side gifts were given. The confirmed could receive a songbook, a Bible, a watch or also money as confirmation presents. After lunch more photographs were taken of the confirmed with the family and alone. Throughout life this day would be kept as a fond memory.

Death and Burial

Translated by Darla Anhorn Lee, with special assistance given by
Dr. Elvire Necker-Eberhardt for some special words in this article.

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Grandfather still lives with the family. He has become old and frail. Proudly, with inner satisfaction, he holds his grandson on his knees. He is happy that he has lived to experience this. He knows that his son looks after the farm well; this farm, that with so much care and hard work, he has obtained and built up. He sees that his name is established. Now and then he goes to the barn. How he had ruled there when he was still young. This is all past. He cannot do it anymore. It is his children who carry on this work very conscientiously in his place. He is satisfied with this situation, even happy. He feels that his end is near. He is thankful to the dear Lord who gave him this gift of old age, so that he has seen and experienced so much. But the song that says, "All men must die," is all too true. He feels from hour to hour that the Lord over life and death will be calling him. He lives in the smallest of rooms of the house. His Bible, songbook, and catechism, along with his prayer book, lay on his small table. His Bible is open. He still reads it. As a "Ausgedinger" ⁽¹⁾ he receives all his daily needs from his children. The house, farm, property, garden, vineyard, etc., belong to his son. He has even legally signed it over to him. So he passes the days in solitude. Life goes on. As he once worked, so his children work. Only a short time remains before the grandfather will be taken. He grows weaker from day to day. His daughter-in-law nurses and cares for him well. She brings him meals when he can no longer get up. Day and night he must lie in bed. He becomes weaker and weaker. The children stay close to him. Late in the evening the daughter-in-law calls her husband, the son. The grandfather is very weak. He can speak only slowly and softly. He prays. Then he beckons to his children. They come closer to his bed. After he blesses them, he closes his eyes. Yes, his eyes are closed forever. He is dead. The son and daughter-in-law stand beside his bed and weep. At that moment they remember how much he meant to them, how he had worked and cared for them his whole life. They kneel and pray.

The next morning the son records his father's death at the town hall and with the church sexton. The sexton obtains the grandfather's personal data so he can find a fitting sermon. Then the son orders the coffin from a master carpenter. The body must be washed and put into another bed. The whole house is in mourning. When the coffin is ready, it is put in the front room and the body is placed inside. His hands are folded. His prayer book is placed on his chest. The son hires gravediggers, who will also carry the coffin. On the day of the burial only greens are placed around the body. Thus he lies in the coffin. His face radiates quiet and peace. The burial usually takes place in the evening.

After the bells ring, the family members place themselves around the casket. The mourners gather. Neighbors, acquaintances, relatives go into the house to see him for the last time. Someone from almost every house has come to be a part of the funeral procession. The sexton and the churchwarden are there. Everyone assembles before the door. The sexton remains in the middle. The pallbearers come and pick up the casket. They bring it outside to the waiting bier. Everyone takes off his hat.

The sexton leads and all join in to sing a funeral song. A prayer is given. Another verse of song follows and then the mourners begin to move, with the sexton and churchwarden in the lead. The casket is closed. The pallbearers stand beside the bier, then lift it onto their shoulders. The mourners follow. All the men keep their heads uncovered. The funeral procession passes through the streets.

If they happen to meet a wagon, the driver will stop and take off his cap. He waits until the procession has passed, then he continues on his way. The entire funeral procession moves on with bowed heads.

Somberly and sadly the bells toll from high in the church tower. At the street corner the procession halts. The bells are silent. The group sings another song. Afterward, the people move forward again. The pallbearers lift the bier and follow. The bells begin to ring again for the funeral march. They arrive at the cemetery, the bier is brought to the grave and the casket is slowly lowered into the ground. A funeral oration with the deceased's personal data and a short biography is followed by another song.

This is sung over the grave: "From dust you have come and to dust you return, out of the earth you will be raised by Jesus Christ, your Lord and Saviour, on the Judgment Day. Rest in peace; sleep well."

While the group sings, the pallbearers shovel the earth into the grave. After they are finished, the family members kneel on the grave and pray. Finally everyone returns to the house.

The mourners and close family members gather at the house for the "Leichentrunk."⁽²⁾ Everyone is quiet. Very little is said. After eating and drinking, the mourners say a few more words of comfort and go home. Everything is once again cleaned. On the next Sunday, all the survivors attend church and once again say prayers for the deceased.

Yes, we are all mortal and must agree with the song which says:

"Death quickly comes to man,
No time is he given;
To prepare or refuse to go,
He must stand before his Judge."

Translation notes:

⁽¹⁾ *The place/room/house where old people stayed after they could not do very much any more was called "Ausgeding," likely from the word "ausgedient," meaning no longer in use or usable. So a person living in such a place was called an "Ausgedinger," in times when families looked after their old people themselves.*

⁽²⁾ *After a funeral, the custom was to gather together for a little lunch (i.e. a "Leichentrunk").*