

# In Touch with Prairie Living

December 2023

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 continues, 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." In this column, I would like to share some of that article.

"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. The children became very happy because they knew that soon Christmas Day would arrive. Then they would eat many delicious cakes and nuts. Friends of their parents would also visit in the house throughout the day, and there would be much laughter and even the exchange of gifts.

The children could barely sleep that night. They were too excited. But then, finally, their little eyes grew weary, and they fell fast asleep, dreaming of the morrow's excitement. When the sun peeped its gold webs across the still-dark sky, one of the children wakened the others with a shattering shout: "It's Christmas Eve morning!" A pitter-patter of little feet echoed on the stair-way, making a tardy little mouse scurry about in terror as he tried to comprehend all the sudden noise in the house. The children scampered and followed their noses to the delectable aromas wafting out of the kitchen, where Mutter was already busy baking pies and cakes and bread and pudding. Oh, what an exciting time of the year! the children thought. "These pies and cakes are rewards for your good behavior," said the mother, laughing. That made the

children cheer and cheer. But then she asked, solemnly: "Do you know who is coming to our house tonight?" "No!" shrieked some of the little toddlers. "Yes!" yelled Helga, the oldest child. "I know who is coming to our house tonight. Christkindlein will be here."

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 a 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 Christkindlein and Pelznickel beam with joy. To the delight of all, Christkindlein 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."

GRHC has many items available including German-Russian cookbooks for Christmas gifts. Go to [www.ndsu.edu/grhc](http://www.ndsu.edu/grhc) and click 'Shop Online'.

For more information about donating family histories and photographs, or how to financially support the GRHC, contact Jeremy Kopp, at [jeremy.kopp@ndsu.edu](mailto:jeremy.kopp@ndsu.edu) or 701-231-6596; mail to: NDSU Libraries, Dept. 2080, PO Box 6050, Fargo, N.D. 58108-6050; or go to [www.ndsu.edu/grhc](http://www.ndsu.edu/grhc). You may also contact me directly at [michael.miller@ndsu.edu](mailto:michael.miller@ndsu.edu) or 701-231-8416.

*December column for North Dakota and South Dakota weekly newspapers.*