



The German-Russian Christmas: Oral Histories from the Northern Plains

(Based on stories collected as part of the Dakota
Memories Oral History Project, NDSU)

By Jessica Clark

Christmas Eve, according to Elizabeth Barbara (Rissling) Lang, "was the best part and the scariest part" of the holiday festivities. Growing up in rural Saskatchewan during the 1930s and 1940s, Elizabeth and her family partook in distinctly German-Russian holiday traditions; for instance, Elizabeth grew up fearing the *Belznickel*. She remembers every Christmas Eve hearing something in the distance, something that made loud noises and rattled chains. These sounds frightened all young children. Elizabeth remembers running into her parents' room and hiding from this mysterious "monster." She always feared that this monster, the *Belznickel*, would find her. In the Rissling home, the *Belznickel* was a creature who wore a large fur coat and fur hat, and carried chains. Elizabeth remembers that when the *Belznickel* entered her parents' room, his moans and groans got louder and louder. Frightened, she hid under the covers of the bed. After some time, her tormentor finally left.¹

As Elizabeth's memories demonstrate, Christmas was a distinctive celebration for Germans from Russia. This celebration helped families and communities preserve their cultural and ethnic identity. Through the Christmas festivities, they held onto their distinct traditions – the *Belznickel*, the *Krist Kindel*, special foods, and language. Even so, after years of living on the Northern Plains and interacting with different cultures and ethnicities, the German-Russian celebrations changed, influenced by the surrounding culture. For example, many of those born in North America grew up believing in Santa Claus.

Most second- and third-generation German-Russian children, born in North America, grew up in the early- to mid-

twentieth century. Some grew up during the First World War, others during the Great Depression and Dirty Thirties, and others during the Second World War. These so-called watershed events, however, were not necessarily the crucial events affecting most children. Rather, the day-to-day realities made life on the Northern Plains challenging. Children coped with unpredictable weather, instabilities of farming, conflicting identities, and much more. German-Russian children, however, worked hard and persevered. In fact, they never realized they had it rough until years later – after a lifetime of experiences and memories. Despite the hardships of growing up in rural, isolated communities, most Germans from Russia have fond childhood memories, such as their memories of Christmas (the holiday most ranked as their favorite).

For German-Russian children growing up on the Northern Plains, Christmas was a time of joy, cheer, and celebration. The season began with the annual Christmas program held at school or church. Organized by teachers, parents, students, and volunteers, these programs were community celebrations, and varied from place to place. While some communities held them in churches on Christmas Eve, others held them in schools a few weeks before Christmas. Most Christmas programs had a play or skit about the birth of Jesus Christ. Born in 1922, Alma (Janke) Schott of Gackle, North Dakota, remembers that most of the community participated in these programs. There was never an empty seat. Alma remembers her teachers always had the schoolhouse frugally decorated and a Christmas tree ornamented with student-made paper chains.²

German-Russian Christmas

The importance of community events notwithstanding, the German-Russian Christmas was largely a family celebration. It is quite hard, however, to describe a typical German-Russian Christmas, because every family had its own traditions. Some families celebrated Christmas on Christmas Eve, typically by attending midnight mass or a candlelight service (depending on their religious beliefs). Then they headed home for an "after-midnight lunch" or a dinner.³ Often, opening Christmas gifts followed this late evening meal. Depending on the family's traditions (and probably location), neighboring friends and relatives might be included in this Christmas Eve celebration.⁴ Other families came home from church and retired for the evening. These families celebrated on Christmas Day. They usually opened gifts immediately after completing their daily chores – feeding the animals and milking cows. They spent the rest of the day cooking, eating, and visiting.

The Christmas celebration commonly included a traditional character or characters. For the second and third generation these characters included the *Belznickel* and *Krist Kindel* (Christ Child), Santa Claus, or all three. Growing up during the 1930s near Devils Lake, North Dakota, Balzer Kurtz remembers all three were present during his childhood. According to Balzer, the festivities always started two weeks before Christmas. As he remembers it, first there was the *Belznickel*. "He was a mean dude," exclaims Balzer. The *Belznickel* came to identify which children had been naughty and which had been nice. Balzer recalls that the *Belznickel* always reeked of booze, carried a willow whip, and dragged a chain. Then, a few days later, the *Krist Kindel* appeared. Balzer recalls the *Krist Kindel* always being a woman – a woman dressed in colorful formal attire, with a hat and veil. She was the nice one, according to Balzer. She gave the children candy. Then, on Christmas Day, Santa Claus came. According to Balzer, on Christmas morning someone always came to his house dressed up as

Santa Claus, handing out a small gift for every child.⁵ For the young children, these colorful characters (the *Belznickel*, the *Krist Kindel*, and Santa Claus) were the highlight of Christmas.

Besides the Christmas characters, many German-Russians also remember decorations and gifts (or lack thereof). Some families had Christmas trees, while others had none. Born in 1917 in Gackle, North Dakota, Emil E. Schaffer remembers "always [having] a Christmas tree." Then again, he acknowledges that decorations for the tree were sparse, usually including popcorn strings and homemade ornaments.⁶ Since most second- and third-generation Germans from Russia grew up in rural areas without electricity, Christmas lights were rare. Some families, like the Risslings, simply did without, while others, like the Kurtzes used candles.⁷ When looking back on their childhood, many German Russians realize not only did they have few decorations, but they also received few gifts. As Balzer states, "Christmas was a handful of peanuts, a little Christmas candy, and an orange or an apple, if [our parents] could afford it. That was it."⁸ Christina (Bast) Krismer recalls getting a dollar bill, a chocolate bar, and a knife, fork, or spoon.⁹ As Emil E. Schaffer says, "we got what we needed."¹⁰

Despite the daily challenges of life on the Northern Plains during the first half of the twentieth century, German-Russian children did indeed get what they needed. They found hope and enjoyment in community and family celebrations, especially at Christmas. During their oral histories, most narrators for the Dakota Memories Oral History Project identify Christmas as their favorite holiday. For the most part, their memories of Christmas make them smile and laugh. Christmas was a time to forget about hardships, to enjoy family and friends, to learn about their heritage, and to adapt to North American customs. At Christmas, as in all aspects of life, the second- and third-generation Germans from Russia created their own distinctive ethnic identity.

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Memories of Teacher

had about six-seven ridges on it, the result being that this type of stone was able to separate kernels out of the head or spike more efficiently. With grain lying in a long sausage-like pile, fanning mills were placed on each end of the grain pile, where men were engaged in operating the machines. One man turned the hand crank to propel the machine, another person shoveled the grain onto the sieves, and the third shoveled the grain away.

Close by, out in the open, workers were kept busy filling the sacks with grain. Two men were in charge of gathering the chaff and storing it in the chaff barns. If the grain wasn't properly cleaned the first time the cleaning process was repeated. At sundown the day's work was over. Man and beast needed rest for the following day. In a single day we were able to harvest 70 to 80 sacks of small grain (one sack=110.23 lbs.)

In 1928 we threshed until August 28. I remember it well because I was confirmed on August 29.

Each village has had threshing machines for quite some time, although they were privately owned. Why wasn't there a community-owned machine? Because one machine could not have handled all the small grain in our community. The small operator (under 50 hectares) didn't have enough horses, the result being that half the time the machine would be standing idle. So, for the most part, the farmers were staying with the old system (threshing stones).

Chaff

Chaff was the main source of feed for domesticated livestock during the winter months. To a large degree farmers also had to depend on weeds as a source of feed. The chaff was moistened and mixed with whole grain or ground grain. Predominantly oats and barley served as sources of feed grain. Why wasn't more hay put up during the heat of the summer? I really don't know. I remember my father had one hectare of native grass he regularly put up

for hay. Later on he plowed it up. For the chaff to be able to remain dry for the winter, most farmers involved with cattle husbandry found it necessary to build a large chaff barn.

Straw Stack

It was almost impossible to build a big enough barn for straw storage. That is why it was stacked outside on a large straw stack. It was stacked firmly enough so that rain water could not penetrate the stack unless a hole was inadvertently left on top of the stack. The length of the stack depended on the area where it was placed. 10 meters and more, the highest eight-ten meters. The shape of setting the straw required a special skill. There was, however, a certain amount of distress involved with trying to figure out how the straw could be used.

Uses for the Straw

1. Bedding for farm animals
2. Heating the large Russian stoves
3. Power the various farm mills
4. Senseless burning of the unused straw

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Sources:

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3. Elizabeth Barbara (Rissling) Lang, interview.
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5. Balzer Kurtz (b. 1928, Devils Lake, North Dakota), interview by Cassie Ptacek (part i), video recording, Devils Lake, North Dakota, 17 June 2007, Dakota Memories Oral History Project; Elizabeth Barbara (Rissling) Lang, interview; Christina (Aberle) Long (b. 1930, Emmons County, North Dakota), interview by Jessica Clark, video recording, Berlin,

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6. Emil E. Schaffer (b. 1917, Gackle, North Dakota), interview by Jessica Clark, video recording, Gackle, North Dakota, 23 June 2005, Dakota Memories Oral History Project.
 7. Elizabeth Barbara (Rissling) Lang, interview; Balzer Kurtz, interview.
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 10. Emil E. Schaffer, interview.