

Interview with Alfred Opp (Part 2) – Food & Drink Customs

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I would like to hear a little bit about your meals in your home. Who prepared your meals? What kind of meals did you have?

Oh, gosh, I tell you - Who prepared? My mom prepared the meals, naturally. My mom also had, for a little while, a maid. But the maid was just a young girl who was 14 or 15 who wanted to learn the arts of things. Usually those boys and girls were people who were poor - from families who had not enough land to care for eight to fourteen kids. But a maid was not uncommon. So we had one. It so happened that her name was Lydia also - but the name had nothing to do with the horse named Lydia.

So, the typical thing in the morning was, we got up, we had tea with bread and jam or schmalz. We didn't have butter. The schmalz was the fat - it was bacon fat that was left over from making the dinner days before. That was basically it. We kids used to get a boiled egg - my mother peeled it, cut it in half, cut it in pieces and put it in a saucer. What a lot of people don't know, I mean in my house we would drink the tea not out of the cup. We would put it in a saucer and drink it like this (two-handed). That's the way we drank our tea. My mom did it, my dad would hold it with one hand, but we would always drink it like that. Now, I've seen it with Russian servants, like my grandfather had quite often, they drank the tea the same way, you know. So I thought we adopted from them. But the saucers were quite deep.

And then we ate our big dinner at twelve o'clock. But usually it came with a variety. We adopted quite a bit from the Russians and Romanians, like the marmalik - that was a maize-flour deal that tasted very good. And we had chicken, and all that, amongst other things. It was usually good. There was not much sweet in it. For the evening we had saguske. Saguske means "cold plate:" cold sausage, pickled vegetables, you know, that kind of thing. And also, tea.

Now, between the meals. Us kids sometimes didn't like what was served. My mother would make a soup or some type of thing we didn't care for too much. Now, naturally by 3 o'clock we were so hungry, from running around. My mother was quite easy, but my dad was brought up very, very strict. And he said, "If you don't eat enough of what's at dinner - that will be it! You have to wait until supper." Well, my mother was so good-hearted, and my grandmother too, so we'd get a piece of bread - you know the old bread. They'd wet it a little bit, spread goose grease on it, and my grandma Opp - she was very, very good - she prepared that old bread very, very good. She'd put a little sugar on it, you know. Like I say, wet it a little bit and give it to me. Now my grandmother Zacher, she did it a little bit the same way, but she sometime came up with the idea that this old bread is very good for you, and she put a little sugar on it too. So anyway, that was basically it.

Did you have some favorite foods that you enjoyed as a child?

Well, sweets of course. You know I like sweets, like Schneebala. You know what they called Schneebala. I like sweets, and pancakes, and Kiechla, which was baked or fried - deep fried strips of twisted dough - put icing sugar on it. That's what I like. But I like anything sweet.

Now when I was a real, real good boy, my grandmother Zacher, she gave me a few Lei - we called it Leh - it was like a cent in Rumanian money. And when I did a real good job around the house, she would give me a Leh. And the next thing I would do, I would run across the street into the lafka - the store, we called it a lafka, which is Russian. And then I could hardly reach the counter, and so I told the guy, "I want halvah" - everybody knows what halvah is - and so he'd give me the halvah, and took a little piece of paper - there were no bags in those days, and he'd rolled it around - looked like a funnel, you know - and put a couple of spoons in it, made a twist on the end, and we'd hold it. Then he said, "Now you go over there and pay the man." And there were always two men sitting there. One was Mr. Neugebauer, and old Mr. Klotz. Mr. Klotz was the cashier and Neugebauer was the one who wrote the receipt. The receipt, you can imagine, was also made of hand cut paper, little squares that we put down with one Leh. I put it there, and then I took the Leh and I walked out of there. I was barely across the street to my Oma's house, when my halvah was gone.

Did your family do their own canning, butchering, sausage smoking?

Oh, jah! My parents - everybody did their own canning. That was - I mean - a great deal and so was pickling. But canning we did, but not the way we do it today. But the butchering --This is a long story here! That took a lot of time. It was very exciting for us kids.

But I tell you, the butchering was a little bit rude on those animals. They would pull the pig out from their bin, or from where they were in, and then two men laid them on the side, and the guy put his knife right underneath, and they were crying. I mean -- I don't know why they didn't find an easier way to kill those animals. My mom and I went into the house and held our ears so we couldn't hear it any more.

So anyway, after it was all done, well, it was a big thing. We did all the cleaning and scraping- we made our own sausage, you know. We did all the salting of the meat, we did our own smoking. But the smokehouse was up in the attic. Now attics were quite high. It seemed more or less like this room here, except it was in a pitched slope of roof. And we had a smokehouse because all the smoke from the kitchen and from the stove went through there. Sometimes we had to help things along, by making smoke. My grandma Opp - she was very, very good at it. Actually, people hired her. She went and she always made sure that everything was prepared for the sausage: the bacon-meat, the goose legs, the goose breasts, the Besskopf, or Bessmagen - it was the stomach from an animal. It was filled like a Haggis - it was all leftovers - but it tasted very, very good. So no, we made everything ourselves. There was nothing bought except salt and pepper - that was it - we didn't have the money.

And how did you store that food, to keep it fresh?

Well, the bread was kept in the cellar. There we had a board suspended from the ceiling. That's the way we kept the bread, usually for up to two weeks - until baking day. But then we had - my mom and my grandparents - we all had a metal container where they stored the meat in grease. They fried the meat first, you know, but not completely - but they fried it enough, and then they put it in and then they topped it off with hot schmalz - and that pork grease kept it over. They did that layer after layer, and so on, until that was full. And then they put it down in the cellar. And in the wintertime, they pulled meat out and put it in the frying pan, you know. So that's the way with the smoked stuff.

Then we had sauerkraut. We had barrels - two barrels of sauerkraut, two with pickles - anything we had we pickled. How delicious that was. And then we had wine, and then had the root cellar. We kept the cabbage - that lasts quite a long time. Roots such as carrots, red beets, and other stuff. We had to pickle our stuff to last, because that's the only way we could get our vitamins in the wintertime - because there were no fresh vegetables and the winter was long. So - that was very tasty.

Now doing all that, it took quite a lot of experience to do it right. Some people were better at it than others. So the rich people hired Bulgarian women who worked on loan - they came in at harvest time and did those things - they were specialized. But my Grandma Opp and my Grandma Zacher - they were just absolutely perfect. Now this one needs a lot of explaining, but I can go into that later.

What was your family's attitude toward alcohol, and did you have certain kinds of alcohol available?

Oh, they were very, very against it. My grandfather Zacher was a church elder. He was very against it. And he was a wine grower - oh, he got good prices. But anytime somebody asked him to have a drink of wine - some people would get quite pushy - he said, "No, on the doctor's order. I can only drink one glass of wine." My dad didn't drink any, especially because he was married to my mother, who came from a better house. He didn't drink. But my Opp family had a little problem. Like my Opp grandfather was known to drink a little too much, but my great-grandfather - he was known to drink quite a bit. There's a little story about that. His wife was not very pleased that he always had wine on his table while he was working. So, one day he said, "Go and get me another pitcher of wine." At that time, the wife did not refuse a man's order - most didn't, you know. That was not customary. There, you do it! Otherwise she was a "bossy" one -- that was not a good thing to be known for! So anyway, she got a pitcher of wine, and she put a dead frog in it. So, she put it on the table and left. She figured that if he drinks that wine and sees the frog, that makes him throw up and he will never drink a glass of wine again. My foot! He poured the wine into his glass, was drinking it, and he saw the frog, looked at it, and took it out. "These damn things get into everything!" He drank the wine without giving it another thought. Well, anyway. That's the way the story went on alcohol.

And just to finish up: What were some of your favorite German traditional dishes?

Oh, well, I tell you, we didn't have many luxury items in the house. We didn't have many fancy dishes, but we had some. My mom had a few that were better than the everyday set. But she had -- what you call it - Sonntags geshirr - that is Sunday dishes. My grandma Zacher had very nice ones. I tell you, they were nice. I remember

one thing she had - a soup bowl that was a real big one. And the only soup I ever saw in there was chicken noodle soup. She made her own noodles. Those noodles, I swear - very seldom did I see noodles so nicely cut -- all fine cut - all by hand. That was the pride of a woman, to have a noodle soup with very, very fine noodles. That was their pride, because many noodles were cut a bit too big. But her soups were special - for looks she left a little fat on it - they were just little eyes. Because a good soup, a lot of people thought, is one with a fat eye - that's good soup. It wasn't. That was not my grandma Zacher. There were hundreds of eyes on it. Then she sprinkled it with parsley. But that soup bowl! It was a big one, fancy, with two handles, with a ladle in it, you know. But all her dishes - they were just absolutely fancy. We had one - my mother had a coffeepot that I saw that was quite interesting that she inherited from my grandmother. She may have had some more but you know, I was a kid. As a kid you don't look at those so much. Except my grandmother's. They were extra-ordinary looking!