

# A Baptism Festival in Northern Bessarabia

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[Note: It appears that the author of this article is using a pseudonym by identifying himself as Hans Nimmerruh. The literal translation of that name into English turns out as Johnny Never Rest. Comments in square brackets in the document are those of the translator.]

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[Translation Begins]

## **A Baptism Festival in Northern Bessarabia** by Hans Nimmerruh

Many good authentic German traditions and customs have survived in the scattered small German isolated dialects in the north of our dear homeland. They surface mostly and also vividly at the various festival times which are the ones that bring the scattered Germans here into close contact with each other and allow for the practice of their traditions and customs. The festival which happens the most here, and also turns out to be interesting, is the baptism of a child.

Already two or 3 days before the baptism, mountains of sweet pastries (*Zuckeruchen*) are baked and a whole battery of schnapps is brought together: from all over the place tables and benches are gathered so as to accommodate the many guests. To fail to invite a relative or a good friend to the child's baptism is in this place one of the greatest sins of omission. The one who is the most delighted about this festival is the sexton. Because, first of all, he is going to earn some good pocket money; and, secondly, he is the most distinguished guest at the heavy laden feast table. Baptisms take place mostly in the evening so one is always busy throughout the day. The "father of the one to be baptized" [or baptism father] (*Taufvater*) already has to walk around in the village in the afternoon and make arrangements for the required sponsors (*Patin*), the number of which can be up to 20, and sometimes as high as 30, while, however, only four are recorded in the baptismal register, two males and two females. During the day, the "baptism father" could hardly come up with that large a number of sponsors. The reason why so many sponsors are asked for is probably based on a specific policy of the "baptism father". Each sponsor is obligated, after the baptism, to place a coin in the baptism bowl or on the baptism table; this money is intended for the sexton, and the more the sexton is able to receive, the more pleasure is given to him by the "baptism father". And if the sexton is surrounded by such a large crowd of sponsors, his face beams like the spring sun. His words are then quite powerful, the prayers

fervent and the baptism song resounds bright and joyful. During the course of the entrance song and the prayer the baptism, the child moves from arm to arm until it has made its way to all the wide circle of sponsors. The “grandmother” (midwife), who must always attend the baptismal ceremony, exposes the little head of the child and the child is baptized. If it is a boy, most of the time, it is given the name Jacob, John or Peter; the most common names for girls are Elisabetha, Karoline and Katharine. Sometimes this causes curious situations to arise, for there is the example in N[eu]-St[rymba] where there are 8 male persons who go by the name of Johann Schmidt, there are several Jakob Maiers and John Langs. It is obvious that a person sometimes ends up with a big embarrassment. To distinguish such persons, one from the other, they are given various nicknames, such as red Peter, John the soldier, tall Jakob, young Lang, and so forth. Now, after the baptism is completed and the very fortunate sexton has put payment for services rendered into his spacious pants pockets, it is up to the “baptism father” to move things on to the banquet. The sexton and his wife are usually called from among the oldest sponsors. Once all sponsors and other guests are gathered, where the room is usually so full that it can barely accommodate the "baptism father", the sexton suggests a table song which is then sung by the crowd of sponsors. After that, the sexton also speaks a table prayer and every sponsor says his “Blessed meal!” (*Gesegnete Mahlzeit*) and agreeably drinks to it. Now, the little glasses start to wander [clinking or lifting of glasses] among the wide company of sponsors. They wander from hand to hand and everyone must say to his neighbor “To Your Health!” (*Gesundheit*) before draining his glass. However, the glasses wander a lot faster and more joyously among the sponsors than did the child to be baptized in the church. Each sponsor is obliged, with the first glass, to say something good and nice as a wish for the little baptized child. But because not everyone has the talent to put together a short speech on the spot, there is sometimes boisterous laughter. If now the glasses make a second round among the sponsor, it is enough just to say a quick “To Your Health!” Until the bottles are empty, the teeth are busy chomping away on the sweet pastries. The sweet pastries probably taste the best to the sexton, since he has brought with him a good appetite in that he had a light breakfast and did not eat anything for the noon meal. Now things are lively in the room. The women sitting at a particular table are especially loud. All kinds of questions are covered; the latest news in the village, economic matters and even politics. At the beginning, the topic of conversation is always about the weather. Once the sweet pastries are eaten up, then come filled bowls of soup, and each sponsor comes up with a couple of spoons either from the leg of his boot or from the side pocket, one for himself and one for his wife (*Enehälfte*). Only the sexton is exempt from this concern, since what is necessary is provided for him. Noodle soup is usually offered, and the longer and thinner the noodles are, the better the soup tastes to the guests. Some fun occurs when, for example, a sponsor suddenly pulls back from (*Vertriet*) the hot soup, or cannot properly take in the very long noodles. After the soup comes meat with potato salad. Now that one has pretty much calmed down his big hunger, one allows himself to engage in lengthier conversations. The older folks tell the stories about the good old days and the young people—about everyday events. Now comes the best dish: the sweet pudding (*Brei*), rice cooked in milk and sprinkled heavily with sugar and cinnamon. It is the local “national dish”. While still busy eating the sweet pudding toward the end of the meal, two of the lively women carry around bunches of flowers on a plate in order to sell them. The ladies doing the selling remain standing in front of each sponsor, sing the song “A somersault is going around...” (*Es geht ein Purzelbaum herum*), pin a flower on the chest and negotiate the price. It is easy to understand why this leads to where one nearly dies with laughter. A heavy-set “Auntie” (*Bäschen*) usually appears from among the cooks after the

“Flower Event”. Her hand is heavily wrapped. She complains that she had scalded the hand while cooking and now needs for it to be treated. She holds a large cooking spoon in her good hand, waiving it close to the nose of each sponsor. In every possible way, the cook complains and asks for money for treatment. To finally get rid of her, each one throws a coin into the spoon. During this time, interesting things sometimes also happen. Suddenly there is a skeptical sponsor who wants to be allowed to examine the hand of the cook on the spot, which she is not ready to allow and comes up with different excuses to avoid the peril from being unmasked. After the rice bowls are empty, everybody stands up and the sexton says the prayer of thanks. The first and most important part of the festival has now come to an end. The sexton wishes for everyone to have a good time and goes home with his wife. The sponsors now pool money; then more schnapps is bought and the entertainment carries on into the middle of the night. The oldest sponsor, whose given name the child bears, has to provide most of the schnapps.

The best and nicest thing about such festivals is that Germans find themselves gathered together and experience a few happy hours. May this festival continue on into the future and be carried out in true German fashion.

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