

# Christmas & New Year Customs and Practices of Resettlers from Sarata, Bessarabia

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[Begin Translation/Transcription]

## Christmas & New Year Customs and Practices of Resettlers from Sarata, Bessarabia

The Christmas festival, since time immemorial, the most German of all festivals, was naturally also of great importance to us in Bessarabia and as such held many customs associated with this festival. To be sure, there was no Advent festival with garland and candles in earlier times as in recent years. We came to know about these first through the National Socialist movement. Unfamiliar to us also was the Nicholas festival. Nevertheless, the many facets of the whole season of Advent conveyed fascination in the hearts of the young and the old.

There was the joy uppermost in each individual person of preparing the secretive Christmas gifts for the festival and, in the children, to convince the *Christkind* [Christ child], also known as *der Pelzmärte*, lying in wait outside by the window, of their good behavior and obedience.

When, during this period of time, the children quarreled and fought, or became unruly and wild, it was enough to give a quiet reminder of the *Christkind* and the little gang once again sat together quietly and well-behaved, or again eagerly took to learning their little Christmas verse and Christmas song.

Impatiently, the children counted the days and hours until Christmas Eve (*heilige Abend*), when the Christmas gifts would be handed out. I still recall vividly how we children would count the days until Christmas with chalk marks under the big table, each day rubbing off a mark. Nevertheless, because the time was going so slowly, we would rub off two or more marks at one time in order to speed up the arrival of the festival. Oh, but soon we came to know to our sorrow that neither joy or sorrow, nor impatient yearning and hoping and wishing would speed up the pace of the season. And that was good. How would the many duties of mother then have been able to be completed before Christmas!

The Festival of the Apostle Thomas, on 21 December, was known in the vernacular as Doll Holiday (*Bobbelesfeiertag* or *Puppenfeierstag*), because the little dolls (*Bobbela*) for the young girls and the hinged-leg and stick hobby horses (*Schenkel- und Steckenpferd*) for the boys had to be made and there was a lot of whispering going on here and there and secretive activities to be attended to.

Then came Christmas Eve. A large glimmering fir-tree (*Tannenbaum*) stood in the church (a tree which had to be gotten from the hills hundreds of kilometers away due to the treeless prairie!) around which gathered all the children of the congregation with ever so gleaming eyes. With great impatience, the little ones endured the pastor's sermon and with great excitement they sang their various Christmas songs and "spoke" their Christmas verses before the congregation. The old reliable customs, which resounded in the houses throughout the German country, were also among us. It would not have been Christmas for us without "*Stille Nacht*" [Silent Night] and "*O du fröhliche*" [Oh How Joyfully] and "*Ihr Kinderlein kommet*" [Oh Come Little Children] and "*Alle Jahre wieder*" [Every Year Again] or "*Es ist ein Ros entsprungen*" [Behold, a Rose E'er Blooming] and all the other names of the old hymns.

After the worship service came the celebration of Christmas within the families. Even though things were different from house to house, one thing was certain: in every house a Christmas tree was lit up and here also resounded once again the old reliable custom of Christmas hymns. Then came the distribution of presents and, in many families, the appearance of the *Christkind*, or the *Pelzmärte*.

The part of the *Christkind* was played by a young girl from among the relatives. Dressed in a snow white garment with wings attached, face heavily veiled, so that the children might actually believe that it was the actual embodiment of the *Christkind*. The *Christkind* let the children pray and sing and gave to them the secret presents the parents had hidden, followed then with a few words of admonition and the advance promise of returning again if the children would continue to be well-behaved and good until then.

Often the *Pelzmärte* would appear along with the *Christkind*, or he would appear alone either before or after the visit of the *Christkind*. He wore high boots, a large shabby fur coat (*Pelz*), a big pointed fur cap and a long flowing beard. Also part of his outfit was a crude club (*Knüppel*), or a knobbed stick and a lantern, or also a small bell. He carried a sack of apples and nuts on his back and also some twigs, which he used to threaten the bad boys. Making loud noises as he walked, he would enter. His voice sounded rough and severe, and, in the presence of the *Pelzmärte*, the little children hung tightly to their mother, or in terror hid under a table or bed, if they did not have a clear conscience. The role of the *Pelzmärte* was usually played by a young fellow from a neighborhood. He also inquired about the good behavior and obedience of the children, also asked if they were good and attentive in school and whether they said their prayers. Then the children had to sing their songs or say their verses. Then nuts and apples were handed out and the feared one disappeared.

With the fading of the hymns and the extinguishing of the candles, the family ate their evening meal. On this evening, as also on Christmas day, there was plenty on the table. As a rule, also the hired man and the maid (if they were Germans) joined the farmer for wine and ginger bread, which otherwise they were not found together as equals.

During the following days of celebration, folks visited neighbors and extended family. During this time the Christmas tree was lit, there was singing and the various home-baked ginger breads of the housewife were tasted and praised, in the course of which the farmer, with a grin, poured out a bottle of wine "made by himself". The events of the year, the harvest and weather, what

was happening politically and the prospects for the new year were vigorously discussed. Then also the barns and cattle and horses and all farming innovations were reviewed and talked over before they parted company.

Immediately after the two days of celebration came the Day of Migration (*Wanderstag*) when the domestic servants exchanged their position or began their year at a new job. During this time there were often long sessions of bargaining and negotiating until a person came up with suitable fair terms.

Then arrived New Years Eve (*Sylvester*). On this evening, here and there, an old farmer would come up with an "Onion Calendar" (*Zwiebelkalender*), which would forecast the weather for the new year. It was come upon like this: A big onion was sliced in half and each layer, representing the 12 months, was spread out on the window sill and sprinkled with salt. And on the morning of New Year's Day, according to the amount of moisture gathered on the individual layers, one could determine the wet and dry months of the new year.

New Year's Eve was generally celebrated earnestly and solemnly with a worship service and Holy Communion. Even the young people were not prevented from staying awake on this night to bid farewell to the old year and joyfully greet the new year. It was in Sarata like in many other Bessarabian villages that the bells rang the old year to its grave and 12 clapper gongs of the bell to proclaim the arrival of the new year. Then resounded choral music or the melodies of the brass band, while, in the interim, loud gunshots exploded from every corner and end (of the street) and people wished each other a happy new year.

On New Year's Day, the children went to the homes of friends and relatives to wish them good fortune, whereby they received either money or sweets as a reward. The good wishes were expressed in verse or song, many also delivered in the dialect, as for example:

|                              |                                    |
|------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Ich ben en kleiner könig     | I am a little king                 |
| Gebt mr net zu wenig!        | Do not give me too little          |
| Lasst mi net so lange stea   | Do not let me stand around so long |
| I muass a Häusle weiter gea. | I have to go a house further.      |

The other one started in high German and then continued in the dialect:

|                                 |                                      |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Als das neue Jahr gekommen,     | As the new year has arrived,         |
| Haben wir uns vorgenommen,      | We have taken it upon ourselves,     |
| Euch zu wünschen in der Zeit    | To wish you at this time             |
| Friede, Glück und Einigkeit!    | Peace, good fortune and eternity!    |
| Friede, Glück und selig Leben   | Peace, good fortune and happy life   |
| Woll der liebe Gott euch geben! | Would that dear God grant it to you! |

This was then followed by:

|                                       |                               |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Wensch eich a glückliches neues Jahr! | We wish you a happy new year! |
| Guda Morga!                           | Good morning to you!          |

or

Dr Stall voll Render,  
s Haus voll Kender!  
a Säckle voll Geld  
und alles, was ihr euch wünschet wollt!

The barn is full of cows,  
The house is full of children!  
The little sack full of money  
And everything which you would wish for!

Another materialistic good wish sounded like this:

Dr Stall voll Hörnla  
dr Boda voll Körnla  
an jedem Eck auf m Tisch  
en brotena Fisch!  
en dr Mitt a Flasch Woi  
no ka dr Vetter und s Bäsle  
glücklich sei!

The barn is full of horns  
The ground covered with seeds  
On every corner of the table  
A bread and a fish!  
In the middle a bottle of wine  
Now uncle and aunt  
Can be happy!

Even strangers, Bulgarians and Russians, came to the German villages in great numbers on the morning of New Year's Day as well-wishing *Surbser*, with their recited well-wishing or their melancholy new year songs and were thereby given their anticipated rewards. Many a well-wisher ended up the new year day in a drunken stupor.

Also, in earlier times, on Epiphany Day (*Heilige Drei-König* = Three Holy Kings), or on the evening before the day, children went around singing. In later years, this tradition was lost in Sarata. On the other hand, for example in Beresina, it was still very much observed. A multi-colored revolving star was carried out in front and then, either at the front door or in front of a window, this was sung:

Die heiligen drei König mit ihrem Stern  
Sie kommen und suchen den lieben Herrn,  
Sie kamen vor Herodias Haus,  
Herodes schaute zum Fenster heraus.  
Der Stern, der Stern soll umwärtz gehn

The three holy kings with their star  
They came in search of the dear Lord,  
They arrived at the house of Herodias,  
Herod looked out of the window.  
The star, the star has to move farther

(at this point the star was motioned to the surrounding area)

Wir müssen heute noch weiter gehn!

Today we still have to go farther!

This was followed up with a reward in the form of nuts, sweets or hard cash, which would generate the following response:

Weil ihr uns eine Verehrung gegeben,  
So solt ihr dies Jahr noch viel Freude erleben,  
Und ihr und eure Kinder  
Und ihr und euer Gesinde!

Because you have given us such respect,  
May you experience a lot of joy this year,  
You and your children  
You and your domestic servants!

Usually, it was on Epiphany Day that the Christmas tree *emptied*, which means that the decorations were removed. The eatables still hanging on the tree were eaten up by the children, the remaining decorations stored away by the mother for the next year. And with that came an end to the beautiful Christmas with its guests and its sociable evenings. Now it was back to the drab everyday routine of one's job.

(Imm. Schöch)

[End Translation/Transcription]