

Spiritual Training of German-Russian Children and Youth

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The spiritual life of a child born to German-Russian parents began when he or she was a newborn. The first visit to church was for the infant's "Taufe" (baptismal service) that was performed according to the old traditions and customs brought to South Russia from Germany. The service was scheduled in consideration of the health of mother and child and their ability to attend the service. Prior to the baptismal service, a Godfather ("Dede") and Godmother ("Doda") were selected for the child by his parents. It was the duty of the Godparents to be involved in the spiritual upbringing of the child. Sometimes more than two Godparents were chosen, if that was what the parents wished.

We had no resident pastor in the village of Teplitz. If the pastor was in attendance to preach for that Sunday's church service, the baptismal service for infants would then be held the same day the pastor was in town. If no pastor was available, the baptismal service was performed by a Sexton. If the Sexton was not available, the "Kuester-Lehrer" (schoolteacher) was qualified to step in on behalf of the Sexton. In the early pioneer years, a church Elder was always available to perform such services - many of these Elders were outstanding in their service to the community and were sometimes more spiritual than the trained itinerant clergy.

During the baptismal service, the parents and the Godparents all stood at the baptismal font. The baby, whether boy or girl, was often attired in the family's heirloom baptismal dress. Generally, one of the Godmothers held the infant while the Baptizer performed the ceremony. If the child was not well, the midwife who had assisted with the birth held the infant for the service. Baptisms were family events and many relatives from the village would attend. For the "Taufe," the presiding Pastor (or Sexton or "Kuester-Lehrer") dipped his hand into the water of the Baptismal font, then touched the forehead of the child to apply a little water onto the infant. Songs relating to Baptism or to the spiritual life of children were sung, songs such as "Dir Herr sei dieses Kind empfohlen" (To You, Lord, we recommend this child), "Ich bin getauft auf Deinen Namen" (I have been baptized in Your name), or "In Dein Reich soll ich O Vater kommen" (Into Your kingdom I shall come, O Father). In the back of most Hymnals was a section of readings for various occasions, and often the spoken part of the service was from the baptismal reading in the Hymnal. When an infant was very weak at birth and not likely to survive long enough to receive a standard baptism at the church, the village Sexton or "Kuester-Lehrer" would be called to perform an emergency baptism in the family home. Every child who was baptized received a beautiful Baptismal Certificate featuring artwork that depicted Jesus holding a little lamb. These became heirloom treasures for the family.

Other than for private family services, infants and very young children were not taken to regular church services. Sometimes young children would be in attendance at special events such as Easter, Christmas, baptism, a funeral or confirmation services. Generally, the mother, grandmother, or other elderly relative living in the home would stay at home on Sunday with the very young children. In my family, my parents alternated their church attendance so that one went to church one week and the other went to church the next week. Often a

family had a "Madchen" (young woman) who served as a family helper and thereby earned her room and board and sometimes a small allowance - such a position helped young women learn home-making skills and also relieved their parents of an extra mouth at the table. Part of the duty of the "Madchen" was to stay at home with the young children while the parents and the older children attended church. But even very young children were always included in family festive events.

The basic religious training of young children began in the home and was carried out by the parents or grandparents. Family prayer at meals was customary, and some mealtime prayers were short and easily learned by young children. A parent, from time to time, would discuss a spiritual lesson at the meal table, and the reading of a scripture verse was common. My "Opa "Zacher customarily gave a sermon to his family every morning at the breakfast table. Prayer would again be said at the supper table, and bedtime or evening prayers ("Abend Andacht ") were routine, often following a spiritual reading or passage from the Bible. In some homes singing was part of or entirely the routine for evening worship. Children were taught one or more bedtime prayers from a young age. Common bedtime prayers said by young children were "Lieber Heiland mach mich fromm das ich in den Himmel komm" (Loving Savior, grant to me entrance into heaven), or "Bewahre mich vom allem Uebel und behuete mich "(Protect me from all evil and bless me).

In Teplitz, even in 1940, few families had the funds to purchase printed religious material prepared for children or young people. Such things were available but had to be imported. As a rule, we did not have simplified Bible story books, religious magazines or youth papers. Only a few families purchased memory-verse cards; but every household did have at least one Bible, a hymnal, one or two prayer books and usually a catechism. If parents felt a child should memorize a Bible verse, that was up to them - there was no organized program by the church to encourage such memorization by children or youth. Fortunate was the child who had a parent or grandparent with a talent for telling Bible stories. Most parents read straight from the Bible or from one of the spiritual sections in the back of the hymnal. Some Bibles, like the one my "Opa "Zacher possessed, had nice illustrations that helped to hold a child's interest.

Singing was often part of the religious training in the home - German-Russians love to sing, and sing we did.. Not all homes had an organ or piano, so often the singing at home was "a cappella." Sometimes singing was done as a family group in the home and sometimes it was as a community group in church or preparing for a special program. Sometimes the mother or grandmother in the home would sing a song as she went about her household chores. The singing of spiritual songs opened the heart to God and gave a spiritual lift to the day. The permeation of religion into the daily life of most villagers is difficult for people to comprehend today. Children and parents together lived a life that was shaped by spiritual beliefs and activities. The church was considered the center and foundation of village life. Most community social functions were attended by a church Elder or Sexton or sometimes the Pastor when available. Such events were at least closed with prayer and often opened with prayer as well. As children grew and developed, they followed the example of their parents in the home and in the community. Religious upbringing was central to family and community life and provided a very solid foundation to guide the children and youth in all of life's activities. When parents needed to consult with someone for guidance about their child's religious instruction the Godparents were always available as were many relatives, including the grandparents.

The religious instruction of children by the community began when the child was old enough to attend school. In

the early days the Bible, the Hymnal and the Catechism were the basic textbooks in the classroom to teach reading, writing and content instruction, including memorization of the subject matter. In the pioneer years, a village Elder would teach Bible class at the school. In later years, after 1865, the Sexton might be the one to come and teach Bible class to the school children. It was part of the school exercises to prepare special church programs such as the Christmas Eve program where students of all ages sang songs and presented spoken pieces.

At about school age, children were also deemed old enough to attend church, but there were no special classes for children. Children sat with a parent or grandparent in the main seating area of the church. Since women sat on the left-hand side of the church and men sat on the right-hand side of the church, the child would sit wherever the parent or grandparent sat. Youth who had been confirmed were allowed to sit upstairs in the balcony, but always with the girls in the left balcony and boys in the right balcony. Since the organ was also situated in the balcony, the organist (often the "Kuester-Lehrer") could keep an eye on what went on. In addition, the pastor in the elevated lectern could also observe what was happening, especially on the boys' side of the balcony. If necessary, a church Elder would have an otherwise unsupervised youngster sit with him downstairs in the church. After marriage, young people sat in the main seating area of the church, not up in the balcony, but still the women sat on the left side of the church and the men on the right side of the church. After church, dinner at home was a family affair. It was common practice for older brothers or sisters who were on their own to stop by their parents' home for Sunday dinner.

All children approaching graduation from seventh grade were enrolled in "Konfirmanden Unterricht" (Confirmation classes). These were taught by the Sexton or "Kuester-Lehrer" and generally were held at the school. "Konfirmation" was held in the spring at the close of the school year. The "Konfirmation" class was responsible for decorating the church for the "Konfirmation" service. Greenery and flowers were popular materials with which to decorate the church. When the big day arrived, the class dressed in their best outfits, the boys wearing dark suits and the girls wearing white dresses (after 1915) and often white veils. For my mother's confirmation, her parents purchased a white dress and white stockings for her to wear to the service - it was rare to have purchased clothing in those days, and not many families could afford such luxuries. Godparents of the boys typically gifted their "Patekind" with a pocket watch, a white shirt with a tie, an embroidered handkerchief and socks.

Relatives of the "Konfirmation" class crowded the church for the service. The "Konfirmation" ceremony was always impressive and festive. Each candidate for "Konfirmation" recited their "Lebens Spruch," a speech that had been prepared during their "Konfirmandin Unterricht" and replete with Bible passages that gave their philosophy of life. Unfortunate was the young person who failed to spend adequate time memorizing their "Lebens Spruch" and then got stuck midway through the speech with no words to say! At the end of the service, each youth was presented with a hymnal with their name embossed on the cover (paid for by the parents), along with a "Konfirmations Urkunde, a".certificate that was richly decorated with colorful religious art work. People prized their confirmation certificates and often hung them up in their bedrooms.

"Konfirmation" was the transition point between childhood and young adulthood. Afterward, the confirmands would gather at home with parents, grandparents, Godparents and other close family members for a festive dinner. The confirmed young person was presented with gifts - each confirmed young person received several

gifts but some received more of some things than others. After confirmation, the next life step for the young person was to enter into an apprenticeship to learn a trade, or to enroll in an advanced course of study at a regional school if the family had enough money. Each young person set about learning life skills needed to prepare them to integrate into the communal life of the village as a worthy and contributing citizen of society. From an early age, each person was educated to be a useful member of society, to respect others and to be respected. This is the way our ancestors had been raised, and they continued to pass on these values as a proud part of our ancestral heritage.