

## **Something from Nothing - Lumpen-Schuhe and Other Treasures**

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When I was a boy in Teplitz, Bessarabia, the school children were taught practical crafts as part of their school exercises. One thing we had plenty of for materials were corn husks. One thing we needed, with only dirt roads and dirt paths to walk on, were door mats to clean our shoes before entering the house. And so we were taught the practical craft of turning the corn husks into door mats. We would braid the corn husks together into long braids, and then sew them together with strong thread. Starting at the center of the mat, we would lash the corn-husk braids together around and around until the round or oval mat was a usable size. These mats were placed next to a dirt-scraper at the entrance to the house and another mat was placed just inside the door. The dirt-scraper was a 3x10-inch long blade with two spikes attached on each end that was rammed into the ground near the entrance to the house. Young men learning to be black-smiths made these dirt scrapers as gifts for their parents.

Another craft item we were taught to make in school were horse-hair brushes mounted on wooden handles. My father made the wooden bases in different shapes with holes. For the bristles, we used hair from the horses' tails and necks. We never cut large amounts of hair from a horse's tail, for each horse needed its tail hair to chase away the flies, of which we had plenty. We carefully trimmed small amounts of hair from an animal to get what we needed. We would ream the holes of the wooden handles so that the holes were wider at the top than at the bottom. Then we would gather some of the horse-hair into a small strand, wrap some fine wire around the strand of hair at mid-point, then bend the strand of hair double at the wire. After fitting the hair through the hole so that it was in tight, we carefully trimmed it. Then we painted the wooden handle to give it a nice finish. As we made these brushes, for added design we would swap colors of horse-hair so that the brush hairs ended up with dark and light designs. We had white horse-hair and dark-horse hair. We even mixed in some hair from cow's tails to get a nice center line. There was always a friendly competition among the students as to who could be the most creative and come up with the nicest-looking brush. This was a craft that the students always enjoyed.

Another item the older girls and boys made were called "Lumpen-Schuhe" - fabric house-shoes (slippers) made from old discarded clothing. Layers of fabric would be sewn together by hand, and then the soles would be cut to size. Then the top pieces for the slippers would be cut from fabric and sewn onto the soles. Colorful yarn was used to decorate and finish the tops of these slippers. These slippers were much appreciated to keep our feet warm in the house during the winter months.

The girls would cut fabric strips from old clothing and sometimes from leftover fabric to make rugs and mats for use in the house. This process involved braiding the fabric strips and then sewing the strips together in much the same way the corn-husk mats were made. Most of these fabric mats and rugs were placed beside the beds in the house. Stepping out of bed onto one of these small rugs was so much nicer than stepping out onto a cold floor in the winter-time.

Basket weaving was also practiced among the school-children as part of their school work. Some boys and girls were very good at it, but I was not. With all of these crafts, we learned to be both creative and practical. The older boys also learned to use their pocket knives to carve wood, and learned to make their own toys and game pieces.

Nothing was wasted in our village. We learned creative ways to make what we needed or what we wanted. We wanted to play soccer, but we had no ball. So we made one out of rags by tying the rags firmly together until we had a rag-ball. While this ball had no bounce, it still worked for playing soccer! We never ran out of ideas for making things.

We made our own tool to catch ground squirrels, of which we had so many they were a nuisance. This squirrel-catching tool was a rod with a hook on it carefully designed with a bend to reach into corners. When we had collected a match-box full of squirrel tails the farmers would give us enough small change to buy one or two candies.

By age 8 to 9 years of age most children were involved in helping with the field work. Often this meant sitting on the back of a horse, guiding it down a line for field weeding, while an older person would handle the plow the horse was pulling. This job lasted for hours a day. That was tough for a young child - sitting on a horse for hours and with no saddle.

My parents kept pigeons - an enterprise that did not require a lot of effort. The pigeons did fine all on their own! It was my job to feed the pigeons. Then, with my parents' consent, I was allowed to trade them away for other breeds. Sometimes friends would try and on occasion did out-smart me in making a deal. I got pretty good at making trades on things I had or made. When my father noticed that I was not all that bad of a dealer, he gave me more freedom. That was my early start in making trades - a skill that I later found very useful as I worked to build the business that brought me success for 33 years.