

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 the holiday season approaches, I wish to extend Yuletide Greetings and special “Weihnachten” greetings to you and your family.

The tradition of St. Nicholas (Belznickel) bringing gifts for children traces its origins back to the Middle Ages. According to legend, St. Nicholas, the historic bishop with his flowing white beard, was a generous, kind-hearted figure. The Belznickel rewarded faithful children. Today we know St. Nicholas as Santa Claus, who evolved from the Dutch “Sinter Klaus.” I recall the Belzenickel in my childhood on Christmas Eve growing up at Strasburg, N.D.

According to Joseph S. Height’s book, “Memories of the Black Sea Germans:” “There is no historical evidence that the German pioneer settlers in Russia set up a Christmas tree in their homes. Perhaps the most obvious reason why the colonists did not have a Christmas tree for several decades is the simple fact that no evergreen trees were to be found on the steppes of the Volga and Black Sea regions.” On the Dakota prairies, the German-Russian pioneers faced a similar situation with no Christmas trees until they were shipped for sale to towns.

Jolenta Fischer Masterson, Sequim, Wash., native of Strasburg, N.D., writes: “On Christmas Eve, three angels would enter our home, cold with snow in their hair. Wearing wings and tinsel crowns, one angel 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, after bringing a special gift for each child - from the Christkindl, we were 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 was eaten as a dessert 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, Iowa, recalls his father selling halvah by the pound in their Herreid, S.D., store. Curt remembers selling black olives, by reaching with a cup into a huge wooden barrel filled with bring and olives. They were daily purchases by the “old folks.” Other common purchases were head cheese and blood sausage.

Homer Rudolf, Richmond, Va., native of Wishek, N.D. recalls: “Some of you remember having the Belzenickel and the Christkindl visit our homes on Christmas Eve. In our community, when company came to visit during the Christmas holiday, the hostess invariably said: ‘Well, let’s have the Christkindl visit us.’ What happened was that cookies and hard candy were brought out, and everyone gathered around the table to munch away and make Maistub! On the table were various cookies including Ammonia, Pfeffernuesse, Date Pinwheel, Plantation Creme, and prune-filled cookies, popcorn balls, Blachenda, Kuchen, and of course we always managed to buy some halvah. Before we had our own freezer, the unheated Vorheisl [entryway] was a great North Dakota substitute. Mom

and Dad said that often the only gift they received a Christmas was an orange.”

Barbara Bohn, 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 Christkindl 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 gifts would come flying on the front porch along with lots of snow and cold. 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 into the snapping cold under the black sky filled with thousands of stars that seemed so close you could reach out to them. It was a magical scene - brilliant white snowdrifts sparkling against the backdrop of dark spruce trees and shadows creating a mysterious and beautiful landscape.”

For further information about the Germans from Russia Heritage Collection, the Friends of the GRHC, the Dakota Memories Heritage Tour (September 15-18, 2011), the 17th Journey to the Homeland Tour (18-28 May 2011), and donations to the GRHC (such as family histories), contact Michael M. Miller, NDSU Libraries, Dept. 2080, PO Box 6050, Fargo, ND 58108-6050 (Telephone: 701-231-8416 ; Email: Michael.Miller@ndsu.edu; GRHC website: www.ndsu.edu/grhc).

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