

# Bessarabian Military Customs

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## Die Losung (the Draft Lottery)

In 1871 the military exemptions were repealed and therefore our young people also had to become soldiers. Angered by the rescinding of the promised rights, some of the settlers left the Black Sea area. The following poem sums up the mood of that time:

The manifest of the Empress said  
That the Germans should be colonists,  
Growing bread and wine.  
So we left our homeland  
And moved to Russia.  
The Russians were jealous  
That we were free so long,  
And they slyly decided that  
We should no longer be colonists.  
If not colonists, then we must also  
Serve in the military.  
Through envy the manifest  
Was made of no effect  
And although we are Germans,  
Now we must be like the Russians.

This immigration song was soon being sung:

1. Here in Russia we don't want to live,  
Because we must become soldiers.  
As Ratnik(I) we must remain,  
So we want to leave Russia.

2. In Saratow, you German canton,  
Bring forward honest Germans,  
Go away to Brazil,  
Where there is no winter.

3. What we have saved,  
We must spend on the trip,  
Away to Brazil,  
Where there is no winter.

4. When we come to Hamburg city  
Our money is taken  
When we travel on the sea,  
Our sacks are empty.

5. As we travel on the water,  
God, send us an angel.  
Stretch out your kind Hand,  
So that we will arrive safely.

6. When we depart the ship,  
We move in God's name,  
So that when we travel in wagons,  
We will be protected from wild pigs.

7. Grapes grow behind fences,  
Dried fruit in the tall trees,  
Apples and figs, they are ripe,  
God, help us in all our need.

As soon as the young men came close to draft age, the day of their "drawing" also came near. "Losung" (drawing) was the word we used for mustering soldiers. It was used because of the way in which soldiers were drafted in the "Russian time." Only a certain number of men from each village were required to become soldiers. So while not every male had to be a soldier, every male had to register for the draft. Those whose numbers were picked had to serve in the military. The others were free. After the formality of the "drawing," some were happy that they didn't have to join the ranks, and others were sad that they would be away from home for four years, to live among strangers. It was natural that the happy men and the sad ones would meet in a tavern to drink to each other. On this day they went home heavily burdened. In later years, the Russian and the Rumanian armies no longer used this method of recruiting. It was not practical and all who were of military age had to serve in the army through a regular mustering. The term "drawing," however, remained.

On the day before the mustering, the village mayor assembled the new recruits in front of the town hall. It was ascertained whether each person on the recruit list was present and accounted for. After this verification was completed, the mayor said a few words to the recruits. He encouraged them all to be clean and sober and above all to keep order in their barracks. He also exhorted them to get along with the recruits from the other villages. In closing he informed them at what time they should come to the Town Hall the next morning in order to start their journey. With these directives from the mayor, the recruits were dismissed. Proud that they were now in the ranks of the fully authorized, the recruits left the assembly place. They all went calmly and quietly into their homes.

Next morning at the appointed time the men appeared in their best suits at the same place. The recorder came and presented the list of those present. At the same time, the teams of horses and wagons came, which will take the recruits to the mustering town. The moment came for the men to quickly put the tri-color ribbon (the three-color ribbon of the Rumanian flag: red, yellow, and blue) onto the rim of their caps. This showed that they were recruits. Suddenly one saw the musician, the drummer, and triangle players. This trio went to the first wagon and the others followed after. The wagons were set in motion. The mayor traveled in the lead wagon with the village recorder. Directly behind them sat the musicians. The leader pressed the accordion as much as he could. The drummer thought his instrument was the most important and the triangle player held the iron in one hand while he hit a strong beat with the other. And so they began. For variety the recruits sang soldier songs, such as "Dawn, dawn, in the morning I must leave here," etc.

They arrived at the mustering place and the first was the examination. Almost all are found to be fit for duty. Only the sick, lame, blind and those unable to bear arms are released; the feeble were exempted from service. Satisfied that all had gone well, the mayor invited the assembled recruits to a lunch. Each soldier received a good quarter liter of wine but not restricted to only one. Soon they were

all cheerful, becoming less self-conscious and more talkative than they had been before. The mayor now announced that it was time to return home. It often happened that the different villages would bicker among themselves. These occasions arose because of the bantering and teasing which passed between the different villager groups.

The recruits from Beresina were called “the powerful,” because they were always ready to fight. Those from Borodino were named the “Siebenzehner”(2). The men from Lichtentaler made fun of those from Sarata:

O, you fools from Sarata ride in carts,  
You travel far to catch a mouse, etc.

Then the villagers from Sarata called the Lichtentalers “frogs” and “frog catchers” and so on. As mentioned, such teasing in these circumstances quite often led to fights. Therefore, the mayor wanted to leave as soon as possible. On the way home the talking, singing, and yelling were done with much energy. After arriving back in the village, the mayor once again exhorted the recruits to maintain order. From the Town Hall the music rang throughout the village. The singing of different folk songs and soldier songs was a nice distraction. Now and then the recruits would stop off at an inn and eat “Saures” (3), “Schafkaese” (brinza) (4), also “Gansebrustchen” (5), “Rauchenfleisch” (smoked meat) and the different sausages; the latter were certain to be available. Many evenings were ended in such a manner and often they had to spend the night with a friend.

In this manner they displayed for the first time the feeling of manhood that was growing in their minds. Many years later they would still remember the day of the “drawing.” In the last years this was no longer the case.

## Reporting for Duty

After the “drawing,” the young men spent about another year at home. After this space of time came the call to active duty. Almost all had to report for duty on the same day. But until that day there had to be celebrations. In the final week and a half the recruits and the young women got together to fellowship and dance. These days of freedom were necessary. Each evening there were get-togethers. The day to report for duty came nearer. On the last day, they went to all their relatives, acquaintances and friends to bid them good-bye. Each gave the departing man a gold piece wishing him good luck and the best of health.

The next day they traveled to the corps area headquarters in the county town. Many people came for the departure. The parents, siblings, friends, also the spouses, accompanied the recruits to the train station, which was full of people as at no other time of the entire year. Slowly as the train began to move, the sound of the song rang out:

“Sad, that we must say good-bye” and so forth.

Yes, they had to say good-bye. The men nodded to each other and wiped away some tears. It was the first time that the young men had to leave their homes—to leave not knowing where they were going and how things would go. Not all had mastered the language of the land (Rumania) and so the military duty for many of the “sons of Schwabia” was difficult. At the command headquarters they were immediately faced with the rough soldier language. One Rumanian curse word followed another. Accompanied by a soldier they were led to the units responsible in such cases.

It did not take long before they were accustomed to the rough barracks environment. It was the same in the German barracks. By faithful and conscientious performance of duty, the recruits soon enjoyed kind, friendly treatment. Certainly there were punishments, but it’s also true that they were shown preference because of their punctuality and scrupulousness.

Many friendships were formed. It happened quite often that the Rumanian commanders would keep in touch with the discharged soldiers of Swabian background. It was a mutual befriending. The men became closer, learning to know each other and treasure each other’s friendship. Although it was at

times harsh and difficult, many fondly remember their time of soldiering.

Translation notes:

- (1) The meaning of this word is not known.
- (2) “the 17ers”—most likely they were born in 1917
- (3) pickled tomatoes, peppers, and cucumbers
- (4) sheep cheese—Schafkaese (in German), brinza (in Romanian)
- (5) geese breast (usually smoked)