

Practices and Customs

Bessarabischer Heimatkalender—1967
W. Rumpeltin, Buchdruckerei und Zeitungsverlag K.G.
[Book Printing and Newspaper Publishing Limited]
Burgdorf, Hannover/Germany
Pages 99-105
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August, 2025
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Note: Information within [brackets] are comments by the translator.

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[Translation Begins]

Practices and Customs

at Advent and Christmas time, on New Year's Eve and
New Year's Day in the Old Homeland

by Immanuel Schöch

If I want to briefly talk about the greatest and most beautiful festival of the German people, about Christmas and Advent, as well as about New Year's Eve and New Year in the old homeland, in Bessarabia, I do so all the more gladly as this provides an opportunity to transport the reader back to a time that is now so far in the past and whose magic and mysterious powers none of us could escape. On the other hand, it is true that as one gets older, one likes to remember one's childhood and time of youth and likes to speak of "the good old times".

Among the foreign people surrounding us, Easter was the highest and most significant festival of the year. It was also held in high esteem and celebrated beautifully among us, but Christmas was still more for us; it was **THE** festival of the German family! From the hidden depths of the German soul, it drew its meaning and substance, but in line with the pious way of thinking of our ancestors, the religious point of view was the dominating and driving force of everything that happened during these days and weeks, indeed beyond that, of existence itself. The songs, verses, and prayers from the old homeland, which I can only hint at in the context of this brief article, are worth being collected and preserved. Our parents and grandparents drew sustenance from them in good and bad times; they still constitute true substance of life for many even today and reveal to us unprecedented values.

But I do not want to get lost in long-winded discussions here, but rather report directly about what once made the hearts of young and old beat faster and made their eyes shine with joy and

delight. I must emphasize once again that everything was filled and carried by profound devoutness. If I may put it this way, therein lay the roots of all that happened in those days.

There was no Advent wreath! It only appeared in Bessarabia during the nineteen-thirties and only very sporadically. Where would one have gotten pine greenery in the desolate steppe! The Christmas trees only arrived shortly before the holiday. There was also no Advent calendar! And yet we children had to somehow manage this thrilling time and deal with it! We had to keep accurate accounts and know when the long-awaited Christmas Eve and Christmas Day would finally be! Coloring on walls and wallpaper was also, like today, unfortunately forbidden back then. What to do? We found a way out! Under the large family table was the safe spot where mother or the older sister with her hated dust cloth could not reach. Here we marked the Advent days with chalk lines up to Christmas Eve. Often, there was actual bickering about who could crawl under the table to add another line. Oh, with what satisfaction and contentment that was done each time! Another day less in this seemingly endless time!

But the mother and the older ones had their hands full of things to do. Now, during the long evenings, the Christmas presents had to be sewn, knitted, embroidered, or crocheted in complete secrecy. After weeks of painstaking work, the yarn had been obtained from the wool of their own sheep; now it had to be turned into stockings, socks, jackets, and scarves. These stockings were not as fine as the nylon and perlon [a type of nylon called Nylon 6] stockings of today, but they were warm and durable, and that was what mattered. There were no runs here. If they wore out (*blöde*) after months or years and the heels and toes had become “threadbare”, they were darned or even “re-knitted” and would then serve for several more years. — The men and sons crafted or had made by the carpenter what was missing in the household: clothes racks, coasters, chopping boards, brackets (*Konsolen*), flower stands, rocking and hobby horses.

As soon as the bag is shown,
the fear of the Christmas Man
(*Weihnachtsmann*) fades away.



But also for the physical well-being, appropriate precautions had to be taken! Now pigs and geese were butchered, because during the festive days, ham and sausage, smoked goose breasts and legs, as well as roasted goose and duck could not be missing. The butcher came to the house, and everything was prepared according to individual wishes. The entire household had to

help. Proudly, the little boy stretched out when the master butcher jokingly took measurements to determine the size of the sausages to be made based on the waist size of the child.

When the day of butchering was over, soap was made from poor quality fats in the waste, so that people were self-sufficient for months to come.

A considerable effort was involved in baking the various gingerbread (*Lebkuchen*) and yeast wreaths (*Hefekränze*), as well as the sliced bread (*Schnitzbrot*) or dried fruit bread (*Hutzelbrot*). Often ten to twelve different types had to be created. Finally, the honey cakes (*Honigkuchen*), peppermint pastries (*Pferrerminküchlein*), cinnamon stars (*Zimtsterne*), anise cookies (*Anisbrötchen*), sweet small baked pastries (*Bandplätzchen*), “twisted cookies” (*Durchgedrehte*), and so on piled up in mountains, all of which were created under the skilled hands of knowledgeable women. There was no electric or gas oven. In the huge baking oven, where the bread was usually baked, all those delicious treats were made. And when my friend came home from school and saw the rich feast spread out on the table, he eagerly asked about the oven deformed (*Ofakrüsselpökel*), as we called the things that were too over-baked, too under-baked, or misshapen. When his mother, beaming with happiness, indicated that there would be no *Ofakrüsselpökel* today, everything was perfectly baked, he said very disappointedly: “Oh my, you cannot even bake small ginger breads, not even *Ofakrüsselpökel* to have a taste!” (“*Ach, ihr, net amal Lebküchle könnet ihr backa, net amal Ofakrüsselpökel gibts zu Versucha!*”)

The last school day took place on the twentieth of December. Until then, teachers and children also had enough to do. The various Christmas poems had to be learned and the Christmas songs had to be practiced. On the last school day before Christmas, each child brought a small bag, a small basket, or a bag full of treats for the Alexander Asylum. Every year, two to three large laundry baskets full could be delivered to the residents of the Mercy Institution. What about today? Do we still have a sense for the old and sick in the Bessarabian nursing home, and are we ready to delight them with a gift?

Every year before Christmas, the teachers went from house to house with the church administrators or with the members of the school committee to collect the necessary funds for a “collection for the Christmas tree” needed for the purchase of notebooks, pencils, Christmas tracts like “Palm Leaves” (*Palmblätter*) or “Christmas Roses” (*Christrosen*). This annual collection brought in several thousand Lei. During the pre-Christmas season, people were more willing to give, and they were not ungenerous for the children.

But back to the songs! Besides the children’s Christmas songs, the sexton-teacher had to select and practice the songs for the church choir. What was sung? Here, I can only provide a brief list of the selection, which mainly refers to Sarata. The songs varied in different communities. Older readers will be able to supplement and expand this list from their own memories.

On the first Advent, the church choir sang: “Your King comes in lowly appearance” (*Dein König kommt in niedern Hüllen*) or “Daughter Zion, Rejoice” (*Tochter Zion, freue Dich!*). But also the songs from the hymn book “How shall I receive you” (*Wie soll ich Dich empfangen*), “With seriousness, O children of mankind” (*Mit Ernst, o Menschenkind*) or “Make high the door, make wide the gate!” (*Macht hoch die Tür, die Tor macht weit!*), and others.

However, in school the children sang among many others:

*Alle Jahre wieder kommt das Christuskind
O Tannenbaum, o Tannenbaum
Es ist ein Ros' entsprungen
Süßer die Glocken nie klingen
Welchen Jubel, welche Freude
Herbei, o ihr Gläubigen
Die schönste Zeit, die liebste Zeit
Der Christbaum ist der schönste Baum
Still, still, still, die Augen aufgemacht
Vom Himmel hoch da komm ich her
Fröhlich soll mein Herze springen
Der Christtag von Gott uns bereitet*

Every year again comes the Christ Child
O Christmas tree, o Christmas tree
A rose has sprung
Sweeter the bells never ring
What jubilation, what joy
Come forth, O you believers
The most beautiful time, the dearest time
The Christmas tree is the most beautiful tree
Still, still, still, keep your eyes open
From heaven above to earth I come
Joyfully shall my heart leap
Christmas day prepared for us by God

“Silent Night” (*Stille Nacht*) and “O You Joyful” (*O du fröhliche*) I will not even mention here. These songs were part of the “basic requirements” (*eisernen Bestand*) and were sung with the same fervor and dedication by young and old alike as “O Come, Little Children” (*Ihr Kinderlein kommet*).

The twenty-first of December was a holiday. Back then, the Apostle's feast days were still celebrated. The twenty-first was the day of the Apostle Thomas. But it was called the “Doll Holiday” (*Poppesfeiertag*). On this day, women and girls would sew doll dresses or make new dolls. Who would have thought of spending a lot of money on a fragile purchased doll? At most, a removable doll head made of porcelain or celluloid was bought, and the missing body parts and limbs were attached, filled with wool or sawdust, to take the appropriate shape. But the father or brother had the doll's carriage, the doll's cradle, or the rocking chair ready so that they could be painted or varnished one last time. The time for purchasing little horses, dolls, cars, tractors, and games like *Lottospiele* [example=Bingo], *Quartette* [acquire the 4 cards with the same face value], *Damenspiele* [example=checkers] and *Mühlespiele* [example=Nine Men's Morris often on back of a checkerboard] would come later.

Finally, the day had come when we joyfully got to wipe the last stroke off from under the table, for today was finally Christmas Eve. After the noon meal, the “Christ Child” was carried off, meaning we had to bring Christmas gifts and treats to the godchildren of our parents “with a nice greeting from father and mother, and you should visit us during the holidays!” Now the heavy basket or mother's shopping bag was emptied, and “a few little treats” and pretzels were given in return with thanks and good wishes. Meanwhile at home, the things from our godparents had arrived, which we children were not allowed to see. Mother received them and disappeared with them into the mysterious room, in the nice parlor (*Stube*), where they went on the gift table or under the Christmas tree. Only mother was allowed to enter this sacret space, where the Christ Child was now going on in his own way.

Several days earlier, the first pine trees had arrived. They had traveled a distance of several hundred kilometers before they reached us from the interior of Russia, later from the Romanian

Carpathians, to help create a German Christmas celebration here in the desolate vast steppe and spread the glow of lights and the scent of candles. Oh, blessed time!



Leipzig 1925, Farmhands at the cheerful Day of Wander

At six o'clock in the evening there was a worship service. Everyone who could manage to be on their feet made their way to the church. Only a few old grandmothers or grandfathers stayed at home to look after the little ones. It was not easy to help the impatient crowd get through the last endless minutes of waiting. The last hour had to be spent with singing, telling stories, and playing until finally father, mother, and the older siblings returned from church.

On this evening, a magnificent Christmas tree gleamed there next to the pulpit. The choir sang: "Be silent, you earnest bells, be silent" (*Schweigt, ihr ernsten Glocken, schweiget*) or "Glory to God in the highest!" (*Ehre sei Gott in der Höhe!*) or "There were shepherds near Bethlehem" (*Es waren Hirten bei Bethlehem*) or "Holy night, oh pour forth..." (*Heilige Nacht, o gieße du...*) or any of the other beautiful Christmas songs. Then the wind instrument choir (*Bläserchor*) began and the congregation sang:

*"Dies ist die Nacht, da mir erschienen
des großen Gottes Freundlichkeit,
das Kind, dem alle Engel dienen
bringt Licht in unsere Dunkelheit.
Und dieses Welt= und Himmelslicht
weicht hunderttausend Sonnen nicht."*

"This is the night, when to me appeared
the kindness of the great God,
the Child, whom all angels serve
brings light into our darkness.
And this earth and heaven light
does not yield to a hundred thousand suns."

The lay leader (*Pastor*)—not the pastor (*Pfarrer*)—read the relevant prophecies about the arrival of Christ. He gave a heartfelt talk that concluded with the song: "O you joyful" (*O du fröhliche*). The first verse was sung only by the schoolchildren, the second by the adults, and the third by the whole congregation accompanied by the wind instrument choir. Then they went home full of expectation.

Inside, the candles were lit, and then the children were allowed in at the ringing of a bell. The shining eyes of the children could almost surpass the glow of the candles! The father read the Christmas gospel, some Christmas songs were sung, and the children took turns reciting their Christmas verses and poems. Then came—the highlight of the entire celebration for us children—the gift exchange! The children gratefully and joyfully accepted their gifts, and even though the candles soon went out, the eyes of the children continued to shine brightly, filling the hearts of the parents and godparents with quiet joy: It is more blessed to give than to receive.

In some houses the Christ Child entered at this moment in the flesh, represented by some veiled girl dressed all in white. The children recited the prayers to him while the young people accompanying the Christ Child sang “From heaven above to earth I come” (*Vom Himmel hoch, da komm ich her*) outside, the little ones inside were given gifts. In between you could hear the deep growling voice of the “*Pelzmärte*”, who rattled his chains from time to time quite fearfully, so that one breathed a sigh of relief when the feared man had disappeared, because it just might be that one did not have a very good conscience and he took the naughty ones with him in his big sack.

After the evening meal, which was particularly sumptuous and plentiful, the first signs of weariness became evident in the little ones; no wonder considering all the excitement and tensions of the recent moments. Soon, the little group lay in their beds, a doll, a small horse, a trumpet, or some other toy in their arms.

Christmas morning. Children’s worship service. The pastor or the sexton-teacher sought to clarify the meaning of the word of God to the children: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.” Again, several Christmas carols were sung and then the gift-giving followed in the church. The church elders and teachers distributed notebooks, pencils, reading books, and candy, and the happy group headed back home.

On the evening of the first day of Christmas, the students had their big performance. Before the gathered congregation, their Christmas songs, Christmas poems, and nativity plays were heard, and tears of emotion sparkled in eyes of some parents when they heard the bright voice of their dear one in front of the assembled congregation.

Amid song and play, the festive days passed. The third day of Christmas, the day of the Apostle John, concluded the festive days. This was followed by the Day of Wandering (*Wandertag*), on which the hired men and maids either changed their positions for the New Year or made new contracts for another year.

New Year’s Eve (*Silvesterabend*) had already arrived, also filled with the seriousness of the moment. Hundreds and hundreds streamed that evening, the last of the year, to the Holy Communion, to the table of the Lord. The choir sang “Ernest and solemn is this hour” (*Ernst und feierlich ist diese Stunde*) or “How fleeting is human time, how we hasten toward eternity” (*Wie fleucht dahin des Menschen Zeit, wie eilen wir zur Ewigkeit*) or “The year will soon go away again” (*Das Jahr will wieder scheiden*) and others.

Just before twelve o'clock midnight, the bells rang together. Again, hundreds of villagers gathered in front of the church. The choir sang on the steps: "Pondering we stand at the year's boundary" (*Sinnend steh'n wir an des Jahres Grenze*) or "Hitherto the Lord has helped" (*Bis hierher hat der Herr geholfen*) or "Oh, another year has disappeared, a year that will not return" (*Ach wiederum ein Jahr verschwunden, ein Jahr und kehrt nicht mehr zurück*). The wind instrument choir played, then solemn silence settled in. Twelve bronze bell tolls announced the change of the year. All around, people heard well-wishes, many kissed each other, the bells rang in the New Year, and shots rang out at all corners. But the choir sang: "Help, Lord Jesus, let it succeed, help, a new year is beginning" (*Hilf, Herr Jesu, laß gelingen, hilf ein neues Jahr geht an*)! — "Now let us go and proceed with singing and praying." (*Nun laßt uns gehn und treten mit Singen und mit Beten*). The crowd dispersed, each filled with serious thoughts. An entertaining feast after communion and a serious hour of celebration would have been inappropriate and completely unthinkable.

New Year's morning. Even before it became light, the dogs were barking and howling. Harsh voices could be heard, heavy footsteps echoed outside. Those were the *Surbser*, the Russian and Ukrainian well-wishers from the neighboring village. Even before Christmas, the mother had prepared a large basket full of baked goods for them, and the father had collected a whole bunch of small change to pay off the well-wishers.



New Year's Well-wishers

Now they came crashing in, individually or in groups, and sang, although not always beautifully, in the loudest voices their monotonous song: *Po lesu chodila dewa Maria, syna nam rodila dewa Maria* ("Through the forest walked the Virgin Mary, a son has been born to us by the Virgin Mary"). Now they reached into the bag that each had hanging around them, took out a handful of grain, and scattered the kernels, sowing them into the room over the heads of those present, while saying in Ukrainian: *Siu, wiu, posiwaiu, s nowym godom posdrawliaiu* ("I sow, I cleanse / through the wind / and sow again, and I congratulate you on the New Year!"). Only now did the morning greeting follow: *Dobroe utro!* ("Good morning!"). They received their gifts and

hurried on, as the next group was already waiting outside, and the whole thing started all over again from the beginning. This continued until around half past nine. Often thirty to forty, even fifty or more congratulators spoke during this time from half past seven to half past nine. They were all in a hurry, because as soon as the [church] bell rang for the second time at half-past ten, and the villagers went to church, the doors were locked. Whoever had not gathered enough through begging by that time had fought too little and was too late, as the physical success of the wish was what mattered. Some had managed to get a glass of wine here and there and were hardly able to sing anymore. Only Afanasij was still singing outside on the street with his booming thunderous voice, proudly demonstrating his German language skills: “Silent night, Holy night!”

But we children were not allowed to miss bringing our good wishes to our parents and grandparents, to our godparents and neighbors. We estimated how the *Surbser* gauged success by the clinking of copper and silver coins in our pockets, which promised a good start to the New Year. The verses we recited were mostly taken from the hymn book or a good collection of poems and almost without exception had a serious character. Only rarely did someone dare to recite a selfish little rhyme like this: “I am a little king, do not give me so little! Do not let me stand so long, I must go a house further” (*Ich bin ein kleiner König, gebt mir nicht so wenig! Laßt mich nicht so lange steh’n, ich muß ein Häuschen weitergeh’n*).

Michel, the cow-herder, and his wife Amalie always sang a duet, he with his high falsetto voice—soprano, she with her deep contralto voice, which almost resembled a male bass, one that Zarah Leander [Swedish actress and singer (1907–1981)] could have envied. When the song had faded away, “for” the emperor, “for” our dear fatherland, and “for” those present, the New Year’s wish followed:

*“Als das neue Jahr gekommen
haben wir uns vorgenommen
Euch zu wünschen in der Zeit
Friede, Glück und Einigkeit!
Den Boda volla Körnla
Den Stall volla Hörnla.
(oder als Variation —
Den Stall volla Kinder,
die Stube volla Kinder.)
A Säckle volla Gold
und was Ihr sonst noch haba wollt!
Guta Morga!”*

*“As the New Year has arrived,
we have undertaken
to wish you in this time
Peace, Happiness, and Unity!
The field full of small grains
The stable full of small horns.
(or as a variation—
The stable full of children,
the living room full of children.)
A small sack full of gold
and whatever else you want!
Good morning!”*

In this way, the first morning of the New Year passed. The Feast of the Holy-Three Kings marked the end of the beautiful season. The tradition of going around with the star was not common in Sarata. Instead, on this day, the Christmas tree was usually cleared, and we sang:

*“Doch nur kurz sind solche Freuden,
bald verlöscht der Kerzen Licht,
Jesus kann allein bereiten
Freuden, die vergehen nicht.”*

*“But such joys are only short-lived,
soon the candlelight goes out,
Jesus alone can prepare
joys that do not fade.”*

The day after, classes in the school began again, and everyday life took its course. But for a long time, the brilliance of the Christmas celebration shone over everyday life and gilded it with its magical light. For many, the magic of those twelve nights shone brightly into old age, even into our days.

May our German people find their way back from the present, which is threatened to suffocate and perish in its well-being, in its haste and pursuit, and in its materialism, where Christmas is often only seen as an opportunity to increase profits and make better sales, to a better understanding and proper appreciation of things. Value has, as was the firm conviction of our fathers, only what applies for eternity; everything else is meaningless.

*Ewigkeit, in die Zeit leuchte hell hinein,
Daß uns werde klein das Kleine,
Und das Große groß erscheine,
Sel'ge Ewigkeit!*

Eternity, shine brightly into time,
So that the small may become small to us,
And the great may appear great,
Blessed eternity!

[Translation Ends]