

Women's Association in Arzis

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Note: In the Evangelical Lutheran Church where the translator lived among Germans from Russia in South Central North Dakota, the English title, in the 1940s, for *Frauenverein* was *Ladies' Aid*. It will be translated *Women's Association* in this article. Any information within [brackets] are comments by the translator.

[Translation Begins]

Women's Association in Arzis

by Ilse Meyer

The Women's Associations in our German Evangelical Lutheran congregations in Bessarabia were an institution for the cultivation of charity. In the parish, the leadership of the Women's Association was one of the duties of the wife of the pastor, in the other parishes it was usually the wife of the sexton-teacher.

The working methods of the Women's Associations were the same everywhere. Therefore, my memories of the Women's Association in Arzis, from the period of 1913 until 1935, will certainly bring back to the memory of some a similar image of their local Women's Association and, I hope, will find an echo in all grateful hearts that are ready to joyfully serve their neighbor.

In Arzis, from October to March, women and girls who volunteered for it gathered once a week for three hours in the parsonage to do handicrafts. There was sewing, embroidery, crocheting and knitting. All kinds of handicrafts were worked on. There were practical things and artistic handicrafts in silk, wool and cotton, which cost a lot of time and effort, but they were done with pleasure. Sometimes, there was even a competition, and it was a pleasure to provide new works and new patterns. During the working hours, Christian books and papers were read aloud. Each worker took her needlework home, and it was not uncommon for her to be able to deliver it finished the next time. So, a whole number of different handicrafts accumulated in the course of the association's year. The older women in the community also took part in it; mostly they knitted or sewed at home and made practical things.

In the spring, when the field work began, our Women's Association concluded its activities with an auction or raffle of the handicrafts made. A suitable opportunity was always chosen on a Sunday afternoon, so that the people could all come. But this caused a struggle with our community people at the beginning, who saw in it a desecration of Sunday, and first had to convince themselves that this was not about business, but about a charitable purpose. The very strict among them did not appear at our auction, but it happened that this one or that one later brought his mite for the Fund for the Poor.

When the auction was over, about a week later, all members of the Women's Association were invited to the so-called "farewell coffee" in the parsonage. At the same time, the report of income and expenditure was given, and then we proceeded to the distribution of our income. A certain sum of money always remained in the treasury of the Women's Association; new material was bought in autumn to be able to set up new handicrafts. During the meeting, various suggestions were made and then, as far as possible, all the emergencies known to us were taken into consideration. Above all, it was our Deaconess Institution in Sarata, whose division for male foster-children was located in Arzis, that received the largest share, then the Support Fund, which cared for poor municipalities, was considered, then the Mission to the Heathen and the needy of their own municipality. At Christmas, we organized a Christmas gift giving for poor children or we went to the houses of the poorest families and brought them food and donated underclothing and clothes. We have also supported some pupils and students who received their education at the Werner School in Sarata and on their studies in Germany.

In the time of need after the First World War, a number of addresses from Germany were sent to us by acquaintances, which we distributed among ourselves and then packages of fat with roasted meat were sent to them.

We were pleased that the connection with the motherland, which had not been broken since the First World War, also extended to our Women's Associations. We once received a letter from the congregation of Kirchheim an Teck in Württemberg, from which many of our Swabians had emigrated, with the request for information about German Church Women's Work abroad. It was in 1926. We had just celebrated the 25th Anniversary of our Women's Association and I was happy to comply with the request and reported on work sessions and celebrations.

On the occasion of this festival, a photograph of our working group was taken and this picture was then given a place of honor on the chest of drawers in the "best room" in many houses. To commemorate our anniversary, we presented our congregation with a new altar cloth, baptismal tablecloth and a covering over the Holy Communion vessels, all made of white linen cloth in rich Richelieu hemstitch and crochet work carried out by the skilful hands of our members. At every high feast time, this beautiful set was displayed on the altar in our church.

We did not celebrate our festival with splendor (*prunkvoll*), but beautifully and harmoniously. The preparations for this were made jointly by our circle. Each member donated his contribution to the feast, and we also received many gifts from our friends and patrons in the community. In those days there was a joyful and industrious work in our parsonage. Many a song and cheerful words sounded during the work from nothing but happy hearts.

On the 25th of March, on the Annunciation to Mary—this day was a church festival day for us—our Jubilee Celebration took place. The program was: In the morning—church service; In the afternoon—the auction of handicrafts; In the evening, in the school hall, the special celebration with the festival meal.

The whole community took part in our feast day, and in the afternoon the large school class, where we had exhibited our handicrafts, was fully occupied. The auction could begin. As auctioneer, we had asked a suitable man who knew how to spice things up with humor. He did very well, everyone was completely involved, and in a few hours the exhibition was empty and our coffers were full! We parted very satisfactorily to meet again in the evening in the school hall with the invited guests.

We all stood to welcome the church choir and sat down at festively decorated tables. The youngest among us served the food, which was rich and finely prepared. Speeches and talks of a serious and cheerful nature alternated with the singing of church and folk songs. They commemorated the founding of our Women's Association in 1894 and the difficult war years, in which there was nothing to buy in our country, so that the Women's Association was forced to stop its work, and thanked God for all the good success in the course of 25 years of work. Everything depends on God's blessing,— that was the keynote of our festival. In animated and joyful conversation, the hours passed much too quickly for us, and we parted with the wish for further blessed and joyful work for the benefit of our fellow human beings.

*Ich denke gern an jene schönen Tage
Aus einer mir vertrauten, jetzt versunk'nen Welt,
Und dankerfüllt ich immer wieder sage:
Es war Dein Auftrag, Herr, Dein weites Ackerfeld,
Zu dem wir Deutsche einst gerufen waren,
Dein Wort zu tun in hundertfünfundzwanzig Jahren.*

I like to think of those beautiful days
From a world familiar to me, now lost,
And with thanksgiving, I keep saying:
It was Your mission, Lord, Your vast field,
To which we Germans were once called,
To do Your word in 125 years.

[Translation Ends]