

Bessarabian Festivals

*Translated by Dr. Elvire Necker-Eberhardt. Translation project coordinated by Dwayne Janke.
Translated from the book, Wie's Daheim War—Der Schicksalsweg der Bessarabiendeutschen,
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Christmas

Christmas, the festival of joy, is coming closer every day. Young and old are looking forward to it, especially the children and young people. At this time they receive the most gifts.

If a child is not behaving during the time before Christmas, his mother is threatening him either with "Pelzmärte" (furry Martin) or with "Christkind" (Christ child).

Yes, Pelzmärte was a man feared by the children. This man came one evening before Christmas. He was wearing a very big, long fur coat, in such a way that the long hair was on the outside. Also on his feet he had big, very big boots. Around his body he had a long heavy chain with which they led him around. In his hand he had a long rod. On his back he was carrying a big sack with apples and nuts. In addition, a bell had been hung around his neck. It rang with the least movement. The children were shaking because of him. They were afraid of his long rod. Most feared that father or mother would tell that they had been naughty several times. They alternately looked at the parents or at Pelzmärte. Almost petrified they stood there. The little ones started to cry. When Pelzmärte asked them whether they always had been good and obedient, most of the time a very hesitant "yes" would come out. Before he left, they had to promise him always to be good and obedient, and they had to recite a little verse. Then he gave them gifts and his companion led him away by the chain.

Older children who gave him an impudent answer were punished with the long rod. When the little ones saw this, they esteemed Pelzmärte even more.

After Pelzmärte had disappeared, an animated conversation started. Everyone wanted to tell how he was dressed, what he had said and done. Every visitor heard this. They simply could not forget it.

Sometimes when the children did not listen, their mother would say they would get nothing from the Christ child, because he would see and hear everything. Before Christmas the children wrote letters—wish lists—to the Christ child. In it they mentioned everything that the good Christ child should bring them.

On the last day before Christmas all the gifts were put together. Secretly they were brought into the house. Mother locked herself into the front room and decorated the Christmas tree. She put the presents on the gift table.

On Christmas Eve all put on their Sunday clothes for the 6 o'clock service. Students anticipated that one the most. This was their evening. There they were the center of attention.

In church, after a song accompanied by the organ, the pastor or sometimes the sexton-teacher gave a short speech, after which the children's festival followed. Christmas songs and Christmas poems were presented. How wonderful and always new were these great songs!

How the parents watched whether their child did a good job. The nicest were always the shepherds in the fields and the announcing of the birth of Christ by the angel. The end of the feast approached. How impatient the little ones were. They were waiting for the present that was to be given to them in church. It was a little bag with cookies ("Lebküchle") and candies ("Zuckerle").

Most did not open these bags from the church. They wanted to show everything to their parents who waited for them at the exit of the church.

At home everything was emptied on the table. With two, three, or four children now the counting began. Everyone had gotten the same. Their joy was great!

All at once mother opened the door to the front room ("vordere Stube"). "Children while you were at church, the Christ child came to us. Come in and have a look what it has brought you!"

Happily they ran in. Speechless they remained at the threshold. A wonderful Christmas tree was there. "Angels' hair," stars, golden nuts, candies, and lights were on it. The lights glowed. Everything sparkles and shines. Under the tree and on the table are different little parcels and other things. Mother and father look happily into their children's joyous faces. At this moment the grandparents also come in. They, too, enjoy this happy scene and their joyous children and especially the overjoyed grandchildren.

All place themselves around the Christmas tree and begin to sing: "Silent Night, Holy Night," "Come Little Children," "Lo How a Rose E'er Blooming." All these nice and wonderful Christmas songs are sung. Then the children recite their verses. How happy are parents and grandparents. Everything has become quiet. Now they are allowed to look for their presents and open them. What great joy! Overjoyed the children come to their parents and grandparents to show their gifts that the Christ child has given them. The more the parents marvel over these gifts, the happier the little ones are. A child's joy still is the greatest and purest! Happy the children who still can enjoy themselves so much!

The lights are extinguished. After all have sat down, the evening meal is served. Then Christmas cookies, candies, nuts and apples are put on the table.

This evening really is a family night. Everybody is at home amidst his loved ones. Nobody is missing. Only the soldiers cannot be at home to participate. This evening always was a special event for the children and the parents. The following day relatives and friends meet. With "May God help you" they greet each and wish each other a "Merry Christmas."

They sit together and talk about the children's festival, the preparations for Christmas, presents, etc. Each housewife tries to triumph over the other with having the best baking.

In the streets men and women go with the little ones. They visit often from one end of the village to the other. On the road, they greet each other with "Merry Christmas," they talk a little and then move on.

The young people meet in their groups and spend happy hours and evenings. Everybody is happy and content.

Yes, Christmas, the birth feast of Jesus Christ, is a child's joyous festival. Christmas time is a Sunday time!

Moving Day/ Wandering Day (Pepper Day)

December 28 is Moving Day or Pepper Day. On this day farm hands do not have to work. They either stay with the old farmer or go to another. In the latter case, the farm hand brings his belongings to his new work place. Afterwards he "moves/ wanders" around. Several ones join and so they go from one farmer to the next. At each place of the visit there is something to eat and drink. Usually there is smoked meat, liver sausage or dry bratwurst. This last one is a delicacy. In the evening they arrive slightly or totally drunk at the new farmer. Next morning they start work with a small hangover. Their new farmer shows them around, gives his orders and wishes. Now the farm hand can work independently. After the farmer has seen several times that his orders have been respected, he leaves the work of the farm to his farm hand. The employee is judged by the condition of the horses. If they are clean, fat and shiny, the farm hand is good, often praised and sought after. This sometimes goes so far that the farm hand even gives more feed to the horses than the farmer has permitted. Of course, if the farmer discovers that, there will be a small reproach. But the main thing has been achieved: the horses are fat. The reproach usually does not amount to much, because deep inside the farmer is glad he found such a good farm hand. In gratitude the farmer lets his farmhand "move;" even so he still keeps his job.

New Year
For Year's End
By Fr. Reinöhl!

With a loud noise the door falls shut.

The year went to all the others.
Shake hands with me my companion of the road
to continue onward.

The door opens in front of us,
Darkness gives way to light!
Courageously we step over
the new year's threshold.

Its face stands before us completely covered,
before us like newly born,
The new year: "I greet you,
at my door step."

This is how it speaks... And already it turns
and hurries in quick strides,
Before it has heard our wishes
ahead in our midst.

Some feet turn and stumble
in the congested crowd.
Those who have to stay behind,
are hardly noticed by the crowd.

We hurry along with the big crowd
striving for a vague fortune.
Whatever was last year,
we don't look back.

Such is mankind. They will never
hesitate discouraged in battle.
They trust and hope from morn till night:
After the night a day will dawn.

The last day of the year has arrived. There is an evening service. There you remember the year that has just passed. You look back and think of all the nice and sad events that the past year has brought. A prayer concludes all that.

The big boys prepare for this night with big keys and gunpowder. No matter what, this night they have to shoot. The young people gather in one of the girls' houses and spend time with games, etc. Around 11 o'clock they all move to the center of the village, "the ring." Many people have gathered in front of the church. Together they take leave of the old year and wait for the new.

The choir or a brass band climbs the bell tower. A few minutes before midnight, the old year is rung out. While everybody has so far been happy and talking, now all of a sudden all are quiet and silent. Nobody talks.

Then from the tower the song is heard: "Oh, another year has passed" or "Now thank we all our God."

At midnight, exactly twelve loud bell sounds are heard. Then the band plays or the choir sings: "How shall we greet you." People wish each other a happy New Year! Then the new year is rung in. As soon as the bells stop, crackers are heard. Although firecrackers were forbidden for a few years, this custom from the old country has to be observed. Nobody could imagine New Year's Eve without

shooting up firecrackers.

Quietly people go home. Everybody meditates on the question: "What will the new year bring? Fortune or calamity? A good or a bad harvest? Are we going to be healthy enough to work in the new year? Will we survive the new year. God will lead us the right way. We will not miss his leading. Up till now the Lord has helped us, He will continue to do so!" With such faith they return home and go to bed.

Many young people start to go through the village to wish their friends and relatives a happy New Year. For instance the wish:

"Because the New Year has arrived,
I have resolved,
To wish you now
Peace, good fortune and happiness...etc.

Usually the wish ends "And on that we'll fire," and then they fire shots.

New Year's morning usually is very interesting. The little boys and girls always go to their uncle—Vetter—and aunt—Bäsle—to wish them a happy New Year. Everybody gives them some money, cookies and candies. Happy with the result of their wishing, they come home and put the money into their valets or piggy banks.

At this time the shepherds too can be seen going from house to house with a big sack. They also bring wishes to their farmers. Everyone receives cookies, bread, sausage, flour or money. On this day they are the richest people.

Even more interesting are the Russians or Romanians coming to bring wishes. They are used to a different custom.

Every one of these "wishers" has his pockets full of barley. When he enters the house, he wishes in his language and sows the barley from his pocket on the floor. Barley falls on tables, chairs and the floor. These wishes signify to the German farmer health, a long life, and most of all, a rich and blessed harvest. They too receive something.

He, too, cannot leave the house without a gift. He keeps everything in his sack where he has different compartments for the different items of baking.

The Swabian farmer in Bessarabia believed that whatever you give away you will get back a hundred fold. That explains why so many from non-German villages come to wish a happy New Year.

On New Year's Day everybody goes to church. Once again they thank the Lord for the blessing received in the past year. But their prayer includes also a request for health and God's blessing in the new year.

"Start with God,
End with God,
That is the most beautiful course of life."

January 6th

New Year is hardly over when a new holiday arrives, January 6th, the feast of the Holy Three Kings. This festival was celebrated in church each year.

The evening before, the "Three Holy Kings" went around the village singing. (As far as I know this custom existed only in Northern Bessarabia.)⁽¹⁾ They always sang the "Holy Three Kings song." Usually three girls or three boys did that. These last ones were dressed so that nobody could recognize them. They wore make-up on their faces. On their heads they had funny paper hats which were decorated with different oriental figures. Two wore a white dress; the third a black one. The one in black was wearing a crown. He held a stick with a turning star. The other two accompanied him so that

nobody had to be afraid. They went from house to house and asked to be allowed to enter. After they entered they positioned themselves and sang: “We Holy Three Kings with the star, we come and look for the Lord....” etc.

After the song, the middle king in black said: “The star, the star has to go around, we still have to seek other ground.” Then they received some money. Upon leaving, they sang a verse of thanks. If they did not receive anything, they sang a mocking verse.

Each group of three tried to sing their best. They wanted to be best and be praised. They always debated on the street what to do and what not to do.

At the end of their endeavor they always went back to the house where they had dressed up. Soon they had their own clothes on, were washed up and no longer wore make-up. Now all the money earned through the singing was put on the table and divided up. What a nice result! Happy but tired they went home. Next day they went to church service. The “Holy Three Kings” day was celebrated just like every Sunday.

Translator’s notes:

(1) The translator is not sure what the author meant by specifying “Northern Bessarabia.” As far as she knows, this custom existed in the area in which she lived—the southwestern part of Bessarabia. So most likely it was a custom followed in all of Bessarabia.

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Easter and the Egg Search on Easter Monday

Easter time is introduced by the Day of Repentance and Prayer. On this day all villagers go to church. In earlier days many people fasted on this day. For the people in the country this is a very serious day. Everywhere there is quietness. Music and dancing are strictly forbidden. This rule is enforced the whole time—during all of Lent. But it has to be said that nobody even thought of not obeying this rule.

The graves are beautifully prepared and decorated on Wednesday and Maundy Thursday. Not a single weed remains. The house is thoroughly cleaned. In the morning everyone goes to church.

Good Friday is the most serious day of the year. Nobody is allowed to work. It is actually believed that anybody just going on the fields will be killed even if it is only for a walk. Different examples are given to prove it; they really happened: Here or there somebody has been hit by lightning because he went to the field. At another place somebody in the field fell over dead. That is the fate of anybody desecrating this day.

The days before Easter are really difficult for housewives. Mountains of cake have to be baked for this festival. All the work depends on her. She has to heat the oven, prepare the cake dough and put it into pans. Several oven loads have to be baked.

Early on Easter morning the bells ring from the church tower. People get up and go to the cemetery in their festive clothes. At sunrise the resurrection of our Saviour is celebrated there. Many, many people gather there. Until the pastor or the sexton teacher comes with the choir or the brass band, everybody visits the graves of his dead. How many tears are shed this morning. The pastor or the sexton teacher arrive. Everybody gathers around them. First the band plays a song. Then, accompanied by the band, the hymn is sung: "Christ lives and with him I too shall live." Deeply moved by the content of the song, everybody listens to the morning sermon. After a final song, people again walk all over the cemetery. Once more they stand at the graves of their loved ones. A nice custom! Honor the dead!

On this day a service takes place in the morning and in the afternoon. Without much ado the day passes.

The second Easter day, Easter Monday, is celebrated quite differently. In the morning, again one goes to church. The afternoon belongs to the youth. Every year on this day, the festival of the egg search is observed. It always takes place in a meadow outside the village. There you want to exercise your body and participate in many competitions with many onlookers present.

In the afternoon all the young people and many others gather outside at the agreed place. Lately they go together in groups. Ahead are the flag bearers. Then comes the band; afterwards the young people. School children and other children accompany them. Older people usually have gone out before. Songs and games take place in turns.

When they arrive on the meadow, first the flag is put up. Then the festival is opened with music and

dancing. If no band exists, an accordion has to do the job, with drum and triangle accompaniment. Then 150 eggs are placed in two rows about a foot between each egg. (In some villages they have 4 rows). Every tenth egg is colored. At the end of each row, ten feet off, another colored boiled egg is placed in the grass.

Now the gathering of the eggs starts. Underneath the flag 2 or 4 girls are positioned, each wearing a nice white apron. One of them carries a basket where the collected eggs are placed. Each row of eggs is set up like that.

The two flag bearers, who have a nice kerchief draped over their shoulders, collect the eggs. Everybody wants to finish first. Every single egg is to be picked up while running. When they arrive at the tenth egg, the colored one, they have to throw it into the middle which makes the school children and the adults very happy. Now and then a short break is held, then the music plays and some dance. Now all eggs are collected with the exception of the colored ones in the grass. The one who can throw this first over the flag post is the winner. Now music, dancing and singing follows.

In the evening the young people meet again in a room rented for this purpose and celebrate more. They prepare a lunch. Many of the eggs are eaten now. One dance follows the other. Happy and content, one spends this evening.

May First

May first, too, is a joyous feast. On this day everything is decorated with green branches. Young and old go outside and celebrate in nature with cake and wine. It is celebrated with a lot of fun. An accordion is always present. With eating, dancing, drinking and talking the day passes fast. Late at night one arrives home. Long afterwards one still talks about how this festival of May ("Majowka") was celebrated.

Pentecost

This really was the feast of the Bessarabian Germans. The young people could not be stopped from gathering green branches the day before this feast. With them they decorated the entrances to the farms, the doors, etc.

Nature has clothed herself in green again. It is wonderful for those walking outside. Everything shows spring.

May or Pentecost Trees

A custom existed where May or Pentecost trees were placed the night before May first or the night before Pentecost. These were long, thick posts. On them were placed beautiful bouquets and green branches. On top of the post usually a framed mirror was put, the frame in the colour of the Romanian flag. The mirror could turn and had long ribbons attached to it. High on the top of the post the mirror glowed in the sun and turned in the blowing wind.

A young man in love tried to place such a May tree at his loved one's or fiancé's place. He asked his friends to help him. Usually he had to pay them with wine. Of course, the post, branches, mirror, ribbons, nails, etc. he had to get himself. The May or Pentecost tree was placed on the middle of the

street in front of the girl's farm. It was hard work to place a May post. But it was done and the reward was sure.

In the morning the girl was surprised; the parents maybe even more. But the girl usually knew who was behind all this.

On the night before May first or the night before Pentecost, the young girls had to be alert because a lot of tricks were played on them. Every girl and boy was aware that he or she could be the target. Therefore they usually stayed up all night, because on these nights paths with straw were made too. These were sown from the farm of a girl to her supposed beau. Sometimes there was not enough straw, so they used chaff. This last one was very hard to get off. The path of straw had to be erased before daybreak, otherwise a girl was considered lazy. You can imagine all the work and running till all was gone.

Many other tricks were played. It happened that big brooms were put into the chimneys in such a way that the broom was still sticking out. Whole wagons were even dismantled and put on roofs. On these nights all the male youths were on their feet. Everybody had a different idea what could be done. For example, a barrel with water was placed in front of someone's house door in such a way that the opening faced the door. Then, when it opened, a string released the cork and all the water emptied into the house.

These were genuine "Swabian" tricks.

There were songs made for the May or Pentecost trees. I found some and want to cite them here:

1. Tomorrow we have to travel and we have to say our good byes,
Sadly we depart, adieu my dear.
2. When we arrive in the mountains, we will look back to our valley,
We all look in all directions and see our city for the last time.
3. When winter has passed and spring arrives,
I want to become like a little bird and fly through the whole world.
4. I want to flee to where it was nice and where I was at home.
Darling, even though I have to part now, in a year I'll return.
5. In a year, at Pentecost, I will place a May tree in front of your house,
I shall bring you a fresh bunch of flowers from a far country.

The Church Dedication Feast

"Today is Church Dedication, tomorrow too,
Until Wednesday evening.
When I come to my darling,
I'll say: good evening!"

This verse, with its oral tradition tells us that this feast lasted three days. It was always observed on the first Sunday in October. Before this feast a housewife is busy until late at night. Again, mountains of

cakes have to be baked. At this time cheese cakes, streusel cakes, fruit cakes, grape cakes [Ed. Note—a fruit cake with grapes on top], etc., had to be put on the table. The following event shows how many cakes were eaten at this feast:

Father and son sit at each end of the table. Mother brings a plate heaped high with cakes. Father looking at the son says: “Can you still see me?” The son replies: “Oh, yes, very well, father.” The father worried: “Oh God, then there is not enough.”

The table is always set. If guests come, they are invited to eat and drink, because at this time there is already new wine available. Young people also celebrate Church Dedication. Because the weather is cool already, they celebrate inside. A musician presses his “box” as well as he can. Couples dance at the Church Dedication dance. The day before Church Dedication, confirmands decorate the church with green branches.

Various kinds of fruit are placed on the altar. You could find melons, watermelons (Arbusen), grapes, pumpkins, corncobs, peppers, etc. In the evening you could see confirmands bringing yellow sand—house floor sand—which was put along the church walls. Other people put sand on their sidewalks.

Church Dedication was a real fall festival.

Cleaning Cobs of Corn

In the evening young and old gather together, but the young people definitely get together. After greeting each other heartily, work begins. The young people almost always sit together in pairs. They hurry. Everybody wants to clean the most. Most of all everybody wants to find a red cob of corn because the one who finds a red one is allowed to kiss his neighbour. What fun! For a girl it is considered bad luck to find one because she does not want to kiss the boy next to her. But a boy will not pass such a chance. If she does not kiss him, he kisses her. Giggling and laughing without end. One cob follows the other. And one story after another is told. Joke follows joke. And one folk song is sung after the other. From very far you can hear the happy laughter.

The wagon on which the cobs are thrown is full. It is pulled away. Another one is brought in. Immature cobs are thrown to a separate place. They are used for feed right away. The full wagon is emptied right away. The corn is brought into the “corn house,” which is made of boards in such a way that there is room between them. This way the wind can blow through and dry the corn.

The cleaning is finished. “Many hands make work a quick end.” During the cleaning father walks back and forth with a pitcher in his hand and serves them so that the throat does not get too dry and dusty.

Now comes the best. Everyone goes into the house. After everyone has washed, they go into the best room. A wonderful table awaits the cleaners. Whatever you want to see is found on the table. Always you find stuffed peppers. Now wine tastes even better. Dessert cakes, grapes, watermelons or melons are served. Everyone serves himself. After everyone is full, then the nicest part for the young people starts. The tables are put to the side and right away music and dancing begins. The musician presses his box as good as he can. Many houses have a piano but more often a harmonium is found. Happiness is at home here. Now and then a sip of wine is taken to increase the good atmosphere.

“Let the young people, the young people, do their thing.”

Superstition

Frequently we come across superstitions that either were brought along from the home country or picked up along the way. For instance: meeting a woman with an empty water pail means bad luck; a full one means good luck.

An owl crying at night on the roof means misfortune, even approaching death to a relative.

Even dogs howling, the breaking of a tea glass or a lamp shade without touching it, or a clock stopping means bad luck. There is more that could be mentioned.

I only want to remind us of the jack-o'-lanterns, the evil spirits and witches. There were many that turned to the help of witches. Magic mirrors and horoscope tables have to be mentioned. Quite common was the prophesying with the help of cards. This was done more by the Romanians and other nationals. Often wandering gypsies—mostly their women—would lay cards. They could look into the past and the future. Others had their hand lines read. Great trust was placed in these prophets. If what they said happened to come true, great reward was given to them.

Old women and men believed in the 7th book of Moses. It happened for instance that a farmer lost several horses in the course of a year, so he turned to someone who could help in this calamity. Nobody could talk him out of this superstition.

Others believed in “brauchen” or “conjuring.” If a child, adult or even a cow became sick, they were brought to the man or woman who could “brauchen” or “conjure.” What nuisance was done with this! Even in our youth, people believed in “brauchen” or “conjuring.”

Young people did away completely with superstition. They talk about it and marvel how such things could be trusted.