

Holiday Traditions

Excerpts from Interviews with Theresa Kuntz Bachmeier, Helen Feist Krumm, Celestina Metz, Sister Joan Nuss, Kathryn Ehli Ternes, Paul P. Welder and Fern Renner Welk

Interview with Theresa Kuntz Bachmeier (TB)

Conducted by Mary Ebach (ME)

2 December 1999, Rugby, North Dakota

ME: Now we are getting into Christmas. How was Christmas celebrated in your home, when you were home with your parents?

TB: There was a *Christkindl*, there was no Santa Clauses. Anyway, she [*Christkindl*] came in the house with a rod, a branch.

ME: The *Christkindl*?

TB: The *Christkindl*, and with the rod you received a few slaps on the back.

ME: Why?

TB: Well, if you was mean –

ME: If you were bad -

TB: If you were bad.

ME: The *Christkindl*, wasn't that a good one that brought you candy or presents?

TB: Yah, but you know the *Christkindl* had to say, "Where are the bad girls and boys that didn't listen to their father and mother?" That's what the words were.

ME: When did you get your present and candy?

TB: Well, then they put it on the floor and when you went to get it, they were going to hit their fingers, but you got it. (laughter)

ME: What do you know about the *Belzenickel*?

TB: Not much of that, there was no *Belzenickel*.

ME: What do you remember about Easter? How did you get ready for Easter?

TB: As far as I know, we had a little path going across from the house where we went to school. That's where the Easter rabbit laid our eggs.

ME: Were they colored eggs?

TB: Yes, they were colored eggs.

ME: Did you have candy then too?

TB: Yes, colored candy, those long ones -

ME: What about Holy Week, did you go to Stations of the Cross?

TB: Oh, yah. We went to Stations of the Cross.

ME: When you were still home, did you go to church on Good Friday and Holy Thursday?

TB: Yes, we did. If there was snow we had little overshoes on; when the snow got deeper, we stepped into the snow with the overshoes.

ME: And then you went to church on Good Friday in the afternoon.

TB: I don't remember anymore, but I think it was in the morning.

ME: What about Easter Sunday? Did you get all dressed up in new clothes?

TB: Oh yes, what do you think -

ME: You wore hats and nice dresses.

TB: What we had nice, everything good - the best we had. And when we got home, we had to take them off and put other clothes on.

Interview with Helen Krumm (HK)

Conducted by Bob Dambach (BD) with Michael M. Miller (MM)

7 October 2001, Hague, North Dakota

HK: So I suppose you want to know from Russia how we went? When we grew up, we'd go out to dances with the young people. It was like that, too, we always were in groups. When one [group] got together then the other ones [joined them] but we got along.

Sunday was Sunday. But when Communists was, there was no Sunday and there was no Christmas and there was no Easter. There was only Oktoberfest and first of May, that would be the Labor Day. They marched and stuff like that. But otherwise- There was abortion [at] that time already in Russia. It's so hard when you have no contact from the outside world. We didn't know what's going on in Germany or over in Russia or across the street. You even couldn't talk to your neighbor because the walls had ears. When you had a holy picture in the house and one of those cams - comes, you better take that down. That was terrible. You always think, "We have it hard." Every country or every community has something - not everything is perfect. But that was worse.

BD: Did you know what was happening? You said they were coming and taking people away from villages. Did you know what happened to those people?

HK: No, all to Siberia. They took them all to Siberia. They had to build roads, and they had to build different stuff, you know. They starved. They'd only last a year or two. You could not even ask [about them].

BD: So there's no letters coming –

HK: No, no. There was no nothing. There was no doctor. There was maybe a hospital 20 miles away but they didn't have the medication. All the babies were born at home. We had these old midwives who took care of them. The lifespan was maybe 55-60. That's about it. *A lot* of people died. Like with the food, too- we'd eat good and everything when we had [it]. We drank our own wine. We made no coffee or anything because we didn't have the money to buy [any]. We had the grapes so we made our own wine and our vegetables. [We] picked all the stuff, you know.

BD: How about Christmas or Easter traditions?

HK: Oh, that was great! Easter, and Christmas too, but we had no Christmas tree. We went out and cut a dry branch off and took it in the house, colored some onions and little colored paper and popcorn rolls and hung it. And that was our Christmas tree. Then the *Christkindl* came, and we all had to sit in a row. "Was she good, was he bad?" "*Yah, der ist bees (böse, bad) und der ist gut.*" She had a little thing, and she hit us a little a bit. And Ma was standing behind the *Christkindl*, and she'd hold a doll or whatever she had to give us, you know, and that was the *Christkindl*. Then we had ham, potato salad and wine and baked our own cookies. Strudels and rolls; we did it all our own.

BD: How about Easter traditions?

HK: Easter, too, the whole week was Holy Week. I remember Good Friday when they put Christ in the tomb and the *Mesner* (sacristan, sexton) had to stay posted there for a couple of hours. Every three-four hours then they changed it again. [*Sie*] *haben gewacht am Heiland, sein Grab.* (They guarded the Savior's tomb.) That was real nice too. Then we colored some eggs. We dug little houses beside the house and put a little green grass in and then the *Oschterhas* (*Osterhase*), what they call the Easter bunny, came. Ma was out early [with the eggs] and she always put them in there so that was nice.

BD: What would you have done for fun? What sort of games did you play?

HK: Oh, we danced, we singed and we played tricks to each other. In fall, like here we have Thanksgiving, we had *Fasenacht* (Mardi Gras). We had a big dance and put different clothes on. Like when a couple got married, we stuffed [clothes of] a man and wife laying in the bed. It's all kids' stuff but was it fun. It was fun. Each group had her leader and he could play the organ or the violin. Singing is the most important [thing] what we had down there. Our choir in our church had 60 singers. And our *Schulmeister* (schoolmaster) was Ferdinand Kraft. Michael, you know the Kraft from Strasburg that had a store? That was his uncle. We had a choir and everything Latin we had to sing, *everything* in Latin. But then, just like in Christmas you sing, "Stille Nacht" or "Komm Christkindlein," that was in German. But the other ones were all in Latin.

Interview with Celestina Metz (CM)

Conducted by Brother Placid Gross (BG)
20 January 1998, Dickinson, North Dakota

BG: Ah, about *Weihnachten*; how did you celebrate Christmas when you were little?

CM: Oh, we had the *Belzenickel* and *Christkind*.

BG: The *Belzenickel* come and scared you?

CM: Yah, right! Oh, we usually got some peanuts and candy, not very many but a few. Didn't get much of gifts, but we always had some Christmas Eve doing.

BG: You probably didn't get any gifts at all maybe?

CM: No, not very much. If we got a little rubber ball or a pencil, that was about it! But *Belzenickel* and *Christkind*, they always came every year.

BG: What did the *Belzenickel* look like?

CM: Oh, he was on all fours and he had a big fur coat over him, or whatever it was.

BG: Did he drag along a chain?

CM: He drug a long chain along. And then if you weren't good, he'd grab you. We always - we had a bench behind the table and we'd sit up there with our feet up on top of the bench!

Guest: What was the purpose of that?

CM: Well, he was going to take us along if we weren't good. We had to pray for him.

BG: You had to scare the kids to be good.

CM: Yah.

BG: Scare them into being good!

CM: Do you remember, yet, when we had school out there? We had one of the - I think one of the Soldoski girls taught? Do you remember that? Vernon would tell you. And there was - they called him the devil that time. And he came and he wanted to grab Vernon, because Vernon wasn't scared. And he came and he grabbed Vernon. "Ma, Ma, Ma!" he hollared. He didn't holler for Dad's help, Ma's!

BG: How was the *Christkindl* dressed?

CM: Ah, always had a white dress on and lots of lace. Her face covered with a veil, you couldn't tell who it was. And she always had a little whip. She tried to hold you out some candy and whip you on the hand! We didn't like her!

BG: Didn't like the *Christkindl*?

CM: Nope!

BG: I can't blame you if you didn't like the *Belzenickel*, but the *Christkindl*?

CM: Yah, but she was - she was mean. She'd hit you with that little wreath that she had. Well, she was supposed to be an angel, I guess.

BG: Did you have baskets? Did you get a basket or -

CM: A little paper bag with a few candy in. She'd hold them up and if you'd reach for it, she'd hit you with that stick. So would you like her?!

BG: So you didn't have big baskets.

CM: No, no.

BG: Was there a donkey along too?

CM: Yah. One year I remember there was a donkey along with a long, peaked nose and he dug into everybody's bag! And, of course, we kids were scared he's going to take some out of there!

BG: The donkey was separate from the *Christkindl*.

CM: Yah, yah.

BG: He walked beside the *Christkindl*. Ah, did you get an orange?

CM: Once-in-a-while. Not every year, but once-in-a-while we did.

BG: An apple, sometimes, too?

CM: About the only time we got an orange was for Christmas!

BG: Well, it was special when they got an orange.

CM: Yah, right.

BG: It was a big deal. So, in the '30s, well, you were grown up already in the '30s, so you weren't too poor. I mean, sometimes in the '30s, they didn't get any Christmas at all.

CM: Oh, yah. We had Christmas every year. Well, I had a brother that was seven years younger than I was, so, still had Santa Claus come.

BG: How did you celebrate Easter? Did you have Easter eggs?

CM: Oh, yah. We always had a lot of Easter eggs.

BG: Did the Easter rabbit come? Did you think the Easter rabbit brought the eggs or -?

CM: As long as we were little, yah, we thought it was the Easter rabbit! Of course, after we got bigger, we had to help dye the eggs, then we knew better.

Interview with Sister Joan Nuss (SJ)

Conducted by Jocelyn Renner Tang (JT)

1 February 1998, Sacred Heart Monastery, Richardton, North Dakota

JT: Sister Joan, I'm going to ask you about some Christmas customs. Can you tell me what *Belzenickel* is?

SJ: Yes, and *Christkindl*, too, we had -

JT: *Belzenickel* was a man?

SJ: He was dressed in a - like a fur coat and long hair, you know, and tied down around with a strap down. And they came to your house and if they say you weren't good, you got licked, you know.

JT: You got [licked] with what?

SJ: They got licked. He had a strap, a *Riemen*, you know, it hung down on his side. And he would lick them. Oh, in the old country they had one, which my mother told us about the *Belzenickel* when we first learned. It's in my mind all the time, when I hear that word, I think of that story.

JT: What is it?

SJ: Well, there was a couple there and they had a boy and a girl, 14 and 15. They didn't obey their parents too much, you know. They were always running ahead of them, and so one time the *Belzenickel* came there and he asked, "How are your children?" They said, "Well, they don't obey us anymore. We don't know what to do with them, we cannot handle them."

The dad said, "Take them out; take them away. We are fed up with them." So the *Belzenickel* took this boy and girl out and never brought them back. Then the parents, after midnight, went out searching. Nobody could find them – no clues. He had murdered both of them over by the barn, cut their heads off.. Since that time I don't like the *Belzenickel*.

And the Christ Child was good. She was dressed in white. She had a veil on and a wreath, and she would bring us – we'd get a little package from her for Christmas, you know.

JT: So the Christ Child was a girl, a female figure?

SJ: A female, um hum, but this [*Belzenickel*] was a male.

JT: And that story your mother told you was a story she got from Russia?

SJ: Russia – that's a true story. That's a true story.

JT: And the *Christkindl* was a female figure and -

SJ: Dressed in white, in a veil and she had a wreath.

JT: So when Christmas came and these people came to your door, were you afraid?

SJ: Not when the Christ Child came, but we never had him [the real *Belzenickel*]. But we had a neighbor man who dressed up as a *Belzenickel*. He came to our house on the farm. It was during the [Great] Depression too. He had called, I guess my parents or my brother, whoever it was, if he could come over on that night to see us, you

know. The man who dressed up - when we heard about it, we didn't like him, so we all ran and hid. Some went in the clothes closet, way up on top. Some went down to the root cellar, and some went in those beds that we had folding, you know, folding beds. They opened the beds, two lay in there, and they rolled them, you know. We all hid; he didn't find a one. Were we glad!

JT: You were so frightened of him.

SJ: I think that's why we hid too.

JT: Do you remember any special Easter activities?

SJ: Yes, at Easter time we always got new hats and shoes. We didn't have nothing else. We took our shoebox and made the little Easter basket and nest right by our bed. And we had some sticks and candy in there. We didn't have much, but there was always something, you know.

JT: Do you remember anything called *Eierlesen*, egg roll[ing], *Eierlaufen*?

SJ: No, hm um.

JT: No? Okay. Were there special religious activities at Christmas or Easter? Like you went to church, you said.

SJ: Yes, we did.

JT: And the Mass was in German?

SJ: I think it was Latin, wasn't it? I don't think they had it in German. Latin.

JT: Oh, it was in Latin.

SJ: It was Latin, I think.

Interview with Kathryn Ehli Ternes (KT)

Conducted by Michael M. Miller (MM)

18 August 1993, Bismarck, North Dakota

MM: Very interesting. What about the holidays, you know, of course during those hard years you didn't have too much for holidays, but how did they celebrate, for instance, Christmas? How do you remember Christmas as a child?

KT: I remember the first Christmas that I really can remember is when my dad had died. We didn't have any – anything, you know, no money to buy anything. My mother was poor at that time. They had just bought a house and were making monthly payments and that time the railroad men didn't make what they do now. So that Christmas we were invited to some friends of my dad that also worked on the railroad. They had no children; they invited us and we got a lot of Christmas gifts when we were there. We were just shocked. I still have a iron that I got from those people. Then when we came home there was a big box in front of our house that I guess the Salvation Army or some organization brought for us for gifts as we were left alone just in October.

MM: This was in 1917.

KT: That was in 1918. Then when we moved to the farm, Christmas didn't mean too much out there. All we got for Christmas was probably a hanky and a bowl of peanuts, nuts and a orange or apple. It was not a big deal out there for Christmas.

MM: What about Easter?

KT: Easter, like I say, there was Easter eggs made and that Easter bread. Then you'd go to church on Thursday, Friday.

MM: What about the 4th of July? Did they celebrate 4th of July?

KT: We went to Mandan for the 4th of July when we grew up; went to the rodeos, fireworks in the evening.

MM: What about when you got married west of Strasburg there, did they have a 4th of July?

KT: Yah, we went to the 4th of July in town.

MM: Was there any kind of music in Strasburg?

KT: Yes, they had a bandstand in the middle of town and there was a band playing at night. And during the day they would just [be] moseying around. Yah, I remember my first 4th of July was we went to town.

MM: And what was the name of the band or who was in the band do you remember?

KT: Oh, the Kleins played. I remember them being in the band and - See at that time they were all kind of strange to me yet.

MM: Because you were out on the farm.

KT: Yah, we were out on the farm, but I remember the Kleins because the Kleins and us got friends when we lived on the farm yet.

MM: What was their full name?

KT: Eugene Klein and Margaret.

MM: And Leo Klein, do you remember him?

KT: Oh, yes! Yah, I remember Leo. Yah, he went to school at that time. I remember when Phil graduated that year, I guess when we got married; Phil and I are about the same age. Then they put on a play one time around Christmastime and we went into that play. We must have been married about a year and a half because I had Art already by that time.

Interview with Paul P. Welder (PW)

Conducted by Betty and Chris Maier (BM/CM)

9 August 2000, Linton, North Dakota

BM: And holidays? How did you celebrate Christmas?

PW: Christmas was really something we were looking forward to. We were always scared of the *Belzenickel* and the *Christkindl*, but it was something to look forward to because there was oranges maybe for Christmas and a lot of cookies and peanuts and nuts and almonds and candy and Christmas was a big thing to look forward to. But we always had a *Belzenickel* and he was mean. He come sometimes even with chains and he was mean. And the *Christkindl* was always kind with a sheet over her and you didn't see much of her face; she was a little better but she was mean too.

BM: Did you have that celebration with your children too?

PW: No.

BM: No, why did you stop?

PW: No, just one time; just one time Santa Claus came and that was it. We didn't allow it anymore. We had two children, Bernadette and Raymond, and the *Belzenickel* came and they were so scared that we were out in the barn milking the next morning and they came out to the barn with their pajamas on. So we took them in and we said no more. It was scary.

CM: What other holidays did you observe other than church holidays?

PW: There was none excepting Easter and Christmas and then Pentecost, you know, *Pfingste*- Pentecost and Christi *Himmelfahrt*-Ascension. That was about it. Well, no. Those Three Kings from the Orient-*Dreikönige*. Yah, that was a big day too.

CM: And how about *Fasenocht*? (*Fastnacht*-Tuesday before Lent)

PW: That was too sometimes. There was some headaches the next day because they drank that home brew, you know and there were some headaches. There was some hangovers and a hangover is a head that wasn't used the night before.

BM: So, Names Days?

PW: Names Days, yes.

BM: Did you celebrate those?

PW: Even after we were married Names Days were still pretty popular.

Interview with Fern Renner Welk (FW)

Conducted by Michael M. Miller (MM)

21 May 1994, Branson, Missouri

MM: I forgot to ask you, Fern, back in St. Anthony, what was Christmas like?

FW: There was no such thing as buying gifts for each one. What they did, they bought lots of goodies, nuts, candy, cookies, and they baked cookies too, cakes, and bought oranges and apples and all that stuff. Then on Christmas Day they would take a plate and pile it this high with all these goodies. But there was no such thing as gifts. This was your gift, these goodies, and we looked forward to it.

MM: Was there a Midnight Mass?

FW: I don't think – maybe there was. We would go by sled and go into day Mass.

MM: Did the Santa Claus come out to your house?

FW: No Santa Claus.

MM: No angels either?

FW: No.

MM: Not in St. Anthony either?

FW: I think they were so busy on the ranch, they didn't have time for all that and later on when they retired they didn't do it either.

MM: What about Easter, anything special at Easter time?

FW: There was talk about the Easter bunny and Easter eggs. They dyed a bunch of eggs, you know. You had Easter eggs. And we looked forward to it. I think we were just as thrilled about the little stuff. Kids get too much stuff nowadays. I wonder if they appreciate it all.