

Child Rearing - Love, Words and Rod

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That young people would marry and have children was the normal expectation of our ancestors in Teplitz and Bessarabia. It was the responsibility of children to carry on the culture and way of life. Without children there was no hope for future prosperity of the family, nor the benefit of having someone to care for the needs of the parents in their old age - there was only the prospect of an end to the family line.

Cultural life was strongly embedded within the family, and children were raised to fit the family mold. Starting from the cradle, the rigging was assembled to carry the sails that would provide a safe voyage over the waters of life. Girls were trained to become good wives and mothers. Both the mother in the home and the grandmothers were actively involved to make sure young girls developed all the skills required for their journey ahead. Boys were educated with equal attention from the family to shoulder their male role and responsibilities. Boys grew up with an understanding of what was expected of them - they were to become a good family man and provider.

Sex education was minimal. The inner secrets of reproduction were never discussed at home nor were young adults allowed to listen in on such conversations. The village Elder maintained a strong stand on moral standards, using the same reasoning and terminology that had been handed down from the past. But for details to satisfy their curiosity, young people went to strangers, servants or a confidant to have their questions answered. Since we were a farming community, there was also ample opportunity for most young people to be familiar with reproductive activities among the farm animals.

In the German colonies, women gave birth in their homes. In most cases a midwife was present to make sure the birth went well. My dad at home was not allowed to be present when my mother was giving birth. This was by strict orders from the midwife who felt that the presence of the husband would only be a distraction. On the other hand, there was never a shortage of help from the women in the family. It was the rule of the day that a "Woechnerin" (a woman who had just given birth) must spend 10 days in her "Wochenbett" (birthing bed) after giving birth, not moving a limb for the first three days. The midwife was totally in charge of the care of both mother and infant. The midwife set the schedule as to when the baby should be nursed, bathed or diapers changed. At least one other family member who was an experienced mother herself was always on hand to assist. My mother had purchased "Schmeckseife" (a bar of special soap that smelled like roses) to be used to bath me. This was a special treat, as such soap was a luxury item.

After a successful birth, the grandmothers of the infant provided the midwife with a rewarding treat that included real coffee and often specialty baked goods. The birth of a child was anticipated with mixed feelings. While the family welcomed the arrival of a new baby, they were well aware of the many tragic complications that could take the life of both mother and infant. Serving as a midwife carried heavy responsibilities and had its anxious moments. A successful birth resulted in a celebration, while a failure resulted in a funeral. When

successful, the midwife was treated like royalty; if the child died, the midwife carried the infant during the funeral procession to the cemetery.

It was customary for relatives in the village to stop by to see the mother and baby. Much attention was focused on the baby. People were especially curious to see whom the baby looks like, what family features the baby showed. Along with the visitors came food dishes of a finer variety. Dishes such as stuffed pigeon, nourishing soups, or sweet rice and raisins were common gifts. A favorite dessert for such occasions was "Schneeballa," a dish of fluffy whipped egg whites served in a tasty sauce made from egg yolks, milk and sugar. These dishes were attractively presented to the new mother in a special embroidered cloth spread ("Tuch") that was tied up by the corners into a slip-knot to carry the dish.

My birth was typical for the culture and times. I was my mother's first-born child and my "Oma" Zacher made sure there was a second midwife standing by who had the experience to handle any emergency situation. As a newborn, I slept with my mother for three days before being placed in the cradle that stood next to my mother's bed. Baby clothes were presented to my mother by many family members and close friends of the family. These items were hand-made by the women who went all out to make these baby garments look pretty. Diapers, little shirts, booties and hoods were nicely embroidered in colors to go with a boy or a girl. Pillows and covers were hand-decorated with both lace and embroidery. Diapers were made of a flannel material that was easy to wash. To keep diapers from leaking, Mom used a red rubber sheet called "Glonka" between the layers of diapers.

Breast-feeding was of primary importance. If the mother was unable to breast-feed or if the baby could not nurse satisfactorily due to a health problem, a substitute method had to be found. This was when the mother turned to a wet-nurse or purchased a bottle to feed the baby. When I was four months old, when my mother tried to feed me I would turn my head away and cry inconsolably. Again and again my mother urged me to her breasts, but I would not cooperate. This went on all night, until I fell asleep from exhaustion. Mom was at a loss to know what to do. She couldn't figure out what was wrong with me. My "Oma" Opp stopped by the next morning to see my mother, and Mom told "Oma" that I must be sick, since I was refusing to eat. "Oma" Opp knew right away what she needed to do. She told Mom that I was fine - I was just hungry! How could that be? My mother was surprised. "Oma" Opp went to work heating up some milk and browning a bit of flour. This she added to the warm milk along with a bit of sugar. "Oma" had used this formula on her babies, and now she used it on me. She sat down on a chair and took me on her lap to feed me. First she put a spoonful of formula in her mouth until it was the perfect temperature, then she put the formula back into the spoon and into my mouth. I ate well and soon was so full that I fell into a long, deep sleep.

For me, learning to walk came naturally. Learning to talk was a different matter. Mom used a lot of baby-talk with me, trying to get me to talk: da-da-da; babala; tu-tu-tu. Nothing seemed to work. "Oma" soon had heard enough and scolded Mom for not doing a better job teaching me. Then my "Oma" Zacher began her method of speech therapy on me. "Oma" went to work to teach me using my name, saying "Alfred, Alfredle" or "Alfredche." "Then she simplified it even more, repeating "Alfred, Afed, Afredsche." In the end I said "Fredsche" and that name stuck with me for a long time.

Once children started to walk, they no longer wore diapers. What came out went down one leg or the other. My mother would time me and take me to the outhouse to prevent accidents. If she missed the timing, I learned the

result. I can honestly say that it didn't take me long to learn to keep my pants dry.

Children learned very young what behavior was acceptable and what was not. Parents didn't stop to ask questions about why the child misbehaved. Disobedience was handled with a rod quickly and on the spot. We early learned what was coming our way if we ended up on the wrong side of the "law." The result was the same whether at home or at school. From a very young age, children accompanied their parents wherever they went, with few exceptions. As young children, we learned to socialize, to behave, and to be part of the communal life. We learned to respect our parents, and they taught us to be honest, God-fearing and loyal. Obedience and hard work were the order of the day - to be otherwise one could not exist.

As a teenager, my mother never received advice on feminine well-being - only warnings to "behave." However, Mom was fortunate to receive a "Doktor Buch" - a medical journal - from her parents. How much she educated herself on human health issues, I cannot say. Mom didn't pass any of her intimate information on to me either. What my mother did for me was unusual and especially emotional to me: the day I left for America she gave me a condom. I was 25 years old when I said farewell to my family. It was a very emotional moment for me. Leaving my mother behind was especially difficult. It seemed to both of us that this might be the parting with no return. I was so touched by what Mother did. Her care and devotion left me standing there in tears. Her love at that moment reached an all-time high with me, knowing that she wanted me to be protected and safe.

Years later, in Canada, Mom was more open about her growing-up experiences and life in Teplitz. Yet she and I never talked about the gift she gave me. I was fully aware of her sense of duty that she carried out with such dignity. God bless you, Mom.