

Life in a Bessarabian Village - Societal Vices

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In our village of Teplitz, Bessarabia we lived a simple life. The families had lived in the village for many generations and the villagers were close to one another and lived in harmony. Our ancestors came from many parts of central Europe and they brought their customs and beliefs with them. Although religion was highly respected by all, some followed God's rules closely in their manners while others kept it a bit loose.

My grandma Opp was a serious lady who was conscientious about her good manners. She also had a sense of humor. In her time, there was a man who was often seen walking about town with a newspaper under his arm. Most people thought David to be a show-off, and suspected that he could not read. But any challenge to his knowledge was unsuccessful in making him come up short, because he had his wits about him and always came up with an answer. Many of the villagers also were not fluent in reading, which made their testing of the man all the more difficult, but a certain curiosity pushed them on. It was a custom on weekend evenings that many of the villagers would sit outside their houses to socialize or watch folks walk by. On one such day, friend David came by Grandma Opp's place while she was sitting outside. They greeted each other, and then Grandma asked the man about what was new. He gave her some gossip and they talked a bit. Then Grandma asked, What's in the paper? David sat down beside her, and thinking my grandma probably couldn't read anyway, opened the paper. He went through the motions of searching through the paper, but my grandma noticed that the paper was upside-down! After a minute or so, he remarked that the paper contained "nothing but politics," folded up the paper and stalked away. Grandma had no idea what "politics" was, but her curiosity was satisfied - she got her answer.

Newspapers and tobacco smoking went hand in hand in Russia for generations. Many of our ancestors enjoyed smoking when they came to Russia. In the eyes of the church people this was considered a device of the devil, and smoking in public was not always tolerated. But many of the later generations were smokers. My dad was a heavy smoker, whereas my grandfather only puffed one after he entertained guests. Dad bought a pack of tobacco and cigarette paper to roll his own. Grandpa smoked in grand style after dinner with his guests. He had a silver tobacco box that had space for tobacco, paper and two rollers on a rubberized liner that when set up rolled a cigarette by opening and closing the box. It was quite an invention.

A poor man bought his tobacco in a pouch and rolled his smoke in a piece of newspaper. To light up, many people used matches if they could afford them. The poor man used a hand-held three-piece flint device made of a wick, a half-round iron striker, and the flint-stone that gave up a spark when hit. The trick was to strike and blow at the same time to get the wick in action. It took practice to get it right, but I've seen people many times who got it right. Newspapers in those days were not that common either, and the ones that were around were in demand for many uses. A chunk of newspaper was always a prized possession.

Men and boys often enjoyed a game of cards. My mother told me that in the eyes of the village Elders, cards

were a "Devil's game." My dad played with friends for pocket change, but most of the young people played purely to be a winner. No-one wanted to be a Durak - a loser. Card games could end in an argument or even in a fight. The church folk had harsh words for those who took pleasure in card playing. A story went around that a man lost all his land in one night playing cards. As young men, my grandfather and his brothers played a friendly game one evening when one of his brothers became upset and raised his voice because he lost. Their mother heard the arguing, came in, grabbed the cards and took them and burned them. Grandpa never played a hand of cards again.

Before WWI worldly singing and dancing was also looked on as sinful, and not to be indulged in by those devoted to the Lord. Many young folks would hang out on their own - in secret. Our ancestors never shied away from a glass of wine or spirits, but some imbibed a bit too much. There were people in our village who became alcoholics and ruined their lives. The story is told that my great-grandfather H. Opp was a hard worker. He also liked his wine so much that his wife felt ashamed. One day he called for her to bring more wine to his workbench. She obediently fetched the wine, but in doing so added a dead frog to it. She thought that the sight of the frog would make him sick. After filling his glass, Grandpa Opp spotted the frog, grabbed it and tossed it out, remarking, "they get into everything!" He never gave it another thought.

One time when the village was contending with an outbreak of cholera, people became very scared and tried various means of staying well. Many people ate lots of garlic. Special prayer meetings to seek protection were well attended. Still people were dying daily. Those who were sick needed someone to take care of them, but nobody was willing to go near them for fear of catching this contagious disease. The mayor came to the rescue by hiring four people from the village to help out. These people were not experts in first aid - they were drunks! The common wisdom felt that drunks were resistant to disease. As it turned out, none of the four drunks came down with cholera. They died later, of other causes.

Our people were good at putting a label on someone to make fun of them. If someone's speech was odd, or they behaved strangely, or had a different dialect or accent in their speech, they were called a Kashub. As I understand it, a Kashub was a breed between a Schwabian and a Prussian. The Prussian side of the family spoke one way, and the Schwabian side spoke another way. The two coming together produced a very peculiar dialect that sounded quite funny. When the later villages in the north of Bessarabia were settled, people were assigned to them at random, producing quite a mix of culture and speech. Similar things had happened in many villages, but these people were labeled Kashuba. The term spread until it became common to label as a Kashub anyone who handled himself oddly from the rest. All it took was one individual who did or said what was not heard before to put him at odds with the purists. I often heard my mom label someone a Kashub, even here in Canada. It was clear that the term had a sarcastic meaning to her. The other day a guy cut me off in traffic. I turned to my wife and remarked, "What a Kashub!" Those of us who live here in America but don't speak such good English could be labeled a Kashub. Yet nobody laughs at us. It's time I realize that.