

Our Weddings

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[Note: Comments in square brackets in the document are those of the translator.]

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[Translation Begins]

Our Weddings **by A. Sandau**

The celebration of the coming together of man and woman to travel together through life is indeed very old. Maybe already shortly after Paradise was lost, a couple coming together had young men and women shouting and jumping before them, accompanied by the melancholy tones of a willow flute. With the Tango, Foxtrot and Charleston dances not yet in fashion, grandfathers and grandmothers told the youth, with words of regret and sadness in the heart, how Adam and Eve so foolishly lost their peaceful life. However, the young people still believed in a happiness on this earth even without an enclosed pleasure garden and despite the consequences of the coveting after and desire for the forbidden fruit (*Naschhaftigkeit*) of their ancient mother. They enjoyed themselves, took to each other and celebrated their union with pleasure. This pleasure at the beginning of a new stage in life should be a symbol for the future. One wants to try and force the happiness of life, so to speak; the young hearts, without a doubt, confronted by secret worries about the unknown and uncertainties up ahead.

Things may have taken place like that, and so things continued on down through time up to our generation today. White Europeans celebrate weddings, and the representatives of the black, red and yellow race perform similar ceremonies for the same occasion.

The German peasant (*Bauer*) of Bessarabia also faithfully adheres to this general practice, and he does the things according to his race as best as he can.

One wants to say right away that the loyalty of this custom is excessively great in some cases, especially when you consider that many make sure that there is a wedding at whatever the cost and soon thereafter earn their bread by way of daily wages. But this is just a very humble, personal opinion and should not be considered as blaming or reprimanding. — “Let each person see to it how he is going to deal with it...”

When I think back to the time of my childhood, I find that our way of celebrating weddings has undergone some changes. Many befitting characteristics of this festivity—whether good or not, I will not go into—have been lost with the passing of time, some new ones added.

However, an essential feature, despite some modification, has not been quenched up to today and will probably remain as long as there will be marriage merry German young men and women in Bessarabia. I mean namely: the serious, sober conceptions of this festival and the thoroughness with which the event takes place. With the same earnestness and incapability of being tired out diligence that our German farmer (*Bauer*) had in establishing his field; with the same thoroughness and deliberation which he used in all his dealings and activity; and that, not being said as a rebuke, extends to food and beverages, so he celebrates his weddings. As his ancestors did it, so he is also doing it; it belongs, so to speak, to his confession of faith.

One cannot comprehend the superabundance of emotions. Always with both feet in reality and the mind focused on the purpose, that is how our farmer is. Of course, a wedding feast will join his day's work as something necessary, like a piece of the whole of his farm. It is a process that must be repeated as many times as a farmer has sons and daughters to marry off. Just as the son has to receive horses, wagon, plow, and 15, 20, 30 or more dessjatin [1 dessjatin=2.7 acres; 1.09 hectares] of land and the daughter receive 2-3 cattle, some sheep and a bed with a number of pillows and feather ticks as a dowry, so both must also have their wedding.

Traditions and customs arise and form among the people, as related to this or that tribal society, the living conditions different according to race and tribe, and because of the worldviews of the people concerned. If they have first of all assumed the correct character and stability, then they will have a good spirit, as well as the religion of a people, with whom they enjoy almost the same respect, even if they are not completely at one with them and even have a different reality.

So, for example, a fiancée among us cannot understand that the church declarations before the altar should not also be followed with a wedding ceremony at the house. And she would be heartbroken if the father, in order to save some money, wanted to lead them quite suddenly away from the altar into the new life; but the best of friends would consider it a sign of greed to depart from the general practice of the “old” ways. As a complete dedication for the beginning of married life, the young couple sees their wedding celebration as essentially necessary.

A bubbling over, exuberant mirth, as such elevating one into seventh heaven for some hours and making one forget the worries of everyday life, is a rare thing, at least for the wedding fathers and mothers. The mother of the wedding, in a simple house dress, leads the oversight in the preparation of the food; however, the venerable father, in vest and shirt sleeves, watches over the tables occupied by the guests, so that nothing gets broken and peace and harmony reign. Both are constantly on their feet and barely take enough time and rest, while hurrying around, to enjoy a mouthful of the served food at one of the lower tables, if per chance a corner is free; but mind you, only after the guests have eaten. Often the father is also alone, while the wedding mother, who appears only occasionally with the guests and is among them no more than a few minutes, eats with the cooks in the kitchen. A wedding day is a hard (*sauer*) work day for father and mother, especially if the wedding extends even to the well-known “after the wedding” (*Nachhochzeit*) where, like in the good old days, after a hot day on the threshing floor, they

collapse onto their bed. A wedding where the wedding father—which, after all, happens very rarely—paces about with slightly rolled up shirt sleeves, reminds one of the quite out of the ordinary everyday prose.

It is quite indicative of the sober and practical mentality of our farmers in the fact that they celebrate their weddings almost exclusively in the winter, where they have more time and the fat pigs necessary for the wedding table are in abundance, and at which time the wine brook is also flowing plentifully. How nice that one celebrates the beloved Christmas festival in the winter and that there is the time where one can insert his weddings without damage to the regular course of his business!

The invitation to the wedding still frequently takes place in the old formal way as it was characteristically carried out by our forefathers in the mother land and then brought along to the new home. Here is where one experiences the change of the circumstances of the account, the wedding invitation according to its intended and external form indeed considerably transformed, in that one either overthrows the old pattern, or that clumsy steppe poetic compositions are added. This invitation is that which is carried out by our companions known as “Bride’s Servants” (*Brautdiener*) or “Bride’s Young Men” (*Brautbuba*). Although now many an aristocratic house, in the spirit of the new times, does the invitation of its guests by way of written or printed invitation cards; however, the original form of invitation is by far more popular among our farmers because it is more energetic and complicated. The use of a shabby scrap of paper (an invitation card) would be considered, by some of our tough and proud farmers, as showing too little respect.

The invitation via the “Bride’s Young Men” is adorned with many colorful ribbons; however, there is something else. The invitation card is a dull thing presented by a half-grown up boy, and, in turn, an excellent long “Wedding Request” by the “Bride’s Foremost Young Man”, (*obersten Brautbu*) specifically presented to each invited family! What a thrilling moment when the decorated lads proudly and with well-wishing demeanor enter the living room! The caps are not removed because that would look too trivial and submissive and spoil the beautiful image, diminish the impression. Without saying hello, the “Foremost Fellow”, depending on his vocal cords, either with a thundering voice or performing in a falsetto sound, begins the well-known old and yet ever new and glad to be heard request: “I come striding in, but if I had a horse, I would be coming in riding it, but I have left my dark brown outside, so I come in on foot. Good fortune in here, Good fortune out there, whether the master and mistress are in here or out there. Are they out there, then I give them a sincere request to come in, along with their chickens and little geese, Oh, no, what I wanted to say was, together with their sons and daughter...” Everybody listens intently. The father is flattered and nods his head approvingly and understandingly. Mother and daughter from the kitchen and the little ones busy reading or playing games rush in to listen to the request. Servants and maids are huddled in the doorway. The many course spots in the request, such as: “and please do not forget your knife and fork or else you will have to eat (*fressen*) [used for animals feeding] with hands and fingers,” are laughed at robustly. Only after the lengthy story has found its end, the fellows bid their farewell to the family. But the father hastens to express his gratitude for the honor the young fellows did to him by way of offering a good drink in a large glass. One accepts the offer as long as it is still possible. If the village is large and the guests to be invited are many, then it is no wonder if one

or the other of the fellows withdraws ahead of time from the circle and squeezes off to the side, since the called for drinking can finally make the strongest of fellows tired.

During the invitations, the single fellows fire gunshots—one, two or more shots in front of each house—which has, fortunately, been put to an end, since now it is only the one who has the legal permission to carry a shotgun who is allowed to shoot. However, on the day of the wedding itself, despite all prohibition, weapons sound off quite extensively because the main part of the festivities usually take place during the night time and the one shooting is in less danger of being caught.

The many and serious objections to the shooting at the weddings are certainly in order when you consider how, through this, some accidents have already happened. In the meantime, it must also be admitted that the situation would be less dangerous if the wedding father in question did not pursue the shooting too furiously and the one shooting was allowed to calmly pull the trigger. Reprimanding the shooting at weddings as being a bad habit is perhaps a little exaggerated. If princes and otherwise great and noble mortals link their celebrations at special family events with canon shots and firecrackers, as well as seeking to give honor through great fireworks, maybe the lesser mortals should also be allowed to express their elevated feelings through a few harmless pistol shots. Basically, however, the thing comes down to the same thing for the important and the unimportant people. The difference between here and there is only between less and more, simpler and more extravagant. The motivation is the same.

The thing leading up to the wedding feast is the “Evening of Ribbons” (*Bandelobt*) (*Polterabend*=Evening of the wedding party). This is where all the finery for the festival is prepared. A vast number of ribbons, bouquets, and artificial flowers are prepared. Flashy, glaring colors are preferred. The bride’s maids (*Brautmädchen*) play the leading role and have a difficult piece of work to do in order to meet all the requirements. The most important task here is to have bride and groom try their fine wedding attire. The bride’s young men (*Braububen*), as well as the wagon drivers, as participants in the preparation, play in part the role of a buffoon, in part courting the girls by means of their crude rural wit. They really enjoy themselves of this privilege by pouring out their entire supply of—not just witty—jokes on this occasion and coming up with some suggestive comments, which, however, on the part of the pretty women (*Schönen*), are not considered so tragic, since way back when “that’s just how it is.” It again shows the power of habit and custom. If a fellow wooed his pretty woman earlier with a few, meagerly calculated candy, now, as her partner, he lets her treat him for free, that is, the girl has to bear the expenses for ribbons and bouquet required for him as her escort (*Kavalier*). He is very demanding, behaves like a Sultan, allowing himself to be served and graciously accepts the homage of the pretty woman. Rather paternalistic: The woman the servant, the man the lord.

In general, the good girls have to put up with this bit of bitter-sweet amusement.

On the day before the wedding, it is their duty to gather the necessary tableware for the festival from friends and relatives. Adorned with white porter aprons, a small bouquet on the chest and equipped with large, ribbon decorated baskets, you can see them rushing up and down the streets, often in the fierce cold and trudging through the deep snow. Moreover, they are almost always lightly dressed; to be warmly wrapped up and going about in dark clothes could not be

reconciled with the important performance of business for the joyful festival. And they put up with it, our brave farm girls!

Fortunately, such an industrious child, on such an occasion of hardships and difficult sacrifices, is sometimes also richly compensated through an engagement with her wedding festival partner.

The bride's young man (*Brautjunge*) always preferred to let the one he would like to have as a life's partner pin the bouquet on his chest. Therefore, sometimes scenes of small jealousy took place among these otherwise not petty and unemotional young folks when it came to the question of who should "pin" (*anstecken*) what on whom. It should be noted that the term "pin" here has a special meaning. It was not uncommon that a boy who was not pinned by the one he desired, or a girl was denied to pin him, celebrated the festival with a heavy heart. In matters of love, the coziness can sometimes come to an end among farmer children. —Even as the bride's maids gather the necessary tableware, it is the task of the young fellows, on the same day, to see to it that the wedding hall has tables, chairs and benches. How earnestly and seriously they go about it! In military formation, the young fellows stand on the hauling wagon, two, three, one behind the other, each one with hands placed on the shoulders of the other. The one out in front leads the horses, richly decorated with paper ribbons and paper roses. As a war hero of antiquity on his chariot, with a grim look, the wagon driver stands on his hauling wagon. The school teacher and the community secretary must also contribute a table or chair, since these two are not allowed to miss the wedding. In frantic haste, the furniture is loaded up, brought to the wedding house and unloaded. Some tables or chairs arrive at the festival with splintered or broken legs. This, as well as in all other preparatory work for the festival always shows the behavior of the concept "*Schaffen*", which is "serious work." Our farmer is always working (*shaffen*), working in the field, working at the threshing place, working for a wedding. Even his walk to the church adheres to the rubber stamp idea of work (*Schaffen*): with the hymnal tucked securely under the arm and going in hurried steps to the place of worship and back again.

If the pastor is not living in the area, the whole circle of bride's maids and companions of the couple to be married accompany the bridal couple by wagon or sleigh to the church parish village. One only chooses "friends" as wagon drivers who have good horses. Because driving is an essential thing. From the house of the wedding, like a wild hunting expedition, it is off to the pastor's village. It is very important that one stops for a few minutes along the way in order to have a round of drinks from the wine jugs being taken along; because, as one is prone to say—"so that our horses will be able to run better." —Anyone who has ever made such a trip and the best of his nerves did not enjoy it, will tend to think of the amusement as something where one risks the breaking of neck and leg and, instead of coming to the banquet, ends up in the sick bed.

If it has been raining and the road is messy, the whole group arrives in the pastor's village in a miserable condition. Then it takes a lot of effort until the abusive situation of people and horses is again cleaned up in a make-shift manner. To be pitied, the distressed bride often looks like that of a ruffled chicken.

After the wedding ceremony is completed, one stops by those who are well known where something is eaten, but especially plenty is drunk. The wagon drivers are in the right mood for the chase. Wild things already happened on the way here, so it will certainly be so on the way

home. Everyone wants to be the one out front and arrive first at the wedding house. The one who lags the farthest behind the others will be made fun of during the whole festivities and teased: he is a coward, a scoundrel, is worthless and his horses are no good, and other things like that. In a shout of “hurrah”, the convoy pulls into the farm. A welcome gunshot is fired. It is often at the last moment that an accident happens: by turning into the yard, one or the other wagon runs so hard against the gate-pillar that the passengers are thrown out in the curve, which has often resulted in a broken arm or broken leg. There have been times when the bride and groom have experienced this and the festival was ruined.

Covered in a sweaty froth, with beaten flanks and swollen nostrils, the horses stop in front of the wedding house. A few protected shreds of their colorful ribbons still remain. The whole company in the wagons do not present a festive image: they appear in front of the waiting guests, tired, battered and in a state of severe exhaustion.

Now things come alive in the house and yard. The spectacle of the inevitable crowd of children. A babble of voices. Now and again also already the sound of a gunshot. Everything is waiting eagerly for the things that are supposed to come. The young couples have become hungry, one heads to the table. Already when entering the house, in the doorway, one received a glass of schnapps. Every serious start is initiated with a good drink. Also the school teacher and secretary must drink a little schnapps when passing through the festive entrance, because—“that is how it is.”

Already long before, the little fellows cast secret and covetous glances in the kitchen, stretch their necks, and become intoxicated by the pleasant smells.

Now, in a few moments, the wedding hall, and even two or three parlors, are filled. “Crowded head to head...” The tables are set up along the wall so that only a narrow space remains between the wall and table to make room for the chairs and benches. Everything is blocked, only the door is free. Opposite the door, at the upper end of the hall, at the middle table, the newly weds occupy their place of honor. To their right, bride’s young men and bridal young women line up, pair by pair, but a certain pecking order is observed. The “Best Man” and his female partner make up the first pair. They are brother and sister of the newly weds. To the left of the pair of honor sit the teacher and the secretary with their spouses. Then come the remaining paired off guests.

Once everyone is seated, wine is then next poured for everyone in order to excite the appetite and to shorten the time until the dishes of food are served. Little is said and a subdued mood prevails. At the most, there are comments about the weather, or that someone asked about how things went on the trip here. Or that one in the bridal party whispers something into the ear of his pretty partner, whereby she has to laugh, putting her handkerchief over her mouth. The minutes pass by. During the whole time, one hears from the kitchen the promising sounds of the clinging, clanging and chattering of glasses, knives, forks and plates, as well as the voices of the cooks. Male and female porters, with white aprons on and a bouquet on the chest, distribute the dishes to the tables with a lot of clattering noise.

Finally, the first steaming bowls, like a locomotive, are brought in. This causes a stir. Things become animated. The clearing of one's throat and a slight cough take place—preparation for the upcoming important task. The first dish is almost always a macaroni soup (*Makkaroni-Suppe*). This is followed by poultry meat with horseradish. This [horseradish] is readily acknowledged by the sweat on the brow. Not a word is spoken. Only a soft slurping and gentle smacking can be heard. One is focused on his plate and what is in it. In the same way as we know our farmers in everything they do. Pretty much according to their rule of conduct: be diligent and thorough and eat and drink “seriously”, in no small way put into practice at a feast.

Then, after a few hours, comes the roast pork with fried potatoes or potato salad, a heavy, fat laden peasant food.

Then, finally, the inevitable and highly acclaimed “thick rice with *Rosoila*”, that is, milk rice pudding with raisins, is brought out; including plums. This is Ambrosia. This dish is enjoyed with ecstasy, a whole bunch of it is devoured. I cannot fail to take this opportunity to deliberately alert our German brothers in the mother land and the other settlements about this situation. Dear brother! If you should happen to speak about a Bessarabian German farmer wedding sometime during the course of your life, then let me advise you, as a good friend, not to scorn the “thick rice with raisins” because you will be considered a barbarian and uncivilized. So, please take note!

What I do not like is the custom in regards to the little people; instead of giving special attention to increasing their pleasure, rather, they are fed in the kitchen, which is really inconsiderate. Granted, there are laudable exceptions where children dine together with adults. If one does not want to put younger guests between the others, you ought to, at the very least, accommodate them all together in an adjoining room. It sometimes happens that in the motley disarray of the kitchen some one sadly leaves empty-handed, even though he had enjoyed the festival and banquet all day long! I remember, as a six year old little fellow, myself once experiencing such a banquet, that is, also left on the sidelines, in the kitchen. It was there that the good things—if what left-over food can be called—were simply set before us on a long, three-legged kitchen bench [long plank with legs on both ends and one in the middle]. There we meekly crouched around, like second-class guests, and let it taste good to us.

During the big break between macaroni soup and roast pork, the mood of the gathering is already far better: the giving out of drinks at the beginning gradually brought the guests of this point. “Wine gladdens the heart of a person.”

A drunken person at our weddings is not all that easy to keep in line and not the most appreciated guest; but is considered an inevitable figure in the harmless play: knowing the story of the wedding at Cana and, considering the words—“...and when they were drunk...”— one practices Christian tolerance.

Everyone is sincerely trying to do his best. Hunting and war adventures are dished out, jokes are told and riddles asked. One produces pieces of art with knife and fork, while another, already quite inebriated, praises to his heart's content what is his, his rising way above everyone else. While another becomes rhetorical, philosophizing... However, the wagon drivers are usually the

most boisterous; they took the young couple to the house of the pastor and brought them back, and that really means something! Their conversation eventually turns to the completed trip. The winner, that is, the one who came back first into the yard, becomes really brutal and harasses the “One who came in Last”. Things often heat up to the point that one says the most rude things. But outright fights are rare.

The older ones among the guests, serious and solid family men, do not participate in these noisy amusements. They conduct their serious conversations separately in some corner. Everything is done with great dignity: their speeches, pouring and drinking. Even the big belly wine bottle, not decorated with a ribbon, looks more majestic than the bottles decorated with ribbons for the younger guests. The dancing and smoking offers a popular topic of conversation. One debated back and forth, and almost always coming to the conclusion: dancing and smoking are vices, hence—sins. It is odd how one was much less zealous when it came around to talking about drinking. There is always agreement that wine gives one strength and it is a fruit of God. One is ready to grant that drinking too much can also be a vice, however, that then is the fault of each individual. That a leg in passionate motion and a dry liver are quite natural, and that the consequence of engaging both to excess can lead to vice, one cannot conceive that consequently there is probably not such a big difference between drinking and dancing.

But the young people, in the meanwhile, are unconcerned about what the old people are saying and gather in the houses of neighbors and—dance. There this pleasure is then often carried to excess, which probably would not be the case in the wedding house, under the supervision of the older folks.

Even as dancing is, so music is frowned upon in the festival hall. It seems strange, but that is the custom. It is kind of nitpicking (*Muckerhaftes*), but one has to put up with it until one arrives at a different view.

As our grandfathers told it, dancing was still quite normal in earlier days. I, myself, remember how, as a child, I attended a wedding celebration where, at the closing, an old cooking woman, to the amusement of all, carried out a dance with an oven rake.

Our elderly folks certainly brought with them the custom of dancing from the mother land. If I am not mistaken, it is still a tradition there today that the father and mother perform a dance in honor of their daughter on her day of joy. It only happens among us in such houses where one is more inclined to allow new things to be introduced and carry on with some of the old ways. Actually, it is perhaps not a carrying on with some of the old ways, but rather returning to an old custom which has just received a modern coat of paint (*Anstrich*).

Characteristic also is the singing at our weddings. The spiritual song has the advantage and, as it seems to me, for two reasons. First, in general, the poor encouragement of the folk song is to be blamed. But then, it speaks to the serious tone about the essence of our farmers and the religious setting of his whole life.

Anyone looking for trained singing at our weddings will come up short in the reckoning. After some song was sung, one often hears the dry-humor comment from one of the farmers: “It was

not nice, but *arg*” (*Sche war’s net, aber arg*). *Arg*, which means vigorous/with gusto, is how it was sung, which is the main requirement. With the utmost exertion at the fork-handle and hoe-handle, so also the effort when singing. In all these efforts the basic principle stands: *arg*, strong, intense and lots of it.

One is not all that particular with the selection and order of songs. So it can happen that after one has just sung [the spiritual song] “Heavenward, only heavenward...” (“*Himmelan, nur Himmelan...*”) quite suddenly and unrestrained singing the [secular] song “Linen Weaver” (“*Leineweber*”). In general, the festival, which started in an orderly and formal way, toward the end already heads in a completely different direction and has very little to do with structure. The mood is free, one lets himself go. The conversation gets loud and strong; always in the tone of the “*Hü*” and “*Hott*” that the farmer has become accustomed to in dealing with his horses.

I recall that in the “good old days” a person did some drastic little things. So, for example, any one of the guests, who had honestly participated and then wanted to go to sleep, stuffed the shirt pocket full of “thick rice” (rice puree), someone challenging him to take some home to his children. The reader can well imagine what this looked like. At best, one can describe it again with the word “*arg*”.

What has become welcome and “fashionable” in the last few years is the reciting of poems which are adapted to the celebration. The speakers are usually girls and boys of school age.

This has led directly to the unfortunately still occurring begging acts (*Betteln*). Because just begging is what you can call the unabashed collection of cash contributions for the benefit of the young couple. A decent wedding guest gives his gift before or after the festival without ceremony; but the disdainful begging displeases him. The collectors—usually the porters—take the pains to give an obligatory speech about things, an amusing portrayal, through fanciful dress-up and humor; however—“one notes the intention and becomes upset.” —This custom is certainly a bad habit, and one cannot regret that it is in the process of disappearing. When it comes to a poor couple and if the situation were to be introduced through an appropriate speech, one could certainly agree with it; not so where the parents can well provide for their children. Much nicer and more appropriate is the recently emerging tradition where the abundance and the splendor of the wedding house and its guests is gathered from among all in attendance and is allowed to go to the poor and miserable in our communities, remembering the Alexander Asylum in Sarata and contributing to this charitable institution.

Early on, the dignified fathers retreat from the table in the corner. However, the younger ones enjoy the festival to the full, up to the very end. The wagon drivers are usually the first ones to get “tired”: the hardships of the journey, the fierce battle of words and wine have mellowed them. At last, the porters, who had to do a lot of running, get to sit and make up for the food and drink they missed out on. These and the cooks sometimes still give an occasional, coarse farcical play.

The final act of the festivity features the “Crown Removal” (*Abkränzen*). One last ceremony. Two chairs are brought forward. The bride and groom sit on them. Now the people hold hands, forming a circle around the young couple, and the “Crown Removal” song begins. Piece by

piece, the “bridal wife” (*Brautfrau*) gets rid of the wedding finery of the bride and bridegroom and puts on each an already prepared somber plain garment. This is supposed to signify: this is it for song and game, the serious side of life begins; jubilation is over with, work beckons.

[Translation Ends]