

## Interview with Shirley (Fischer) Arends (SA)

Conducted by Ron Vossler (RV)

July 2, 1997

Ashley, North Dakota

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Edited and Proofread by Peter Eberle

- RV:** We are in Ashley, North Dakota at the home of Emma and Christoff Fischer, and we are first going to be talking with Shirley Fishcher Arends, author of Central Dakota Germans: Their Language, History and Culture. Shirley, could you give us your name and education and a brief background about yourself?
- SA:** My name is Shirley Fischer Arends. I studied here in Ashley, North Dakota. I was born here and went to high school here. I went to Ellendale State Teacher's College for two years and went to Minot State Teacher's College for two years. I left North Dakota one year to teach in Montana. At that point I received a scholarship to Kent State University in Ohio to study German, which was really the beginning of a long history of my life. After Kent State I received a Masters degree in German literature. After Kent State I worked in many places, lived abroad for twenty years in Europe and ended up getting a PhD at Georgetown University. I was a Georgetown university fellow. Getting the masters, having a successful life, getting the PhD—the secret has always been the education that I received in North Dakota and the complete and total support I always received from my parents.
- RV:** Your book The Central Dakota Germans is a major major contribution to the understanding of Dakota German culture in general and it follows the book by Nina Farley Wishek, which was the first real sort of exploration of the German plains culture. What was for you the most interesting part of the work you did on your book? What did you enjoy the most in writing your book?
- SA:** I think the most enjoyable was that I was the outlet for the people that I interviewed. When I went to Kent State in 1961, I had no idea that I was part of any kind of unique cultural group. I thought I was simply an American. Of course I still feel that I am simply an American, but I'm also a part of an ethnic group. They asked me to do my Masters thesis on this ethnic group, and I came back to North Dakota and started to interview people. I started to interview the pioneers who came from Russia to Dakota and settled here. The most wonderful thing for me has been that I could be an outlet, and that all these people were so delighted and so thrilled that somebody cared, that somebody wanted to know who they were and where they came from, and that somebody wanted to make a record of this for future generations.
- RV:** When you set out and began writing the book did you have particular aims in mind? Were the parameters drawn for this broad an exploration—because it is the history, language and culture—or did that evolve?
- SA:** It evolved. First I did the Masters thesis which was the start, but I would have to say that the topic captured me. Going all the way back to '61, I kept working on it. I'd come home, my mother helped me and traveled around with me, talked to people. I kept working on the topic, working on the topic, and at one point I was going to publish it as a book, and I spoke to my former advisor for my Masters thesis to

get advice on how to do it, and he said to me “Why don’t you do your PhD? You have a dissertation and if you do it as a dissertation you can get advice; you can get help from people who are experts in all these fields.” I had gone into so many different fields. I had gone into the history of the people, the personal history; I’d gone into the culture, all the different facets of the culture—their sayings, magic healing.

Magic healing is what the Germans call it. It’s the healing that we found in the communities, and I had gone over so many different areas and collected so much material that he felt that I needed to go somewhere where I could be helped and where people could give me advice. He thought that it would really be a worthwhile contribution. I applied to Georgetown University because they’re a very famous school for languages, linguistics, and studies of cultures and people, and I received a fellowship—I could study for free, teach at the school—and of course I had two other jobs on the side, I had two children to take care of. I received advice from specialists in all the different fields, and if I had a question like—we talk about magic healing, in North Dakota we call it Brauche, which is healing which is how I was treated when I was young because of the lack of doctors. I could go to the specialist for Spanish language and Spanish history and ask him if it had appeared—someone had told me it had appeared in the Spanish language as witch—and he could explain to me that somehow with the German tribes moving that this word had come to Spain and had never been traced in the etymological books. So then we had another view of how very old what we are talking about is.

I also studied the Grimm brothers who not only wrote fairy tales but also history of German culture, and in the Grimm brothers I could find sayings that went back to pre-Christian history that were part of the brauche tradition, showing how very, very old these things were, and how they came along through the culture. Then as the tribes became Christianized they adapted the healing with the Christian faith. All of these interesting facets of faith: you have the Jesuits at Georgetown, I’m a Lutheran. And you have the most famous school in America for linguistics and with professors from Germany, especially professor (A59 Rhine) who is the world’s specialist on dialect, taught me how to come home and how to record this dialect which is something that I had not done before. We recorded the dialect; we studied the dialect; we can tell you by how you speak where you’re from in Germany or in Alsace—in that region. That’s one of the chapters in the book that was an addition to the book, so the book became a chapter on history. I have gone through everything, I’ve pulled it all together, the history that you get from the people that I had talked to and their history and how it fits together with the history of the people as a total.

I studied the culture, all of the facts like the wedding traditions, funeral traditions, how all the traditions were part of the church calendar year. These traditions had songs which we found; they had special foods that you ate, and the whole thing developed around the church. They were very, very faithful, very devout people. One of the chapters then of course was on healing and that kind of a cultural background, so it is a very interesting history book I think.

**RV:** So you have a variety. Even your subtitle indicates the variety and the broad amount research you had to do—history, language, and culture—so many things. I’ve found in my own work that there are almost too many things to touch on that it becomes a huge project, but I wondered what you particularly enjoyed working on, if there was a certain part of the book that you found most rewarding to work on, or that if you had to save only one part of your book what part would you?

- SA:** Well I think the cultural history is so fascinating because you go back in time so far, and you realize how old things are, because as an American I am like everyone else, you know, if its too old lets tear it down and build something new. When you discover that your cultural background and the things that you accept and you start to go back—how much people knew along time ago. We think that we're the beginning and the end when we're young, we know it all, we're going to the future, and we don't realize that our future is so based on what we already have and what we've already experienced and the values that we've gotten down through the generations. I think the DNA studies are probably a start in explaining to people even their cultural history—how much is in you that is a part of you, that is very important in how you live your life.
- RV:** It is interesting how the growing up in this Dakota German culture there often was this strong sense of being influenced by family. If you're Fischer you do this and this and this, and so you almost have in a folkloric way some of the reflections of modern discoveries, as you say, with DNA. What do you hope people reading your book won't miss? What would you like to highlight as a focus?
- SA:** Well, there's two ways that I approached it. I wanted the book to cover everything for the people in general. I didn't cover my own family; I covered for everyone so that they could take this book and go from there and study their own family, and in doing that my greatest hope was that it would get into the schools so that the young people in the Dakota's would come to realize how much has been done for them and with what great intelligence. These were not just simple people who came over here and built a little sod hut. It took enormous intelligence, it took enormous strength and confidence to come to a prairie where there were no trees for shelter, no trees for fuel, no water; that you could come in here and build something; that you can come in here and settle this vast prairie. I would like the young people of the Dakota's to realize what was done for them and how much that they have to be proud of.
- RV:** You talked some about how as a young women you gone with your mother and visited many of these people who you ended up interviewing for the book. Could you tell us an interesting or a particularly scene or time that you remember well?
- SA:** Well my grandmother, who was a healer, a Brauche, was crippled for the last thirteen years of her life with arthritis because she worked so hard on the prairies. She was an educated woman; she spoke and wrote Russian and high German, and she spoke the German dialect which she taught me, and she also spoke the Moldavian dialect, the country Moldova today. She couldn't leave the house because she was crippled, and I always had to help take care of her. Well all of the old people in Ashley came to our home to visit her, and all of the people who needed healing came to our home to visit her, so I as a child growing up had this enormous cultural advantage of having all this going on around me.

My mother is also a Brauche, although she doesn't practice it because she believes modern medicine can take care of people now. This is something you did when you didn't have anything else you could do. My mother always took me to visit people. We would visit the older women who were widows, living in little houses here. We'd take them oranges and talk to them, and I had an enormous background doing those things. The experience that stuck with me and that I learned to really understand was when I went to the Ukraine (was South Russia then) to visit. I was talking to an older women named Mrs. (A117 Reidlinger) who I had known who had lived down across the tracks from our house. She was in the hospital in Ashley, she was dying, she was in her 90s, and I was holding her hand, I was just a young women, and she said (she was crying), "It was such a hard life. In Russia we had fruit on the ground, we had grapes on the ground, we had apples on the ground, and in North Dakota we found only stones on

the ground” and I think every Dakotan can relate to that when they see the piles of stones in the fields all along the highways that people had to pick. The earth was so difficult to cultivate.

**RV:** So that was this woman’s memory of Russia that you connected with. Now you’ve also been to Ukraine and visited, what were your feelings then?

**SA:** Well I didn’t quite understand her because of course I thought, you know, Ashley, being an American and I still do—it’s the most wonderful thing. I didn’t quite connect to everything that she was saying, but I certainly remembered. I made notes, I wrote everything down. The first opportunity there was to go into Russia, I went in about three years ago, and we had a lot of problems with soldiers sort of floating free with some machine guns and all, and little road blocks and things, but I was determined to get through. I got into the area called Glueckstal, which was where most of the people in this area came from—Glueckstal in Russia. I got to all three villages where my family was from: Glueckstal, Neudorf, and Bergdorf. They were the three villages of the Glueckstal area.

The thing that I was overwhelmed by is how beautiful the villages were, how prosperous the people must have been who lived there, how they had these long houses, roofs coming (A134), a long house facing a wide road and then streams along the front, streams along the back and a huge garden in the back—very prosperous, very beautiful villages. Most overwhelming, the churches looked like little opera houses with big columns, beautiful churches and they’re still standing. The Soviets did everything to destroy religion, but those churches are still standing, they have been used for (A138 discotech) and whatever, but it exists.

There was one woman in the town of Bergdorf where my grandfather Fischer came from, and I was with two Americans and two Germans, and I was the only person who could understand her. She and I had this conversation: She had grown up in Bergdorf and then when the German army marched into Russia their world was destroyed at that point because they became the enemy, being German. They were then taken by Stalin to the slave-labor camps in Siberia where all of the men basically died; a few of the women came back. The families, you can’t say that like “a person is missing from the family”, but rather “a person is left from a family”—it is very, very seldom that there are two or three. And she was still living, and her daughter was still living in this little town of Bergdorf, and when she talked to me she could have been living next door to me all my life because we spoke exactly the same German dialect, using exactly the same words. The German people with me couldn’t understand her very well because the dialect is so old, but her dialect had been preserved because of their isolation in Russia and the years in the camps, no opportunity to study or learn different German. Our dialect was preserved, we would have lived there together if we would have stayed; we [both in Russia and in ND] lived in isolation, settling great areas. The Ukraine looks like the Dakotas, only there is more water—well not anymore, we have so much water now. Ukraine looked like Dakota—vast fields. This area had been taken over by the Russians from the Turks and they brought the Germans in. They didn’t just bring Germans in, they opened it for settlement, just like the American Homestead Act; they had their own version of a homestead act. So they settled in Russia, they were rather isolated, we came to the Dakotas—North and South Dakota. This area down here, said by the famous American historian Frederick Jackson Turner, was the last frontier. The frontier was divided into six parts and this was the last frontier known as the Great Desert.

So we’re in here, we’re isolated in our small communities together, our language was preserved. It’s like if you go to Egypt to the Pharaoh’s tomb, and you dig out these things that makes everyone so happy

because they find a vase from a certain era of Pharaoh's period of time. We have the same thing with our language; it's like a little vase that's been preserved because it's been so isolated. Our language is a very beautiful dialect and it's still spoken in the (A165 Bertenberg) area of Germany. This doesn't mean all the other German's understand it because they have different dialects in different parts of Germany, but anyone from (A167Bertenberg) would understand us and would understand this lady in Russia. But she and I spoke exactly the same and it was a really overwhelming experience for me. She talked to me and told me her problems, told me what she had suffered; she accepted me because the language was the acceptance point; I spoke like she did so completely that I was a part of her family, we belonged together, and she accepted me that way. I had very good experiences in Russia with people with the language. That was always my entrée; it was always the way that I could get them to tell me really painful, painful parts of their history.

**RV:** So the language itself, the people and their folkways by being isolated both in Russia and in America, in effect, as you said in your book, gives us kind of a window onto another world. Could you say more about that?

**SA:** Exactly. The language holds the culture. If you study linguistics you learn that language holds and carries a culture. So little sayings that you have, "if you work hard this happens or that" your religious customs—the Lutheran religion and the German language worked together in a great deal to carry; and they carried the Catholics too because the Catholic Church is very international, and they have Latin for their services and all. But the language carried the culture of the Lutheran faith—the Lutheran faith helped, but the main part was the language itself—you know all the little sayings that your grandmother told you and different kinds of food that you eat or a certain way that you treat people.

I think that in North Dakota we have a real sense of community, and I think this comes also out of those villages. I don't think you could have settled this vast plain—sea of grass I would call it—without a real sense of community. It was not possible for one person to come in here and build a little sod hut and survive. They had to pull together, they had to accept each other as members of one great family and one community, and I think we still have that here today. I think about the flood in Grand Forks and how that was carried through and how people helped each other—and in Fargo. I think that shows what an enormous sense of community that we have in the Dakotas. We didn't have vandalism; we didn't have all the problems that you usually find where you have major disasters.

**RV:** Maybe a related question from that: How or in what ways do you think growing up in this central Dakota German culture shaped your character and your own attitudes?

**SA:** Well, like I said, I always knew I had the support of my parents, and I also knew that I had the support of my grandmother who wasn't even living anymore. Because of the things that they taught me, the things I learned here in my community, I've always been able to work hard, and I've always been able to come through every adversity; it's an attitude—you accept adversity. When I had adversity I would think "well my grandmother came to North Dakota and lived on the prairie and suffered and worked so hard and froze so hard and had this arthritis, all these things; and my parents who so much wanted to go to school and had to leave school in the eighth grade and worked so hard. What could happen to me?" Really, nothing. There's nothing that I couldn't face, because the adversity that I faced was something that with character and hard work you could get through. I wasn't fighting elements; I wasn't fighting the lack of opportunity because that's available to all Americans.

- RV:** So in the settling of this last frontier here, in a sense, that frontier still lives on in you.
- SA:** In all of us I think. It lives on in all of us. I think North Dakota people wherever I run into them are very well educated. They place a very high value on education because I'm sure that most of them had the same experience that our family had: that people were not allowed to go to school, that they had to work, that the opportunities weren't there. North Dakotans, whenever you meet them, are always successful, hardworking, value education, they value family, they have strong moral character. I'm always very, very proud to be from the Dakotas.
- RV:** We've talked some, and there's a statement that at the very end of a cultural tradition whatever remains is food, and is often is the last cultural remnant to go. What do you think, for example in this area in Ashley, is left besides food as far as cultural traditions of the Dakota Germans?
- SA:** I think we have an enormous amount of cultural tradition left, and I think we still have, like I said, that sense of family and community. A lot of people still know German; a lot of young people still know the German dialect. One of the things that I wanted to accomplish was, as I mentioned, is that young people should be proud of what happened, of what was done for them, of the intelligence and hard work that went into settling the Great Plains, and I think that our language has been devalued, and I think in devaluing our language, you know, calling it a funny dialect or whatever when it's a very healthy dialect. Professor (A228 Rhine) says that it's an intact dialect; for those of us who still speak it it's an intact dialect. I think not enough value is placed on the dialect, and I think one of the saddest things is that we don't teach German in the schools in Dakota when we have this credible background and when people have so much knowledge already it's not that difficult to learn a language.

And Germany is a very important country. There's no way to get around it; it's a very important country, although as far as we're concerned—it's very strange, the word German. We speak German and all of that, but I don't think people think of themselves as German in any sense related to a country of Germany, because when we left Germany two hundred years ago there wasn't a Germany. There were little places: Dukedoms, like today, Liechtenstein, Luxemburg, Switzerland—little places like that. That's why you have the (A237 Vertenberger) speaking Swabish, the (A237 Birush) speaking Bavarian, the kingdom of Bavaria, they are all divided up. It was only Bismarck, who our state capitol is named after, who in the 1870s had pulled together all of Germany as a country. That was the first time that we had a country as Germany, and I think because we all left before there was a country of Germany, we don't relate to the Germany—the country Germany.

In fact, I spoke to a German historian in Washington one time and I said "Why is it that people don't consider us German?"—even the American historical society of German historians doesn't consider us German. We're considered Russian somehow, although we don't speak Russian. It's because we left Germany, went to Russia, and came here when it wasn't a country. We've never formed a bond with German as a nation; we don't know the national anthem; we don't recognize the German flag, we don't know what it really looks like, maybe you see it at the Olympics. We've never had a bond with Germany as a nation, but we've had a bond with Germany in the sense of being German speakers, having German cultural things that we do like the little sayings that they may have that we may have, and the Germans find it interesting because a lot of the things that have survived—because we have the culture of Germany at the end of the 1700s beginning the 1800s that have not survived in Germany. They've had the two wars, they've had the bombings, they've had changes of people, refugees from everywhere mixing together They don't have the cultural heritage in tact, in some ways, as we do. It's very

interesting, like Brauche, the healing, all of the customs that go with that are really lost, although they know it existed. These are things that we still have that we can contribute that are interesting to them. But our relationship with German speaking Americans or German speaking Germans is a cultural thing; it's never been a nationhood thing.

**RV:** We've talked a little bit about the undervaluing of the dialect and I had similar experience in university when I spoke dialect, it wasn't hokdeutsche, it wasn't the right kind of German. So I wonder if you think there is an undervaluing or not valuing of the cultural traditions. For example, if we went up and down the street in Ashley and talk to people, they probably wouldn't be able to say very directly that some of what the traditions they carried on were German; they wouldn't even identify them necessarily as such. Why do you think that is? Where does it come from? Is it a lack of recognition or an undervaluing?

**SA:** Well, I think one of the problems of course is WWI and WWII and the picture of Germany as an aggressor and the picture of Germany with the holocaust and all this. I think in a subtle way it's put on us even though when we left Germany it was in the era of Napoleon. When Napoleon took over he took the western part along the Rhine river on the west away from the Catholic bishops and the Catholic princes who lived there and gave it to France, and he moved them to the east side of the Rhine river and started dividing lands up. According to the German laws at that time, if the prince was Catholic the people were Catholic, if the prince was Protestant the people were Protestant. Napoleon started pulling German boys into his army. He had to force all of what he was doing, and he wanted to use them as he went east as he went to Russia, as he went everywhere. One of the reasons people left is they did not want to be involved in all of these military activities. They did not want to serve in the military.

Also, of course, there was the church issue, if the prince then became a different religion, then Catholic people would leave or Protestant people would leave and move onto the new lands. The new lands at that time were in Russia, not in America, although some people were going to Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Missouri. So they were always anti-military. This is a strain that runs through, and that's why so many of our people here in America, even our Mennonites and Hutterites, people who will not serve in the military even today. We have an anti-militaristic history.

When they were in Russia, they came in with all kinds of rights. They didn't have to serve in the military; it was a basic right, and they could have their German schools and run their own communities. Well, at some point, when the Czar loosened the laws so that the serfs would have more rights they brought in universal military service which was around the 1870s. Then once again these groups of Germans were being asked to serve in the military. For instance, my uncle Christian, who served in the war as a captain in the Russian army in the last with Turkey, my grandfather served as an officer in the war with Japan. As long as one brother was in, the second, third and fourth had a chance to not go, but as one brother went in the other brothers left. They went to the new frontier which was America. When the brother got out of the service, he left; they did not want to serve in the military.

Once again, they were moving to not serve in the military, and when they came to America there was no draft—you did not have to serve in the military. Then the draft was brought in and the Germans in the Dakotas served in the American military in WWI, and they served in WWII. Two close relatives of mine were killed in Germany in WWII. So the anti-militarism was during their German period, although they did then serve in the military [in American]—my son is in the military, he is a Navy lieutenant commander, so we are now serving our country, but this is our country, it's not the prince who has decided in Germany that you have to go and serve in Napoleon's army. It's not the Russian Czar who has

decided that you have to serve in his army in the Turkish war. In America, it's our own country, they're our own laws, our own decisions, and I think that's why they started serving and the military thing is in the past now.

But to answer your question about why it is not valued, I think that outsiders view us with WWI and WWI because they consider if you're a German, you were involved in the war. Not all Germans were involved in the war; not all Germans were for the war. I don't think that that should be held against us in anyway. I don't see the connection.

Also, the dialect, because we don't have German in schools, people can't take the dialect background and develop it into really solid high German. When I speak German, I speak my dialect, and I also speak a German of the quality of an Oxford English. I speak a very upper-class, excellent German. I'm always complimented for my German, a very unique German, and I did it with my dialect. I went to college, and I used that dialect as my basis and ended up with a PhD from a famous university like Georgetown. I did the whole PhD in the German language. I did my papers, everything, in German, and I got a "with distinction" on the book I wrote, the dissertation, on the Germans in the Dakotas. It's a very valuable tool, and people are not making use of this tool. They don't have a chance; we're teaching, for some reason, Spanish in North Dakota in the schools. Nothing against the Spanish language, but young people don't have the opportunity to turn over this knowledge and make something of it. That's why the dialect just sits there and isn't valued and can't grow and can't change.

**RV:** What do you think the general American public needs to understand about the Dakota German culture?

**SA:** Well, I would think the main thing would be how much they contributed as pioneers. Everyone in America loves pioneers. It's one of the few things that historians haven't been able to ruin and change and say it wasn't good. Pioneers suffered; they built this country. Their values—you know we don't just have Puritan values, the Puritan values are important, but we also brought values to America and we pioneered.

If you look at North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, up into the three provinces of Canada to the north of us, parts of Montana, over to Washington state, Sacramento Valley in California—this was all pioneered by the Germans from Russia, and in the Dakotas of course and all along through our area with our Scandinavian neighbors, but we were the people—the Scandinavian and the Germans—who pioneered here, and we brought values and these values have become a part of the American culture and the American value system, and I don't think people even realize that. We have so much to be proud of, and the value of community like I said before, and a moral life in a sense that you care about your environment. In North Dakota, when people turn on the water they are paying attention to how much water they're using. They're paying attention to what they're doing to the environment because they've lived with the environment. When they walk out of the house here they say, when the clouds are going this way and down there it's dark and over here it's light—the minute they leave their house they're in their environment, they know where the clouds are, they know what the wind is doing, they know what the weather is doing and they value that environment. They're probably the first environmentalists. Also, the hard work ethic and the fact that all adversity can be overcome, and the deep faith—I think the religious faith that they had—without faith you can't accomplish a lot. You have to have faith in God, you have to have faith in yourself, and you have to have faith in your family and in your community.

**RV:** Thank you.

**SA:** Thank you.