

## A Bessarabian German Happy New Year

### "Schiessen und Krapfen"

By Alfred Opp, Vancouver, British Columbia, 31 December 2007

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In my Bessarabian homeland, the closing out of the old year and the ushering in of a New Year was celebrated according to our traditions and customs. I was privileged as a child and a young man to experience our traditions and also to hear about earlier customs from my Grandmother Zacher who had an excellent memory and was able to repeat what her folks passed on to her. My ancestors carried with them to Russia a New Year's custom that was called "Das Neujahr einschiesse" -- start the new year with a bang! The old folks in my village of Teplitz used a "Boeller" or "Moerser" for this purpose. My Opa (Grandfather) Zacher had one of them in a desk drawer and I remember looking at it as a young child. It was made of a steel block 4 inches square and about 8 inches in length. Down the center of the Boeller a round hole was drilled nearly to the bottom. This hole was fitted with a large-headed pin to which was attached a wire/metal loop. Another wire/metal loop was attached to the metal block. A length of rope was tied through both of these metal loops, holding the pin and block together with a little slack. The rope was also the means of holding the device so that it could be swung and brought down onto a hard surface to discharge it. I do not know what the device was loaded with. In later years, I learned of some small balls (pellets) of explosives that were available in Germany that would produce a "bang" when thrown against a hard surface. I never witnessed my Opa's "Boeller" being discharged, but this is how my Oma (Grandmother) remembered it and told it to me. Maybe someone out there can shed additional light on this! It is my impression that my Grandpa Zacher learned about this particular device during the time he served in the 1905 Russo-Japanese war - the war that changed many ideas in my home village of Teplitz, Bessarabia. My mother also mentioned something called a "knallerei" at New Years. If anyone can add to this also, please contact me. In the beginning of the settlement years, the pioneers found life so difficult that they took no time off for celebrations! They needed all of their energy just to survive. In the later years, times had changed through hard work and progressive innovations so that there was more time for leisure. Then the old customs were remembered and celebrations were revived. The young people entered into the celebrations with enthusiasm, but the church elders and the mayor did not always approve of the ways of the young people. The rule of life for the older people was to live respectfully in the name of the Lord. Singing non-religious songs, cheering, and dancing were "verboten." Many times the parties of the young people, even when carried on behind closed doors, were brought to a halt by the elders of the village. There were no second warnings. If the offense was repeated, what came next was the strap. This was sufficient to put cold water on these "worldly" activities until after World War I.

My Grandpa Zacher was a blacksmith by trade - something he learned as a young apprentice. Then along came WWI and he along with many other young men in Bessarabia was conscripted into the Russian Army. Once the war was over, the church elders soon lost their grip of control over the soldier-boys who returned home from the war. In 1918 Bessarabia was given over to Romania and the village mayor was relieved of his previous law-enforcement duties. Law enforcement was taken over by a Romanian official who did not understand the

religious traditions and culture of the older German townspeople. The Romanians were quite tolerant of celebrations! Only if the parties became unruly were violators of public order kept in check with the rod.

New Year's Eve was celebrated solemnly by the village Elders, and cheerfully by the village young people. In my family, Grandma Zacher on the afternoon of New Year's Eve went to the graveyard holding a candle to pay respect to her loved ones. My Oma (Grandma) Opp spent New Year's Eve at home reading from the Scriptures. These things I remember well because as a young child Grandma Zacher would take me with her to the cemetery, and I would also spend time with Grandma Opp. Then at the stroke of 12 Midnight, the church bells would ring out the old year. The sound of the large bells was so deep that it gave everybody goose bumps.

The morning of New Year's Day most villagers would walk to the church for services, then spend time at the cemetery to honor and remember their loved ones. Around noon, families gathered for a special dinner with close family members. The foods served were very similar to the foods served at Christmas. There was generally a meat dish, along with cabbage and potato salad, rice steamed in milk, and root vegetables. To close out the feast, the women would serve "Krapfen" also called "Berliner." These were round doughnuts fried in oil or grease. When done, they had developed a white ring in the middle into which jam was injected for a filling. To be considered good quality, these doughnuts had to be light. For an extra special touch, they were sometimes glazed with sugar icing. What a treat! We ate them with "poor man's coffee" which was a mixture of roasted barley and chicory. This was the only coffee known to me until I was a teenager in Germany after World War II. Making and eating "Krapfen" is a tradition that we have carried from the Old World to our New World with the exception of the war years. With this story, I want to wish each of you a happy new Year. May peace be with us.

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Alfred Opp is the author of "[Pawns on the World Stage](#)" - the memoirs of his childhood in Teplitz, Bessarabia and the experiences of his family in war-torn Europe (Poland during 1941-1945 before they fled to East Germany in 1945, then the reconstruction of West Germany 1945-1955).