

Bessarabian Wedding Customs

Translated by Darla Lee through a project coordinated by Dwayne Janke. Thanks to Dr. Elvire Necker-Eberhardt for assistance with some specific words in this article.

Translated from the book, Wie's Daheim War—Der Schicksalsweg der Bessarabiendeutschen, by J. Becker, published 1950.

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The Engagement

Opposite sexes attract each other. This is true the whole world over, and so it is with us also. It is in the young people's fellowship that young man and women become acquainted. They learn to respect and honor one another. The girls are very shy. They do not show it if they have an inclination toward one or another of the young men, or if they are indeed, in love. The young men are just as reserved as the girls. One seldom finds one who is eloquent. He is concerned that his advances might be rebuffed. Thus he is silent. Instead he waits for his "sweetheart" at the farmyard gate in the evening to take her to a dance or to a fellowship. He talks with her more often than the other girls. Everyone notices his behavior. They both feel, they both know, that they are in love. Still they do not declare their love. They say something affectionate to each other and blush terribly. The words stick in their throats. The first of May or at Whitsunday, the young man will invite his intended to a Mayday or Whitsunday festival. If the girl is still friendly and pleasant after this occasion, the young man can be more certain that she is fond of him. He gathers his courage, but he still has inner apprehensions to professing his love out loud. The world already knows, the sparrows are whistling it from the rooftops, and it is said "the lad is going to his lass." But a big struggle ensues before he finally sees his way to asking her the big question. When one gets engaged, one does not make a big deal about it.

Naturally, it is different when a young man from outside the village desires to marry. This is often done through a matchmaker. A wedding follows soon after the official engagement is announced.

O tender longing, sweet hopes,
The golden time of first love!
O, that it would remain eternally green
The beautiful time of young love!
Therefore prove, who binds oneself for eternity
That you have found that heart for your heart.
The illusion is short, the regret is long!

Listing of Items Brought into Marriage (Die "Aufnahme")

One day before the wedding of the a young couple occurred the "Aufnahme" or items brought to the marriage, in many places also called "Verschreibung" or the listing. This concerns the listing of the property of the bride and groom. It is performed at the request of the parents of the intended couple. The mayor, the village recorder, and two community-appointed men come to go through the property brought into the marriage by the couple. First the men are served a good meal, then they begin the work. The two men chosen by the community are called the "appraisers" ("Taxanten") because they must appraise every large item. They must be completely impartial. The "Aufnahme" of the bride is first done. Her collected things and clothes are laid out. The appraisers take each article in hand, name it for the recorder and he enters it on the list. They whisper among themselves and agree on a price for the article. Then one goes back to the recorder and tells him the stipulated amount. He makes note of the amount on the list and this is repeated until each item is written down by the recorder and appraised by the appraisers.

Afterward, the recorder adds up the total sum of the items given to the bride by her parents.

The mayor, the recorder, parents of the couple and the couple themselves, as well as the appraisers then put their signatures at the bottom of the list. The same is done with the bridegroom. When all is finished, the group once again partakes of a good meal. At the conclusion, the authorities return home and the engaged put their things back in order.

This custom has proven to be very good. For example, if one partner of the marriage dies, the children of that union always know who brought what into the marriage and in the case of re-marriage, the property of the deceased would be reserved for the children of the first marriage. If hard currency was brought into the marriage, it would be placed in the orphans fund. This custom is practiced in Kloestitz.

It was a very productive arrangement and this "passing back" is still maintained today. In this we see that our forefathers also thought about social arrangements and we must acknowledge that their wisdom commands our respect.

The following is a copy of just such a "List of items brought to the marriage" or marriage agreement from the year 1879 in Sarata.

Copy of Schutzensgerichtsbuch (the book of laws for the mayor) Littera F. Folio 103: The Marriage Agreement

On this day, the 19th of October, 1879, Sarata settler, Jakob Waldenmeier, legitimate, unmarried son of the farmer Jakob Waldenmeier, of House #68 Revisions No. 13 has settled this marriage agreement with Sarata colonist, Maria Fuchs, legitimate, unmarried daughter of the deceased farmer Gabriel Fuchs of House #85 Revisions No. 85, to whom the parents will presently give the following property:

	Rbl.	Kop.
I. Property of the Bridegroom		
The above-named receives from his father:		
The entire house across from Leopold Gassler, half of the stable, half of the cellar, half of the courtyard, half of the husbandry, the vineyard on Streitberg, which lies between Georg Bandel and Mathias Brenner, from the vineyard to the lower area where the cattle graze, everything in payment to 400 Rubles	400	
1 Bible, 50 Kop., 1 Testament, 20 Kop., 1 children's reader, 10 Kop.		80
2 horses, 100 Rbl., horse gear, 15 Rbl.	115	
1 new iron wagon	60	
1 cow, 20 Rbl., 2 wine barrels, 20 Rbl.	40	
2 harrows: 1 iron, 1 wooden	4	
2 field wagons, 1 Rbl., 50 Kop., 6 sacks, 4 Rbl. 20 Kop.	5	70
2 field hoes, 2 hoes, 2 Rbl., 1 seed strainer, 1 Rbl.	3	
Complete wardrobe	40	
	Total:	50
Deducted from the above are:		
1. The mother's property in accordance with the orphan book	169	78
2. Marriage gift from the father	269	78
	Together:	56
The amount owed by the son to his father	228	94

This 228 Rbl, 94 Kop. is loaned by the father to his son for 1 year interest-free, after which he must pay a 4% interest per hundred until the debt is paid off.

Besides the above, the groom has this property:

	Rbl.	Kop.
A. Personal savings		
1 Songbook, 1 Rbl., 1 Pocket watch, 12 Rbl.	13	
Cash, 70 Rbl., 1 container for washing clothes, 5 Rbl.	75	
	Total:	88
B. Grandparents property		
Cash 50, Rbl.	50	

II. Property of the Bride

	Rbl.	Kop.
Received from her mother:		
1 Bible, 50 Kop., 1 Songbook, with gold leaf, 2 Rbl.	2	50
1 Book of Sermons, 3 Rbl., Prayerbook, 50 Kop.	3	50
1 Closet, 30 Rbl., 1 chest of drawers, 40 Kop.	70	
1 sofa, 30 Rbl., 6 chairs, 16 Rbl 50 Kop.	46	50
1 table, 6 Rbl., 1 table, 4 Rbl., 1 mirror, 2 Rbl.	12	
1 kitchen cupboard, 10 Rbl., 1 kitchen table, 4 Rbl.	14	
1 cooking pot, 2 Rbl. 25 Kop., 1 coffeemill, 1 Rbl. 60 Kop.	3	85
1 wash basin, 1 Rbl. 60 Kop., brass bowl, 1 Rbl. 35 Kop.	2	95
1 ladle, 70 Kop., 1 pot with lard, 3 Rbl.	3	70
3 table cloths, 2 Rbl. 50 Kop., 14 towels, 3 Rbl. 50 Kop.	6	
1 towel holder, 1 Rbl., 5 napkins, 1 Rbl. 50 Kop.	2	50
5 pair of curtains, 8 Rbl. 8 Kop., 1 umbrella, 2 Rbl. 60 Kop.,	10	68
3 sacks, 2 Rbl. 70 Kop., complete clothing wardrobe, 40 Rbl.	42	70
Bedstead with made-up bed, 80 Rbl.	80	
Picture under glass with frame and embroidered pouch	1	80
2 cows, 50 Rbl., cash, 100 Rbl.	150	
Total of property brought by the bride:	452	68

The following is hereby set down by mutual agreement of the parents and the bridal couple:

1. The father, Jakob Waldenmeier, retains for himself and his wife, the newly furnished house and the smith shop as long as they live; in this house the daughter Katharina shall also be able to live as long as she is unmarried. After the deaths of the parents and when daughter Katharina is married and leaves the house, then the son Jakob will take over the house along with the smith shop, but only the buildings, not the smithy hand tools, for the payment of 200 Rbl. The half portion of the stall, farmyard and cellar, which the parents kept for their own needs will go to Jakob, the son, after their death without cost.

2. When the father, Jakob gives half of his farmland to his son, Jakob, the son must settle and pay any fees, cash or natural, that may pertain to this land. Besides this, the son Jakob must give to his parents each year as long as they live: wheat, 12 bushels worth, cleaned and ground; barley, 9 bushels and 200 eggs. Also, the son shall stable and feed the 2 cows and the calves belonging to the parents. If the parents maintain more of the son's cattle, then the children shall also give the parents each year: 12 litres of butter and from the daily milking .6 litres of milk.

The bridal pair and their parents are of one mind and agree accordingly that if after the marriage, one of the partners should die, with or without leaving heirs, their property will be divided according to the rules relating to the dividing up of land ("Theilungordnung") used here in Sarata, which is also according to the laws of Wuerttemberg.

The preceding marriage agreement contains our free will and understanding in every point, and to its corroboration and inviolable legality, we, the undersigned, confirm:

The original has these signatures:

The betrothed: Jakob Waldenmeier, Maria Fuchs

The parents: Jakob Waldenmeier, Anna Waldenmeier, Elisabetha Fuchs

Witnesses: Leopold Gassler, Alois Waldenmeier

The authenticity of the preceding signatures is certified by the signature and crown seal of the Sarata Village Administration.

Sarata, 19th of October, 1879

The original has this signature.

Candidate of village elder, Stuhlmüller

Community recorder Bossert
The original was certified again
Community recorder Bossert

The Wedding

A marriage permit must be obtained from the parents of the bride and groom. After this the wedding date is agreed upon and the preparations for the big celebration begins. Normally, the occasion is delayed until the autumn when the farmers are finished with their harvesting and have more time.

A large amount of linens and clothes are sewn for the bride. She also orders furniture if this hasn't already been done. The groom's father takes care of obtaining a pair of horses with gear, a wagon, plow, harrow, etc., for his son. Everyone works to pay for the bride's trousseau.

After all is ready, they walk, or drive if they do not live in the same place as the pastor, for the "the hearing." There the couple must undergo a small test in the Bible. They then receive the official wedding notice or certificate. This notice must be read in the church on three consecutive Sundays. In this time period anyone who might have objections to the marriage could be heard.

The wedding day draws nearer. Prior to the date, however, the bride and groom seek out people among their relatives or acquaintances to be the bridal attendants (groomsmen and bridesmaids) for their wedding. Often there are 10-12 couples or more. Certain couples are especially asked to gather together the dishes, stools and tables.

These bride attendants ("Brautbuben") who do this task must also bring invitations to the houses of those invited to the wedding.

Four or five days before the wedding, about three attendants meet at the wedding house to take the reception invitations. Each carries a staff decorated with colorful silk ribbons and wears a pretty nosegay on the left lapel. In earlier times the invitations were delivered verbally, but in more recent years, the "Brautbuben" bring around written invitations. After the invitation is presented they are given a small glass of wine or schnaps. Very often a box of matches or cigarettes is also given. At noon they would return to the wedding house where they would be served a delicious meal. In the afternoon they would continue handing out the invitations, as 40-50 or more families needed to be invited. In the evening the attendants return to the wedding house for supper, then they would go home.

The last Sunday before the wedding was the "Bendelabend" (literally "ribbon evening"). This is so named because the bridesmaids pair up with the groomsmen and each bridesmaid gives her partner a boutonniere with a ribbon ("Bendel") in it. By a richly covered table, several are designated to gather dishes, stools, and tables to be carried and the order of the procession to the church is established.

The next morning the three chosen ones, as well as 2-3 other bridesmaids, come to the wedding house again. One of the groomsmen will bring around a horse and buggy. The best and prettiest horses are used. The girls bring glazed paper roses to decorate the horse's harness. The nicest harness with shiny yellow tin roses is also used. Colorful ribbons would be interwoven in the manes and tails of the horses. The groomsmen wear a green boutonniere with a red ribbon received from the bridesmaids on their lapels.

Colored ribbons are also attached to the staffs of the men. The bride's maids carry large baskets with pretty, colorful silk ribbons fluttering from the handles. After breakfasting, they go outside to gather up chairs, tables, benches and kitchen utensils from the invited guests. It is impossible for the parents of the bridal couple to have everything needed for so many guests. This excursion is a special joy for the young men and women. They go from family to family and from each receive something, a pair of stools, perhaps a bench or the girls will get some utensils. With full wagons and baskets, they bring the assembled things to the wedding house. It is all very colorful.

Two or three rooms are cleared of furniture, so there is more space for the activities. Around noon, things are made ready. In the evening, all the bridesmaids and groomsmen come together. This is the "wedding eve" (also called "Krusser") because the guests would bring a chicken. The chicken would

be killed and cleaned. The couple's parents also contribute other things. The head and feet of the chicken are used to make a good sauce for the meal. For this reason, it is called "Krusser." After the meal, the groom's men take their bridesmaid home. The long awaited wedding day is approaching.

If the wedding takes place in the village, the bride's servers and maids assemble in the morning. All wear their best clothes. All are supplied with boutonnieres and ribbons and find their places at the tables. At the entrance stands a small table with a bottle of schnaps and white bread upon it. A man behind the table gives each guest a small glass of schnaps followed by a small piece of sweet bread.

The young married guests take their places in the bridal couples' room. If the room is too small for all of them, some will sit in the next room. The older guests sit in the third room and the children in the fourth. The bride's father will assign more young men as cupbearers and more young girls as servers. As soon as all the guests are seated at the tables, the coffee is served. At this moment, the teacher, usually a sexton, comes in and speaks from God's Word, followed by a short speech—a devotion—and then a prayer. The speech is opened and closed with a song.

Everyone drinks coffee with the sweet bread. Suddenly, the church bells ring for the first time. The bridal couple rise. The groom's men and the bridesmaids follow them. At the door of the house, the couple bids farewell to their parents. The bride cries bitterly. She is leaving her parent's house to establish her own household. The bridal procession forms with the couple at the head. Two small girls walk behind the bride to hold up her veil. The other couples follow in the pre-arranged "Bendelobend" line. The parents, guests, and relatives follow behind. A host of younger children walk beside the bridal pair and the other couples. The bells ring together. The procession enters the church. As soon as the bells stop, the organ starts. The prelude ends and then the pastor announces the wedding song. This song is always "Jesus goes before us." After the sermon, rings are exchanged and the couple joins hands. The ceremony is complete. "What God has brought together, let no man put asunder."

The last verse of the beginning song is sung and then everyone returns to the wedding house. As soon as the procession reaches the front of the church, "good luck" gunshots are heard from every corner. The newlyweds come into the courtyard and everyone wishes them good luck. In the meantime, the photographer has arrived and is waiting. After the wedding photographs are taken, they proceed back to the reception where noodle soup and roast chicken is served. Along with this one eats the lovely Bessarabian wheaten bread. (We did not know black bread.) The female servers in snow-white aprons are busy, since about 180-200 guests are present. The cup bearers stand in their white shirts and aprons, but on both shoulders are colored ribbons or "Trikolore" (the three colors), these criss-cross on their front and back. These men are also called upon often.

When all is finished, the newlyweds and the other couples arise and leave the room. They arrange themselves again in pairs and walk through the village. The bride carries her veil alone over her left arm. With pleasure she converses. Now and then a shot is fired. Little boys also shoot their "pop guns." Many young men and women and also older people crowd around the village wall in order to see the newlyweds. Many young people think about their future wedding day—will it be much longer before they too will be walking through the village?

The old ones look back on their wedding day. How long ago it was! How many disappointments already experienced, how many sorrows, how much work and trouble. The whole life is seen from the human viewpoint as "a way of sorrow," an eternal struggle for existence. It barely seems worth the effort. Then they also think back when they were young, when they courted the girls, got engaged and married. How lovely it was then and how hard it is now!

In the meantime, the newlyweds are moving further away. One must go back to work. Toward evening the couple comes home again.

The older people stay in the wedding reception house. They drink and talk about the past and the future. Many tell jokes and because one eats so frequently and so well at weddings, the jokes are often about eating. I only record one of many here:

man comes to his neighbor. At the door, a 5 year-old boy is crying. The man asks him, "Is your father at home?"

“Yes.”

“Where is he?”

“In the kitchen.”

“What’s he doing?”

“He is eating.”

“Have you already eaten?”

“Yes.”

“Then why are you crying?”

“Because I am already full!”

Then the youngster began to cry again. The man came in and found the whole family at the dinner table. Then he understood why the young son was crying. They were having “Dampfnudla” (steamed noodles). There was still plenty left. The boy was crying because he was too full to eat anymore!

Thus it also goes at the wedding reception. There are lots of leftovers, but unfortunately everyone is too full to eat anymore. The bride will often tell the following joke, and hope that in her marriage it will not be so:

“An engaged couple are walking arm in arm. They come to a small obstacle. The man says to his bride-to-be:

“Watch out, my treasure, take care that you don’t trip here.”

A few months later after the wedding the same couple are walking on the same road. The man is three steps ahead. They come to the same small obstacle. This time he calls over his shoulder to his wife,

“Pay attention, woman, don’t trip here!”

These and similar jokes are told. Others tell again how in the First World War, they as Russian citizens had to fight against Germany because they were in the Russian Army; how some of the Swabians were taken as war prisoners to Germany and treated quite harshly. They talk about the war with Japan in 1905. Then soil, plowing, seeds, harvests, thrashing, etc. would be discussed.

The evening meal is served: potato salad with roast pork. Everyone partakes with the best appetites. Wonderful! Even the wine tastes better in one’s mouth. How beautiful to sit at such a feast! And yet one hardly really appreciates it. One is barely finished and this song is heard:

“When I was young, I stayed at a wonderful inn...”

Another song, well loved and often sung, is:

“Why should I ask for money and possessions, when I am satisfied.”

Folk songs and church songs are exchanged. Young and old participate. In most cases, the newlyweds and the other couples are allowed to dance. If there is not a piano or harmonium available, then a harmonica or an accordion is used. The first dance is for the bride and groom. Things continue cheerfully with others joining in.

Soon it is midnight. Still to come is the “big moment”: the Abkranzen (“uncrowning” of the bride). The bride is placed on a stool. All the bridesmaids form a circle around her. The bride takes off her garland and veil, closes her eyes and places the garland and veil in her lap. The girls move in a circle around her singing: “Beautiful is youth in joyful times, beautiful youth, it comes but once!” The bride stands during the song and puts the garland and veil on one of the bridesmaids. The same is done with the groom and his men. It is said that whoever receives the bride’s garland and veil and the groom’s boutonniere will be the next to be married. After this, the couple will lead out the Ehrentanz (“honor dance”) and others join in the end. The other young people, the elderly and children stand watching the scene with great interest. The younger children learn “good luck” greetings, which they present to the newlyweds along with gifts. In the meantime, there is more to drink and eat. Close to dawn, coffee and tea are served with the best cake. Sometimes, it is a shame that with all the eating before hand, one’s stomach can barely eat a tiny piece of the cake. By daybreak, the elderly take their leave and also the young disappear. Each of the groom’s men escorts their partner home. The newlyweds also retire.

In the following days, more guests arrive bringing and giving gifts, among which can be found baby linens and clothes. Many kitchen utensils are also received. Most of the guests drink a small schnaps with something to eat. The bride's attendants return the table and utensils to those from whom they came. In the evening, all is quiet early, because everyone is dead tired. On one of the following Sundays, the bridesmaids and groomsmen, as well as other friends and acquaintances, are once again invited over. This time normal food with coffee is served. With dancing the Nachhochzeit ("after wedding") or Hochzeitsbegräbnis ("wedding burial") is closed out.

Yes, beautiful is youth in joyful times
Beautiful is youth, which comes but once.

In the following days, furnishings are arranged in the home of the newlyweds. The dowry is sufficient; they can move into a nicely furnished house.

Passion flees,
Love must remain,
Flowers wither,
Fruit must ripen,
And within governs
The modest wife,
The mother of children,
Who wisely oversees
The family circle
Teaching the young women
Restraining the young men.
Ever industrious are
Her diligent hands.
She increases gain
Through common sense
And never rests.
(Schiller)

Weddings were, of course, different 20 years ago. They only took place in the parish where the pastor lived. The bride's people had to travel there. The bride and groom ordered the transportation. There were farmers, who were invited to the wedding. For many it was a special honor. It was an opportunity to show off their finest horses for the entire community. This was a worry for the bride's maids, as each wanted to have the most beautifully decorated horse. On the morning of the wedding, the wagons would arrive. After the prayers of the sexton and good-byes to their parents, the bride and groom would board the first wagon. It was usually a "feather" wagon. Each couple had a wagon. The horses and harnesses were finely decorated. Before the bridal couple's wagon was set in motion, "Permission to travel" was given by one of the wedding guests. This was a long prayer expressing the desire for a good trip. The bridal wagon began to move and the others would follow. They would barely reach the village gate before the first shots would ring out. The entire village waited to see the bridal procession. More shots would be heard.

After the wedding in the parish was completed, they would come home again, but did not go to the wedding reception house (at first), rather they would drive through the village streets. Like wildfire the news went from house to house. Everyone came into the streets to see the newlyweds. This was the topic of conversation in the village for a long time.