

In Touch with Prairie Living

By Michael M. Miller

Germans from Russia Heritage Collection
North Dakota State University Libraries, Fargo



GERMANS FROM RUSSIA
GRHC
HERITAGE COLLECTION

As I prepare this December column, I wish to extend warm holiday best wishes and special "Weihnachten" greetings to you and your family.

The recent Pride of Dakota Holiday Showcase events in Fargo and Bismarck were wonderful outreach experiences. My thanks to the many persons who visited the GRHC booth.

In my December 1996 column, I shared memories of Christmas from colleagues. Jolenta Fischer Masterson, Sequim, WA, a Strasburg, ND native, writes: "On Christmas Eve, the angels would enter our home, cold with snow in their hair. Wearing wings and tinsel crowns, one would be in pink, one in blue and one in white. After singing, Stille Nacht in German and Silent Night in English, the angels would disappear into the night and bring back a special gift for each child - from the Christkindl, we were never told. Only after that special visit would there be a gift exchange and feasting. It was wonderful to be a child in those days!"

A Christmas tradition in many German-Russian homes was halvah. This pressed confection of sesame seed and honey is eaten as a desert or snack, somewhat crumbly and crunchy and quite sweet. With vanilla and chocolate flavors but sometimes marbled. Halvah is a Turkish confection. Curt Renz, Ames, IA, a Herreid, SD native, recalls his father selling halvah by the pound in their Herreid store. Curt remembers selling black olives, reaching with a cup into a huge wooden barrel filled with brine and olives. There were daily purchases by the

"old folks." Other common purchases were head cheese and blood sausage.

Jim Heilman, College Station, TX, a native of Eureka, SD writes: "My favorite childhood memories from the 1950's and early 1960's are associated with Advent and Christmas services at Zion Lutheran Church, Eureka. Saturday afternoons were reserved for endless rehearsals of the Sunday School Christmas Program held on Christmas Eve, part of it consisted of recitations in German, where were incomprehensible to most of us. The services ended with the singing of "O Du Froehliche". I have never forgotten the sound of the old folks, most born in Russia, as they sang that hymn in their quavering voices. Advent traditions are still the most meaningful part of the holiday season for me, especially here in Southern Baptist country of Texas."

Barbara Bohn of Toronto, Ontario, who grew up on the Saskatchewan prairies remembers: "When I was very small, I remember Dad taking the youngest children up into the attic and telling us that this was the night the Krist Kindel would come and bring us presents. We would hear sleigh bells outside and then the front door would crash open and a huge box full of wrapped presents would come flying into the front porch along with lots of snow and cold. It was always so exciting and there was the hope that the very special thing we wanted most would be in that box of gifts. I loved Christmas Eve when Dad would hitch the horses to the open sleigh

and we would all be bundled in warm coats, boots, hats, mittens and scarves. Dad would have put the bells on the horses' harnesses and away we would go in the snapping cold under the black sky filled with thousands of stars that seemed so close you could reach out to them. If it happened to be a full moon - it was a magical scene - brilliant white snowdrifts sparkling again the backdrop of dark spruce trees and shadows creating a mysterious and beautiful landscape."

The 16th Journey to the Homeland Tour is May 20-30, 2010. The tour includes May 22-26 in Odessa, Ukraine visiting the former Bessarabian, Black Sea and Crimean German villages. The tour group also travels to Stuttgart, Germany for May 26-30 including a day tour to Alsace, France, and visits to the German-Russian museums in Stuttgart. Detailed Tour information and costs are at this webpage: www.ndsu.edu/grhc at "Homeland Tours."

For further information about the Germans from Russia Heritage Collection, the 2010 Journey to the Homeland Tour and donations to the GRHC (such as family histories), contact Michael M. Miller, The Libraries, NDSU Dept. #2080, PO Box 6050, Fargo, ND 58108-6050 (Telephone: 701-231-8416; Email: Michael.Miller@ndsu.edu; the GRHC website: www.ndsu.edu/grhc).

December 2009 column for North Dakota and South Dakota newspapers