Fellowship of the (Sausage) Ring

A Meditation on *Wascht*

By Ron Vossler

In our family, there is no clear boundary between love and sausage. So when my youngest brother—our family's official sausage aficionado—called the night before our annual family reunion, I immediately knew why: to remind me to bring the sausage.

"You haven't even placed the order yet?" he asked, incredulous.

Yes, I admitted, out of sloth, and forgetfulness, I'd forgotten.

"We've never had a family reunion without sausage," he said, deflated, and I could hear the disappointment in his voice. "But I'm hoping to see you, and that sausage, tomorrow night at Mom's place."

Early that next morning, as the rising sun balanced on the horizon, and my car barreled along the interstate, I placed my guilty, last-minute cell-phone call—to the grocery store in my old hometown of Wishek, North Dakota.

"Vossler?" a heavily accented male voice said. "Ok. We'll haf your sausich ready at about tree dis afternoon. All tirty fife rings."

With catastrophe thus averted, and the promise of sausage ahead, I drifted in reverie as I drove. I thought of the thick accent of the fellow taking my order; of the deep imprint of history in his speech, of the archaic sounds of our ancestors – German-speaking villagers from enclaves in Ukraine who'd settled the Dakota prairie a century ago.

I pondered the conjunction of new cell-phone technology and old-world sausage. I even chanted the odd sounding foods of my own family's cuisine – those strange syllables of my childhood that after I left home for good at eighteen, I'd rarely heard – *shwatamaga, kholadetz schuffnudala, holupsi, kuchen, schlitzkuechla*, and, of course, *wascht*, which is our own Dakota German word for sausage.

Heading west on the interstate at Fargo, I pondered *Wascht*. The high German word for sausage is *Wurst*. Once, in Berlin, Germany, I'd heard that word pronounced *deutlich*, exactly, the speaker shaping his lips just so for each letter in *Wurst* – the "u" and "t" and "s". In our German dialect we shed such niceties. We say the word quickly. No lingering: For Dakota Germans, *Wascht* is a quick sausage of sounds, all mashed together. As if we can't wait to snap the sausage casing with a fork tine. Or pop that first pagan chunk into your mouth. Or *fress* – that's the Dakota German word which means to eat animal-like, ravenously.

By the far edge of the rough drift prairie of Central Dakota, I thought about the origin of *Wascht*, on the Ukrainian steppe and on the Volga River; how the German farmers settling there two centuries ago—so far from man, but so close to God—experimented with ways to preserve their meat, finally settling upon ring sausage, upon *Wascht*. Each village, each locality had its special recipe, its own delectable varieties and flavors; even now, descendants of Dakota Germans in south-central North Dakota still are trying to determine which grocery store – in Wishek, or Ashley, or Napoleon – makes the very best sausage. As I drove, I kept thinking about all the heavenly varieties

of sausage, and that word heavenly led me to ponder how sausage often competed with spiritual matters.

I'd witnessed it myself: some mouth-watering soul, stuttering a meal-time prayer, with a ring of hot fry sausage perched on a platter just beneath his nose. At such a juncture, with the sausage emanating all its delights, who, pray tell, has strength to focus on God's manifold gifts?

Such situations explain, I think, the origin of those truncated Dakota German mealtime prayers, like the much-used "*Abba, leiba, Vater*, Amen." Such prayers are long enough to render the Creator His due and, also, brief enough to not impede any quick dinner-time passage—hand to mouth—of the first delectable piece of sausage. There is also a worldly addition to that prayer, where the praying person quickly appends an English phrase, just after the "Amen": "Now pass the *Wascht*."

Midmorning, I drove under a high sky. That's what we called it in my baseball-playing days. No clouds, the late July heavens the color of washed-out "prairie *hosen*"; which is our prairie parlance for blue jeans. That got me to thinking about old words, how they are conduits to the past, to old memories. I thought of Proust, a famous French writer who in his novel showed how, through our own primal senses, like taste, we are able to gain, or regain, our past. That happens each time with my first bite of sausage. Maybe it's all the grease, which slides open the valves of time for me, but with the first taste of sausage, kaleidoscopic images flash in my mind of holiday gatherings at my grandparents' home in the 1950s.

It was a time when food was love, and the best of food was our beloved *Wascht*, curled like a sleeping giant on my grandmother's favorite platter. Once, I watched my grandfather making sausage in his basement, feeding a mixture of venison and pork into his *Waschtspritz*, his meat grinder. I watched the pale casings bulge there in his fingers, ever so mysteriously, as they filled with meat. That was my own born-again experience; after that, I became a true believer, having been present at the Big Bang of sausage creation, Dakota German style.

Our family albums are thin on actual photos of people, but invariably include a number of snapshots of sausages, of sausage making, of bib-overalled farmers standing around tubs, proudly displaying large sausage rings for the camera. The photos—all black and white—date from the time when farm families in rural Dakota townships still butchered communally.

For nearly three-fourths of a century in America, maybe longer, Dakota Germans worked together; they built homes, barns, sheds, pole barns; they threshed; they hauled bundles; they dug wells; and they did all of that back-breaking labor of the prairie frontier together. As one old timer explained: "It was a hard life. But you were never lonely. Only if you wanted to be."

At Valley City, sculpted buttes gave way to the lowlands of the James River Valley, and then past Jamestown, a two-lane highway carried me south; it wound around a series of small, blue glacially-formed lakes, and deep into a swath of wetlands, home country for me – the large triangle-shaped area of Central Dakota settled by Germans-from-Ukraine, what I've often heard called "The Sauerkraut Curtain."

I remembered traveling this same road decades earlier, as a long-haired, back-packed hitchhiker, when a local farmer of German from Ukraine background pulled over and beckoned me into the back of his pickup. Handing me a jackknife, he motioned with a nod of his chin at a paper bag of groceries propped against a couple of hay bales in the back of the pick-up: "Yah," he said. "Cut yourself a chonk of dat sausich when you get hongry."

That kindness to strangers – I knew even then – was common to my own ethnic group; a tradition of food-giving to

guests for the trip home, rooted in Biblical traditions. There is a verse in *Hebrews* which says a person should entertain guests just as they would Jesus, for even the least of these may be an angel, or even the Savior himself, returned to earth.

That got me thinking about a family story, about how late one night in our small town hospital, not long after I was born, my grandpa lay dying, so he thought; in a dream, Jesus, *der Heiland*, the Savior, came to him, and stood in the midst of a family gathering, not unlike the reunion where I was headed. That dream-Jesus, speaking in German dialect, blessed all of grandpa's prairie progeny—all his children and his grandchildren, those born and unborn; and then this Jesus imparted His wisdom: that within the whirlpool of life on earth, to love one another was, of all gifts, the greatest, the most precious, until He, Jesus, drew us to Him.

Grandpa awoke so blissful and refreshed from the dream that for an instant he was certain he'd gone to heaven: not long after, discharged from the hospital—though he was illiterate, or nearly so—he took up pen and paper, to painstakingly describe that dream, using a pastiche of slowly sounded out, phonetic dialect German and English phrases – a message to the future that I still have.

Such memories carried me to my home county. On my old hometown's edge, I stopped at the grocery store, a long, low building, where at the meat counter in back, my order, the box of sausage—thirty five rings—was waiting. I maneuvered that box—balanced on the wobbly wheeled grocery cart—through the familiar narrow aisles.

Someday, I promised myself, as I wheeled that sausage to the checkout counter, I would make a documentary film, chronicling the role of sausage, of *Wascht*, in the pioneer life of the Dakota Germans. The film's title? Why I'd call it: "The Fellowship of the Sausage Ring."

The film's focus, I figured, should be Georgie Just, Wishek's premiere sausage master. I'd caught a glimpse of his grey head, bobbing in the meat department; but I'd deigned not to bother him; he looked as if he had enough on his hands – or, better, in his hands---busily plunging his bare arms up to his elbows, mixing another batch of sausage meat.

I read somewhere that using his own secret recipe, Georgie sold an average of seventeen hundred pounds of sausage each week. To vacationers who crammed their ice chests full; to funeral attendees as comfort food; to aged couples at high school reunions, hungry for reminders of their prairie childhood. And also, as someone once confided to me, to a soft-hearted retired farmer, for his weekly trip to his farmstead, to feed fresh sausage rings to the last living creatures there, a bevy of wild barn cats. The record sausage sale–3,845 pounds—came during

Grandpa Fetzer, Wishek, North Dakota
about January 1959

Photo submitted by Ron Vossler

Wascht

my hometown's annual fall festival, *Sauerkraut Day*. Surely such a prodigious amount qualified sausage-maker Georgie as official "Lord of the *Wascht*."

That box of sausage deposited in my car's back seat for the final leg of my trip, I drove the quiet streets of my old hometown. On main-street, the old Herr Mercantile Store still stood, a two-story brick building in bad repair, its long, plate-glass display windows now boarded up. I remembered farmers who came to town during the week to repair equipment, to pick up parts; and on those days, or on Saturday nights, they'd buy sausage from the store's meat-counter, then seat themselves on wobbly benches propped against that storefront; there, they'd eat Dakota German fast-food: sausage folded into a slice of "boughten" white bread---a real treat then.

I drove by the abandoned house where I'd grown up; across the street, my grandparents' home—where Jesus made that cameo appearance in grandpa's dream, and the basement where I'd watched grandpa making sausage—was now gone, torn down. "*So ischs halt*," was what I told myself in German, said aloud. "That's just how it is, how life is." The sound of those old dialect words eased the sting of loss, of change. I departed my hometown then, taking a series of two-lane highways, in the direction of Aberdeen, across the North Dakota border, where my mother now lived.

Golden stubble of fields flashed by. Ring-necked pheasants skittered along the roadside. The strong scent of the thirty five rings permeating my car, I kept thinking about *Wascht*. I thought about that retired farmer feeding rings to his barn cats. I thought about how, even in old letters, *Wascht* was mentioned. Or, better, its absence. Those messages from German villages in Ukraine to relatives in Dakota described communist terror, and how in the early 1920s their villages, and family larders, were completely cleaned out, in what has been called the greatest plunder operation in history, as all livestock, clothing, tools, and grain were removed. "They even stole all our *Wascht*," one exasperated villager wrote his relatives.

Late afternoon, I toted the box of sausages into my mother's condominium in Aberdeen. Even from down the hallway I heard the gabble of excited voices, of our entire clan—my elderly parents, my four brothers, their families, three generations of *Wascht*-eaters—all gathered for our annual family reunion.

First thing, after hugging my mother, I stacked the cool sausage rings from the box into my mother's fridge. My youngest brother – the *Wascht* aficionado – watched with face beaming, as if I was parceling out Schliemann's gold from Troy, nodded in approval that I'd remembered the sausage.

That evening in the city park, we perched on picnic tables. We prayed. We gobbled sausage. We smacked our lips. We blinked in the warm sun. We spooned up mom's spiced potato salad. We wiped grease off our faces. When a stiff wind blew up the edges of our plates, blew our hair back—if we had any left to blow—one of us make the remark, more blasé than bitter: "Typical North Dakota picnic."

Back at my mom's condo, we talked into the night. We drew a map, street by street, of our old hometown. We argued over who once lived where. The next day we doddered across a broad expanse of grass at the city park, playing croquet. My brothers and I—athletes well past our prime—laughed that our only balancing act now was not spilling the food off our paper plates. My older brother, who once boasted a yard vertical jump in basketball, gimped around on his bad legs. He waved his croquet mallet at a gopher that he'd spotted in the grass. Then, as the German word for that animal flashed into his mind, he said: "Isn't that thing called an *Erdhaas*?" My eighty-seven-year-old step-dad, a stoic farmer, dapper in his straw hat, placed his palm flat against the trunk of a thick elm tree, to steady himself against frequent dizzy

spells, and patiently awaited his turn with the croquet mallet.

That evening, with periodic trips to the fridge for leftovers– i.e. more sausage—we told improbable, yet true, stories. The brother who'd seen the *Erdhaas*, related how years earlier after surgery to repair his torn Achilles tendon, a nurse asked what foreign language he spoke. None that he knew of, he said, propped up in his hospital bed. The nurse showed him the words he'd muttered, which she'd scrawled on a pad as he'd drifted into unconsciousness from anesthesia before the surgery. They were German dialect from his childhood—"*Es brennt gerade wie Feur*—It burns just like fire."—words that he said he didn't even know he knew.

"What else do you know that you think you don't know," someone quipped.

At that point, my younger brother, an engineer in Denver, and his wife, told their ghost story. It was true, they said. The day before, on the way to the reunion, they had driven gravel roads, trying to locate our grandmother's grave in an isolated cemetery along the North and South Dakota border. They'd gotten lost. Not a building in sight. Just prairie. Wheat fields and pastures stretching to the horizon. Then on a rise ahead of them, what looked like an elderly, dark-shawled woman, beckoned to them, forward. They drove on, thinking to ask that person directions. Over the rise, the lady had disappeared; there was nothing in sight except the cemetery, right ahead, where our grandma was buried.

"Didn't grandma always wear a dark shawl like that?" my younger brother asked.

The room fell silent. Everyone glanced sideways as the authentic prairie ghost story sank in. Yes, we decided, somehow our own grandmother, lonely for a visit—for some *Maistub*, as prairie visits were once called—had dispensed supernatural guidance to her grandson.

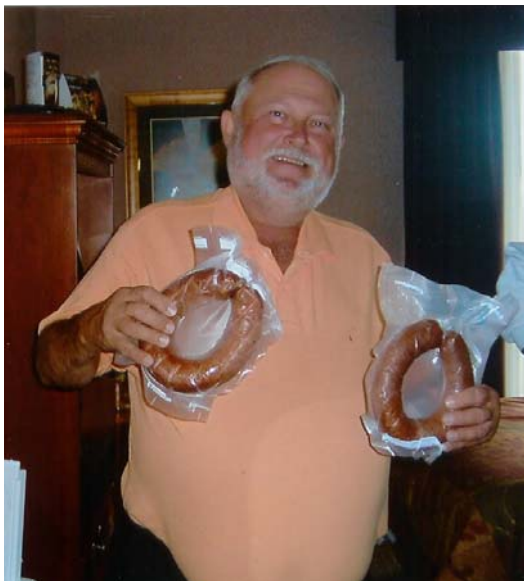
"Someone should write these stories down," my oldest brother said, the one who doesn't like to read, not since he'd been impaled by a high school English teacher upon the interminable prose of the novel *A Tale of Two Cities*.

"I did write them down," my mother said, reminding her oldest son of her anecdote book she'd just completed. "Or didn't you read the copy I sent you?"

That next day we were in the city park again. At one point, my niece, a slim high school sophomore with a strong resemblance to our grandmother in her wedding photo, circa 1915, leaned against her father's truck. She delved sunflower seeds from a large plastic bag propped against her middle, discreetly cupping a hand to her mouth to discard the shells.

"That's called *gneiffering* in our German dialect," I said. "Chewing sunflower seeds."

Did she know, I added, that our ancestors in Ukraine learned that habit from the Jews in Odessa? That in the 1950s the farmers came to Wishek on Saturday nights to shop, chewing sunflower seeds all the while spitting husks onto the wooden floor of the store? Did she know that the depth of seed husks swept up on Saturday nights indicated whether or not business had



Mike Bailey, originally from Wishek, displays Wishek Wascht
2006 GRHS Convention, Portland
Photo submitted by Ron Vossler

been good? She kept chewing, nodding occasionally. I heard myself, as I droned on, sounding too much like all those grizzled, wind-scoured relatives of my own youth, telling stories about the prairie past, hoping that sheer dint of repetition ensured their survival into future generations.

At some point my younger brother, the *Wascht* aficionado, began to describe how to grill sausage. He'd just built himself a new deck, primarily, I felt certain, so he'd have a place to grill sausages. It was the most excited I'd seen him in a while. He stood in the hot sun in the park, waving his thick fingers. First, slice an entire ring in halves, he said, then splay it open on the grill, splash liberally with a few jiggers of Jack Daniels whiskey, then grill to absolute perfection.

Now I know that *Wascht* is not the healthiest of foods. But let me defend its virtues. At one point, I'd sung the praises of sausage to one of my friends, who in turn berated me unmercifully about its heavy fat content. Didn't I realize it could create health problems? That's true, no doubt. Yet I knew, also, there is also much of immortality, or the hidden sign for it, involved in sausage; for each ring, however inaccurate that term, is curved in a large, tear-drop shape that takes the exact form of an *Ankh* – which is the Egyptian symbol of eternal life.

And *Wascht*, so my physics professor friend has informed me, intrudes upon the realm of science. A ring of sausage, he said, has a stiff, yet flexible shape; and both ends, which touch in an inimitable way—either wired or tied together—form a special angle: which is a fundamental constant of nature that takes the name of the Russian scientist who discovered it, Timoshenko's beam equation.

By the final reunion day, thirty-five rings of *Wascht* were devoured or packed away in ice coolers for our various homeward journeys. We stood in the warm August sun in the parking lot of my mother's condominium, the aging members of an old prairie family, all marveling at the fleeting passage of time, that another reunion had come and gone, wind through the grass of time.

Saying goodbye was always hardest; embraces might be final, like with my mother, still our family's moral authority at eighty three, but now grown so frail, so that in hugging her, her bones folded together, gently, like a small bird's.

As I drove from the parking lot, my youngest brother, the *Wascht* aficionado, delved into his cooler, and holding several sausage rings aloft and twined in his thick fingers, brandished them in triumph; and in doing so, he struck almost exactly the same pose as our own ancestor in that butchering day photo of half a century earlier. For some miles afterward, my brother's joyous shout still echoed in my ears: "Ashes to ashes," he'd said in parting. "And *Wascht* to *Wascht*."

The scent of *Wascht* still permeated the interior of my car, as I retraced my journey through the Central Dakotas. I passed lush stands of corn. Serene pastures. Sheared off, golden-stubbled wheat fields flashed by. Old unpainted barns leaned their bulks into the wind. As I drove I wondered how many reunions still remained for us, the last of the Dakota German dialect speakers—and how long until the final puny voice of our clan was extinguished?

By the time I'd arrived at my home, to where I now live, I had more questions than answers. But I knew only one thing, really: I knew that until all of our allotted days spooled themselves out in raptures of futurity; until we've all fallen back on the earth like wind-blown sheaves, then drawn to the roseate heavens like early morning dew—which is to say, until the end finally meets its beginning—until then, at least, until all of us lay curled asleep upon our Savior's breast, there would still always be *Wascht*.

Ron Vossler is a published writer, university instructor, and recipient of several fellowships and awards. He is a member of the International Committee of the Ukrainian World Congress. Ron was raised in Wishek, North Dakota, and now lives in East Grand Forks, Minnesota. His website is located at http://www.ronvossler.com/.