

Bessarabian Festivals

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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.