

In Touch with Prairie Living

December 2015

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



GERMANS FROM RUSSIA

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As the Holiday Season approaches, I wish to extend Yuletide Best Wishes and special “Weihnachten” greetings to you and your family.

Louise (Regehr) Wiens of Ontario traveled in August 2015, to visit the ancestral village of her mother and aunt for the 200th Anniversary (1815-2015) of Leipzig, Bessarabia, today in southern Ukraine. Below is her story.

“Nothing could have prepared me for what my eyes were about to behold as I walked towards the Lutheran church in Leipzig. The magnificent white steepled building which once was the pride of the village and which at one time had seated hundreds of the faithful had been reduced over the years to a small dilapidated structure. Dirty windows and curtains let in some meager filtered light as I squinted and closed my eyes, trying hard to reflect on the grandeur of its past. As I hesitantly opened another door in the back, I was shocked to step out into a pasture of sorts, seemingly as neglected as the building itself. I again delved deep into the corners of my mind and tried to retrieve the wonderful stories I had been told so often about the church in Leipzig. I envisioned rows of filled pews in a row in that now empty pasture and also in the now missing balconies, but most of all I tried to picture wonderful Christmas Eve services I had heard so much about from my mother and her sister.

“Yes, it was the highlight of the year for us,” my 91 year old aunt recently told me. “We could hardly contain our excitement. On December 24th after school, we all walked across the street to the church for the program for which we had been practicing very hard. We girls all wore our best dresses, which our mothers usually sewed. Every student recited a Bible verse or sang a song. It was so beautiful. We were all looking

forward to the sack of goodies which we would receive at the end of the night. In school we had all sewn little sacks which we had embroidered with our names. We received apples, nuts and some sweets. The older students received a pencil and the young ones received a small blackboard with some chalk. We didn’t open our sack until we got home because we were so afraid we could lose something on the way. We were thrilled with our treats and nobody ever complained. Everyone got the same thing and the same amount. There was no money for presents.

Several weeks before Christmas the deacons from church went door to door in Leipzig to collect money from families of the students to buy treats for the sacks. Families who could not afford to give were able to give bundles of wheat which then were sold by the deacons. There was not much talk about Santa Claus. Not that I can recall anyways. Pine trees didn’t grow in our area of Bessarabia. Every family had a small fruit orchard in their yard and so we would bring in a small sampling of a branch which we had fun decorating. We tore up small pieces of green paper and twisted them around the branches to simulate leaves. In our Christmas sack we often had a few pieces of candy and after we ate the candy we carefully refastened the paper wrapper and then tied it on the tree for decoration.

We also baked little wreath-shaped cookies and hung them on the tree. Our parents went to the market a couple of times a year so sometimes we got a candy cane at Christmas, but there were eight children in our family so this did not happen very often. Sometimes we had halva and a type of rice pudding at Christmas. These were always special treats. And fruit soup. Also Holubtsi. And we sang Christmas Carols.

Louise writes, “I get up from the computer desk and walk over to my sewing machine. I opened my mother’s dark brown wooden sewing basket and pick up several spools of unopened pink embroidery thread, circa 1955. There is also some dressmakers’ sewing chalk from the same era, which has withstood the test of time and which I will use today. And then there is a large white plastic box that once contained Halva, but which now functions as a container for my spools of thread. A tasseled nomad perched on his camel is embossed on the lid, *Sacharen Bros. (1966) Inc.* The box is a treasured remnant from my childhood.

I gave my aunt a quick phone call. She informs me that she has polished off the last of the Halva which I brought for her from Leipzig this August, and which I purchased at the 200th anniversary celebrated at the school across from the church. This is the same school which she and her siblings attended and which still stands today. “Yes I always wanted to become a nurse,” she often tells me. “But the war. Well...you know. We all had to quit school.

And so it was, that I (Louise) was one to eventually become the nurse. Although I had always really wanted to be a teacher...a history teacher that is.”

The memories of Louise are shared in her writings at this GRHC webpage: http://library.ndsu.edu/grhc/history_culture/custom_traditions/index.html at Louise (Regehr) Memories.

If you would like more information or you would like to donate to the GRHC (family histories and photographs), contact Michael M. Miller, NDSU Libraries, PO Box 6050, Dept. 2080, Fargo, ND 58108-6050. (Tel: 701-231-8416); Email: Michael.Miller@ndsu.edu; GRHC website: www.ndsu.edu/grhc.