

Sunday Customs in Bessarabia

Translated by Darla Lee, with special assistance given by Dr. Elvire Necker-Eberhardt for some specific words in this article. Translation project coordinated by Dwayne Janke.

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When our forefathers immigrated from Württemberg to their new home in the country of their choice, they brought their customs and practices with them. These traditions were passed down from generation to generation. The young are always coming along and are raised up with the customs and practices of the parents. Just as the old would leave the house and land as an inheritance for their children, so also with the customs and practices. This was always the connecting link between the old and the new generations. The common customs and practices were the cement which held people together in a foreign land, their new Bessarabian home. They showed the difference between themselves and the other peoples. These customs were particularly retained in their purest form by the common folk, by the faithful and honest farmers. We, their heirs, can and should be proud of them for doing this. The bond with the soil allowed us to keep and protect these true processions up until the time of resettlement in Germany. Afterward our people were scattered all over Germany and Europe and we are in danger of losing these customs and practices. The faithful retention of these traditions has already brought reproaches that we might pull the culture backward, especially in the small towns. This should not deter us or discourage us—just the opposite—the poet says: “What you have inherited from your fathers, earn, so that you can possess it.” These traditions should be holy to us. Everything can be taken from us, we have lost all. As the poor, we remain poor. Goethe said: “Poverty itself makes one proud when it is undeserved.” These precious customs and practices, no one can steal from us. They continue to live when we pass them on to our children.

Therefore we will not waste any time, but proceed to explain how we practised, preserved and fostered these traditions in our households.

Sundays

The sun shines brighter on Sundays than on a workday. Everything seems more beautiful on the Sunday morning, brightened by the warm sunshine. In the early morning the yards and streets, especially the footpaths are swept and strewn with yellow sand, “house sand.” The white plastered walls and houses seem prettier, cleaner and brighter than normal on Sunday morning. A general quietness prevails over the yards, streets, fields and meadows, in gardens, vineyards, and fields. It seems as though God elevated Sunday to be more special than all other days. The farmer arises, puts on his best clean work clothes and cares for his horses and other animals. The animals also appear to know that it is a Sunday or holiday. They can rest and are not required to do the hard work.

The farmer goes to his house gate. He sees his neighbor and nods a friendly morning greeting. After a few exchanges they meet at the wall to discuss the past work week; what they have accomplished and what must be done in the coming week.

In the meantime, the youngest son, who is in charge of cleaning shoes and getting water for the mother, has finished his chores. The daughter helps her mother in the kitchen preparing breakfast. Everything for the noontime meal is also prepared. The father is called.

After grace is said or a chapter from the Bible is read, the family eats breakfast. Everyone cleans up. The Sunday clothes are brought out. Everything shines on Sunday. The bells ring from the high church steeple. The bells invite the people to church services with a special chime. The farmer and his wife with joyful, earnest faces walk silently toward the church. The children follow them. Each carries a songbook under the arm. It is an inspiring Sunday morning picture. The people seem very different

today. The callused hands rest from days of burden and heat. Everyone looks festive. The bells ring a second time. They encourage haste. Those who live further away must quicken their steps in order to arrive on time and get a seat. In troops, the people stream into the church. Three bells sound "together." Soon the last note sounds. After the last people enter the church, the door is closed. While silence reigns in the village, the organ begins its weighty tones. The congregation slowly sings along. The vast steppes give people a big heart. The farmer must go about his work "slowly and deliberately." So also is his song. The sextant or the pastor gives a pious sermon. The "Our Father" is said and prayers given for the sick or housebound who cannot attend. The service ends, and everyone stands for a short prayer. As quietly as people had come in, they quietly leave the church. Silent and thoughtful, the people return home.

The daughter or the son has already fed the animals. The meal, usually noodle soup and roast chicken, is steaming on the table and awaits the return of the family. The father takes off his Sunday coat. He says the prayer and everyone sits. No one speaks and everyone looks at the father, who spreads a napkin in his lap. He then ladles soup into his bowl and gives the ladle to the mother. The others do the same. Nothing is said during the meal. Everyone finishes and waits for the father. When he arises, the family stands. He says a prayer of thanksgiving.

Everyone leaves the table except the father. He reads the "Deutsche Zeitung Bessarabiens" or the "Volksblatt." He smokes a cigarette or a pipe while reading. In the meantime, the wife finishes her work in the kitchen. Then the curtains are closed and it is naptime. How pleasant this is for the parents who have toiled and slaved the whole week. Hardly ever do they get a full night's sleep. They must work hard almost every day and night.

At this time, the daughter sweeps the kitchen, and again cleans up the dust. She brings in some pretty flowers from the garden in front of the house and places them in a vase on the table. First however, she lays one of her lovely-embroidered tablecloths over the table.

The youngsters go out. Father and mother get up. The hottest part of the day is past. The father now feeds the horses, then again puts on his Sunday clothes for vespers. He takes a bench and places it in the shadows of an acacia tree or along the village wall. It is not long before neighbors, friends, or other acquaintances come along. At first there is not a lot of conversation, but after a while they become more talkative. They discuss the on-going work, news of the day, the contents of the newspapers, and other things. They also eat some sunflower seeds. The afternoon is soon over. They all return home. The farmer and his wife take their bench and go inside.

The farmer paces in the living room, already planning work for the next day. In the course of the next week he has to help his brother-in-law lay a floor that he has built. It goes without saying that he will help him. During this time, his son feeds all the animals.

The farmer then goes out and sees that everything is "in order." The prayer bells ring. He stops in the middle of the yard and removes his hat and says a prayer. This law was instituted in place of another Sunday service in Württemberg in 1639.

The evening meal is finished.

The youth have disappeared; the youngest ones are taken to bed. The farmer still stands a while longer talking with a couple of men at the village gate. After a short time the group breaks up. The farmer goes in to bed, because early next morning hard work awaits him.

The youth up to 18 years old are free from studies in the hot summer months. Therefore, they celebrate on Sunday like the older youth.

After the midday meal, about 3 o'clock, the older boys and girls gather together. They have built up companionships within their age groups. They all meet in a small wooded area. Someone brings along an accordion, a "Blosbalga." The player takes his "box" and the music begins to sound out. One dance follows another. Happy and pleasant describes the entire fellowship. Now and then a song is whistled or stamped out on the grass.

Someone else tells a couple of short jokes or anecdotes, which cause the whole group to break into laughter. Those who weary of dancing sing a few folksongs. These songs are sung very slowly and

dragged out. A certain air of melancholy is pronounced showing that they are “children of the steppes.”

The whole group then goes to the train station since a train would soon be arriving. The outgoing and incoming passengers are observed. The ladies wearing make-up are looked at disdainfully. The conductor calls out “gata,” all aboard! The Rumanian-Akkerman railroad was built in 1914. Everyone boards quickly. The train starts to move and the train station becomes empty. Since it is yet early, the youth walk through the meadows to the vineyards. On the way, they pick beautiful field flowers. Each puts a flower in a buttonhole. They then must turn around in order to arrive home at the proper time. At the outskirts of the village they say friendly good-byes and slowly walk to their houses.

After the evening meal, the young people gather again on street corners. They sing and dance again. Some will sit on a bench, a “Hofbaenkle,” and talk. From all sides one hears the sounds of lovely melodies.

The young mothers sit along another street wall. They hold their 3- or 4-year-olds on the lap. The children become restless and the mothers must entertain them. They sit the child on the knee and let them “ride” (mother moves her knees up and down) while singing:

Hop along, hop along, horsie
Riding past the castle,
Looking at the ladies—
One is spinning silk,
Another winds it up.
One wears a red skirt
Another one is a hairy he-goat.

Hop along, hop along rider,
If he falls he doesn't cry,
He falls in a ditch,
And meets the ravens,
He falls in the swamp,
And goes “plop”!

When the “plop” is sung, the mother almost lets the child fall as she straightens out her legs. This is wonderful fun for the children and they begin to laugh with delight.

The 5- and 6 year-old children play games in the street in the evening hours. Children of the same age in the neighborhood meet together and the running, jumping, yelling and crying begins. They soon get tired of it.

They form a circle, join hands and walk around singing:

Rings, rings, rows,
The goose lays eggs,
Sitting behind an elder bush.
Everyone cries out “Husch, husch, husch!”

At “Husch” all fall down and the laughter can be heard far into the village. They play other games, souballa, pinball, and rounders, etc. To describe all of them would take too long. All at once the mother's call is heard. Some children obey immediately, others want to stay out. When this is not allowed, the happiness changes into tears. “After the laughter, comes the crying”—yes, the mother is consistent. She cannot allow her child to remain any longer in the yard or on the streets. The children have to get to bed as the next morning everyone must arise early. It is not possible for the children to sleep longer than the grown-ups.

As the farmer looks over the village, gardens and meadows at sunset on Sunday, he sees the blood-red sunset on the horizon and is gripped by a special feeling, an awe for all before him. A wonder fills his heart and involuntarily he removes his hat and says, “God, how manifold and great are your

works. You have wisely put everything in order.”

For a long time, he stands deep in thought wondering at the peace, the splendor and grandeur of the village and the fields. Today one remembers this picture of the homeland and is taken with an unspeakable longing; a nostalgia for the fields of home. It pulls at the heartstrings—secretly a tear comes to the eye and unbidden the lips speak: “Homeland, oh, homeland, how far away you are!”