The “Pripas” [Stray Dog] and the Sexton


Translation from the original German-language text to American English is provided by Alex Herzog, Boulder, CO, with editorial assistance from Dr. Nancy Herzog.

(Adapted from a report by an eye witness)

Are you familiar with the term *pripas*? If not, that does not indicate a gap in your learning, but rather a sign that the term from Bessarabia has become extinct. In Bessarabia, the word *pripas* denoted a stray dog, meaning that the dog was entirely independent of other dogs and all humans. Since this sort of dog “species” does not exist in Germany, there is no special term for it.

In Bessarabia, dogs truly led a dog’s life. Every farmyard had one or more, although in human favor they clearly ranked behind cats. They were not tolerated near the kitchen and its pleasant smells. For a dog to try sneaking into the house amounted to a death wish. There were no doghouses, which meant that the dog had to find its own special, protected place, usually in the open shed for the wagons.

A dog was rarely born a *pripas*. It would generally simply become one owing to its urge to accompany its owner anywhere and everywhere, presumably to protect him. In the field that was no problem. There a dog might be able to grab a mouse or a squirrel and to watch the owner while lying in the shade of the wagon. Naturally, this strenuous work would tire the dog, entitling it to a well-deserved nap.

Since it was dangerous to leave the dog’s own farmyard and be bitten by other dogs, farm dogs developed a special tactic when they did leave. They would trot not on the side of or behind their owner’s wagon, but rather between the rear wheels of the wagon. That way, the driver could not see that the dog had come along, and other dogs would not dare to come close for fear of the driver’s long whip.

Sometimes, of course, the wagon was not heading to the fields, but rather to the market, often in another village. The dog might discover this fact a bit late, so it simply would keep running under the wagon. And upon greeting his master on arrival at the market, the joy was decidedly one-sided. Most often, the dog might receive a kick in the rear. But what to do, especially with the good market smells of bratwurst and fresh bread? Much worse was the situation if a female dog had run along, especially one not averse to a bit of love adventure.

Under the spell of this kind of odor, a male dog forgot all caution. But where might the “lady” be found? Against all his habits and experience, he ventured into unfamiliar territory in search of a “bride.”

Upon finally sighting the lady, he was confronted with a whole group of other suitors. Naturally, the lady would be unable to fulfill the wooing by so many, so she would run to see which one might keep up the best. The gang would leave the market in convoy, but in strict ranking order—the large dogs in front, the smallest ones way in the back—at times appearing like a grand procession. The female dog would leave the market in search of a place for the expected hanky-panky, perhaps in a nearby corn field. There would ensue rather bloody biting fights between the strongest candidates, and several hours would pass by the time the tugging and romantic frenzy was over.

Then would come a wake-up period. Where had they ended up? Where was the master’s wagon? With great effort, thanks to a sensitive nose, a track might be discovered leading back to the market. But by now all the wagons would have disappeared! Time to search for them. Some of the dogs, especially the ones feeling strong enough to strike out on their own, would actually find their way back to the village. Most would not. Therefore, they would be left alone, without a master. Each would have become a *pripas*, with an uncertain and sometimes tragic fate. Some of them might be bitten to death by other dogs, and some dogs might get rabies or mange and get beaten to death because of it. Some might get lucky and snatch a place in a farmyard without dogs. At first they might stay in the straw barn, and if other dogs did not drive them away, they might find something to eat by landing a mouse or an occasional chicken that had intended to lay eggs. If a farmhand or the farmer did not discover the stray, and it was not pelted with
stones or earth clumps, it would have an interim “asylum” in the straw barn. If the stray was chased away, there was still an “emergency home” within the reeds of the nearby creek. If the stray was able to stay, it could begin the process of integrating. Gradually it would sneak closer, perhaps to a corner of the stable. Often it might be a child finding pleasure in a newly discovered stray and allowing it to “bond.” And some day the child might even provide something to eat. That would be the onset of a new life, finally reaching status of “yard dog,” ending up as the most loyal of dogs and a defender of the farmyard to the last drop of blood.

One day, a pripas had found its asylum in the yard of the local sexton, who during the week served as teacher and on Sundays played the organ and represented the pastor in church. Because not every village could afford its own pastor, several villages might get together to form a parish, and the pastor would preach in each village in succession. When the pastor was not serving a particular village, the local sexton led the church service and delivered the pastor’s sermon.

This sexton had neither dogs nor a farmstead, therefore no straw barn or mice, but he did own a chicken coop. reason enough for the pripas to establish a domicile in the vicinity of the coop. During a scouting venture, the dog also discovered the entrance to the coop. Good enough reason to try to find something edible. Lo and behold, there were eggs, and with luck a chicken might be caught. However, the dog did not devour the eggs in the coop, but carried them in its mouth and enjoyed them out in the field. Clever enough to hide the “disappearance” at least briefly.

Still, after a few days the family noticed that the chickens appeared suddenly to be laying fewer eggs. Putting a watch on the coop resulted in discovery of the cause. But what to do? All attempts to drive the pripas away ended up in futility and were finally thought too time-consuming. The pripas was too smart. He had long disappeared by the time a door in the house opened.

Then the sexton had an ingenious idea. He had a friend who was a great hunter before the Lord. The sexton decided to borrow the hunter’s shotgun and to get the egg thief from a distance. It is not known whether the great hunter had instructed the sexton in the use of the gun. Probably not. He had never been a soldier and didn’t know much about hunting either. But he did take up watch. Attempting to grab an egg that day, the pripas took notice of the “hunter” lurking in the kitchen window, and instead of making his usual run to the field, he ran into the street. The sexton ran after the dog, which had meanwhile reached the middle of the street. This completely undid the shooter’s strategy. The “hunter” ran after the dog, raised the gun, and took a shot. But because he was short-sighted, he did not notice that he reached the street, mistook the distance and shot way too high. Instead of hitting the dog, the shot landed across the street, landing in the walls of the house of the preceptor (financial officer of the region). The holes in the wall of the house and the shot pellet remained visible for weeks.

Very worrisome times for both the hunter and the loaner of the shotgun. (In those days, we described that kind of situation as “Jetzt war die Zigorre billig [suddenly the cigar tasted pretty cheap]”). The behavior of the “hunter,” shooting a shotgun from the side of the street, as well as that of the friend who loaned the gun, appeared to have “endangered the state.” Initially there was talk of attempted murder, then of a regrettable accident, then of a simple mistake, and finally there was no more mention of the matter. In any case, things did not come to an official accusation and certainly not to a trial. The whole matter seemed to have died of its own, as did so many in the Romania state.

We can only speculate about the change of mind by the preceptor. Those in the know insist that the preceptor did enjoy double his normal salary that year.

**Editor’s note:** Coincidentally, regarding this topic, the leading interest group for dog owners in Germany declared June 10/11 as the day for undertaking activities that help society to realize the special status of the dog and to honor it.

[Captions:

p. 7, top: *During the week. Teacher Lempel from Wilhelm Busch’s “Max und Moritz,” is the perfect image of a sexton. (Any similarity with the person described herein is purely accidental and also intentional.)*

p. 7, bottom: *Sundays.*

p. 8, bottom: *A small Friedenstal dog.*]