

In Touch with Prairie Living

December 2018

By Michael M. Miller

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



GERMANS FROM RUSSIA
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As the Holiday Season approaches, I extend Yuletide Best Wishes and a special Fröhliche Weihnachten greeting to you and your family!

The December/January 1984-1985 issue of *PRAIRIES Magazine* published by the *Ashley Tribune* included this fascinating article authored by the editor, Warren Overlie: "A Russian Christmas: How was the grand holiday of Christmas celebrated by the German colonists in Russia during the 19th century? With cakes and prizes - and tales of trepidation - as this story relates."

"Children in the German colonies of South Russia in the 1800s celebrated Christmas in a way that was both merry and frightening. It was a time when obedient boys and girls were rewarded, but the disobedient could glumly look forward to stern lectures and perhaps a spanking. On the night before Christmas Eve when the sky was red from the setting sun, an excited mother gathered her small ones around her and told them stories about the time when Christ was born in a stable a long, long time ago. Friends of their parents would also visit in the house throughout the day.

Helga was most certainly correct. Christkindlein was coming. Helga was the oldest, and slowly opened the door. Who should her dreamy blue eyes behold? Yes! At last! It was Christkindlein! How beautiful he appeared, so tall and white in a flowing gown! "Won't you please come in?" she finally managed to gasp timidly. Christkindlein grandly pranced into the room, ringing a bell and singing. He carried a big bag, and the children gradually recalled from their mother's coaching that Christkindlein was the bearer of wonderful presents.

"Have you been a good girl this year, Helga?" asked Christkindlein in a booming voice. "And how about you, Gotthilf? And you, Tina? And you,

Reuben? And you, little Elisabeth?" It was amazing how Christkindlein knew so well the names of the children.

Suddenly, there was another loud rapping at the door. Christkindlein opened it, and into the room leaped an athletic figure all covered with fur. "Pelznickel!" shrieked the children, terror-struck. If the children had looked more closely they might have detected that this roaring, stumping apparition was only Oskar, the young man who worked at in his uncle's blacksmith shop. He wore the heavy sheepskin coat. He had a very big and bushy beard. On top of his head loomed a big cap with horns, and around his neck clanged a banging chain. In his left fist, he carried a dangerous stick, its evil purpose and all too obvious.

"Who can recite some Bible verses?" asked Christkindlein. "Does anyone know John 3:16?" Reuben shyly raised his hand, and then softly repeated the well-known verse. "Das ist sehr gut," said Pelznickel clapping his hands and patting Reuben on his back. "I am very proud of you."

The children's knowledge of the Bible made Christkinlein and Pelznickel beam with joy. To the delight of all, Christkindelein presented each child with an orange and apple, a raisin cookie, a big piece of blachinda, some zucchini bars, and an enormous prune kuchen.

How happy everybody was! Then Christkindlein and Pelznickel said it was time for them to leave because there were other children they wanted to visit.

Pelznickel frowning said, "I want to see a little boy named Ross. I understand he has been up to some mischief. And I shall certainly want to ask Carrie and Kirsten why they were playing with matches when they were explicitly told not to do so."

As Pelznickel and Christkindlein, walked to the door, they hugged Gotthilf, Reuben, Helga, Tina and Elisabeth. They chirped in unison, "We will help Mutter and Vater, and we will try to think about other people's feelings and not just our own all the time," they promised.

And that is the story of how Helga, Gotthilf, Reuben, Tina and Elisabeth grew up to be such fine, helpful and considerate people. When neighbors would compliment them, they would always reply with grin: "There were two strangers who came to our house at Christmas-time when we were children. They had odd names, but they taught us a lot."

Read the the complete story of "A Russian Christmas" at <https://www.ndsu.edu/grhc/articles/magazines/prairies/christmas85.pdf>.

I want to thank the hundreds of visitors who came to the GRHC booth at the Fargo and Bismarck Pride of Dakota Holiday Showcases in November and early December. We saw many folks of our Germans from Russia community.

If you would like more information about the Journey to the Homeland Tour to Germany and Ukraine; becoming a Friend of the GRHC, or would like to donate (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; website: www.ndsu.edu/grhc.

December column for North Dakota and South Dakota weekly newspapers.