

Our Neighbors, the Bulgarians

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Note: Information within [brackets] are comments by the translator.

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[Translation Begins]

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by Immanuel Schöch

The German villages of Bessarabia were surrounded by foreign people like an island in the surging sea. There were Russian, Ukrainian, Bulgarian, Moldovan villages, Cossack and Gagauz settlements. This was especially true for Sarata. Three kilometers [1.9 mi] south of it was the Bulgarian village of Kamtschik. Today it bears the name Sarja. So here the conversation will be about Kamtschik, not Sarja.

The place was founded in 1830, around the same time as some of our German colonies, such as Gnadental (1830) and Lichtental (1834), were founded. As colonists, the Bulgarians received about the same privileges as the Germans, but the Russian government gave them only thirty *Deßjatinen* [81 acres / 32.7 hectares] of land per family. They left their Bulgarian homeland on the other side of the Danube, after they had to endure various oppressions under centuries of Turkish rule and had been assured by the Russian government of full religious freedom and economic development as the Slavic fellow-believers. So, Bulgarian colonists, who had been assigned to settle in the lands around Bolgrad and in the Cahul District, but also in the southern part of the Akkerman District, came to their new Bessarabian homeland. They were to be mainly engaged in vegetable and fruit growing, but also in silkworm breeding and of course in agriculture. Sheep and horse breeding of the Bulgarians also had a good reputation.

In terms of his character traits, the Bulgarian was perhaps the closest to the Germans of all foreigners. He was tough and industrious, reliable and modest, and at the same time of extraordinary thriftiness, which here and there went as far as stinginess. The Germans were held in higher esteem by the Bulgarians. Over the decades, the Bulgarians tried more and more to

imitate the German model. They also made good progress in this respect, adapting more and more to the Germans both in clothing and especially in house building.

The great influence of the Germans was particularly noticeable on Kamtschik, but also on the Moldavian Gura-Celighider (five kilometers [2.3 mi] west of Sarata). Anyone who got to know the remote Bulgarian and Gagauz villages around Taraklia or the Moldavian settlements along the Dnjester [River] where no Germans lived, could make comparisons that confirm my observations. The favorable influence of the Germans on the others was occasionally praised by the authorities.

Although the population of Kamtschik was almost as large as that of Sarata, it initially had hardly any craftsmen of its own and no shops. At first, the Bulgarians liked to work for German blacksmiths and carpenters, tailors and shoemakers. They also came mostly to Sarata for their purchases, as larger shops offered a better selection, and they also placed greater trust in the German merchant and craftsman.

Even before the First World War, a number of Bulgarian apprentices were accommodated by the German masters of Sarata in the various professions, but also as agricultural workers they tried to learn German methods of work and imitate them at home. In fruit and vegetable growing, from their past experience, they were perhaps even superior to the Germans.

One of my best childhood memories is picking cherries in Kamtschik. Dimitri Dimitriew had a magnificent orchard. Cherries and apricots grew especially good here. He invited us children to eat cherries and apricots with him every year. We picked and ate as much as we could, then each of us got his basket of cherries to take home for the mother, who was always happy about this juicy greeting. Instead, Dimitri and his people were with us for the picking of grapes and then helped with horses and wagons and his workers for days.

Courses of Learning by the Bulgarian

As a young teacher, I made the acquaintance of the venerable old colleague Michow. Although I did not understand Bulgarian very well, I attended a lesson on “the honeybee” which he gave in the Bulgarian language—it was immediately after the annexation of Bessarabia to Romania, even before the Romanization efforts began. This hour was so instructive, so vivid, so full of information, that I still remember it today as a true “sample lesson”. He fetched from his stand a honeycomb studded with bees, pointed out the queen, the drones, worker bees and brood, the cells filled with honey or flower-dust, and gave wonderfully clear and beautiful explanations.

When I once went on a learning tour with my school class to the Bulgarian vegetable gardens—“the cabbage gardens”—on the Sarata River, in order to show the children the irrigation systems, the large scoop out wheel (*Schöpfrad*) with winch (*Göpel*), then the magnificent cabbage, the dark blue (Aubergines) [egg plants], the yellow pepper plants and the heavily hung tomato plants with the red beautiful fruits, we set out on the way home, singing German songs, by way of Kamtschik. Men, women and children, everyone hurried out into the street to see the German school class and to hear and wave. So we came to the vicinity of the school, where colleague Michow was already waiting for us. He kindly invited us to take a break in the shade of his

beautiful fruit trees, which we gladly did. No sooner had the children made themselves comfortable than Mr. Michow had two giant tables carried here, then his wife brought two large bowls of honey, a little girl pressed a tablespoon into each child's hand and off they went! Oh, how that sweet honey tasted! Many years later, we laughed and smiled when we remembered the "visit to teacher Michow" and the Bulgarian hospitality. After we had rested and strengthened ourselves, we visited the teacher's large **silk caterpillar breeding facility**. In a room almost the size of a classroom, there were high shelves on which many thousands of silkworms were eating. The constant eating and nibbling on the fresh mulberry leaves, which were brought here by the basket every day, sounded like a mildly trickling fine autumn rain. The students stood there overwhelmed and amazed, but Mr. Michow explained and I translated: "When the warm spring days bring out the first tender leaves from the mulberry trees and mulberry bushes, the time has come to bring to life the eggs laid in early autumn by the silkworm butterflies, which had previously been kept cool and airy in cardboard boxes. Already for the laying of eggs the female butterflies had received linen flaps underneath, like small handkerchiefs. They attached their eggs to it. Each female laid 500 to 800. Now the caterpillars have to be brought to the point of hatching. They need a very uniform temperature of 37 degrees (*Grad*), just like the human body has when it is healthy. That is why Bulgarian women hang the linen flaps covered with eggs on their bare chests, and after only 36 to 48 hours the caterpillars begin to hatch. They are now only 4 to 6 millimeters [0.15 to 0.24 inches] long. In a warm room, the little black-headed caterpillars get their first food—the most tender mulberry leaves. They eat eagerly and therefore grow quickly. In the course of their development, they shed the skin several times and finally reached a length of 6 to 8 centimeters [2.4 to 3.2 inches]. When



they are fully grown, they refuse to eat any more food and look for a suitable place to spin a cocoon. Now the shelves are covered with thin brushwood, and soon you can see the caterpillars spinning their elaborate cocoons. A clear sticky juice wells out of the mouth, which immediately hardens into a thin but strong thread in the air. This thread is 1,000 meters [1,097 yards] and longer. The nicest cocoons are left in the room for further breeding. The others, however, are thrown into a cauldron of boiling water, where the threads are loosened and can now be wound up. The dead pupae go to the farm as chicken feed. The raw silk is spun together by the Bulgarian women into thicker threads to knit silk stockings or weave fabric for blouses. These silk things not only look beautiful, they are also extremely hard-wearing and durable. The correspondingly cut cocoons are also sewn onto darker velvet to create artistic flowers and ornaments and thus adorn the Bulgarian state room as 'pictures of velvet and silk'.

The pupae that remained alive have turned into butterflies after two to three weeks and are now hatching. Although they have wings, they are completely flightless and do not eat any food in

their short lives. They marry (*halten Hochzeit*), lay their eggs and die. The purpose of their existence has been fulfilled. The cycle can start all over again. We thanked Mr. Michow for the hospitality and the instructive lecture, sang a little song as a farewell and made our way home. What we had seen and learned again today!

In the Stone Quarries

Another course of learning led us to the Bulgarian stone quarries. Stone quarrying and masonry were also areas in which the Bulgarians were very efficient and with considerable effect, as Sarata bought almost all of its stones for the construction of the houses and stables from Kamschik. Most of the buildings in Sarata were also built by Bulgarians.

We had taken ladders and ropes, candles and firewood with us and under the guidance of Stepan Trubanetz, an old stone crusher, we enter the tunnels, which are about four to six meters [13 to 19 feet] underground. The work here was hard and also dangerous! Probably every year there were the injured and again and again a dead person, killed by being crushed by falling rocks. We were not at ease down there, and we were glad to be able to say goodbye to the old Trubanetz in the light of the bright sun. The broken limestone was nicely placed above ground according to certain size and sold in this way. We searched in the fragments for fossils of shells enclosed in the limestone layers, as witnesses of a long-vanished period of the earth's history. We took with us the most beautiful ones for the mineral collection at home and at school.

Whit-Monday—Marriage Market

Today was Whit Monday (*Pfingstmontag*), which has been the day, here in short called "Marriage Mart" (*Heieratsmarkt*), of the official engagement of the young couples since ancient times. Around the church, the shopkeepers had pitched their stalls and tents. There were the most beautiful baked horses and dolls for the children, colorful candy canes called "flag sticks", bear dirt (liquorices), stork dirt (a white sugar mass) and Halwà [a thick paste made from flour, butter, liquid oil, saffron, rosewater, milk, turmeric powder, and sweetened with sugar]. But also the thirst was well taken care of! Lemonade, Kwaß (a Russian, fermented drink made from malt, bread and the like) and fruit juice in all colors! And there are the swings! Hey, how the young couples whizzed through the air!

The girls stood in groups on the large lawn, who wore their best clothes that day. So that one could see how many of them they had, they wore five, six skirts on top of each other, each of the upper ones always one to two centimeters [0.4-0.8 inches] shorter than the lower ones. In the long black braids, however, silk ribbons and roses were interwoven. And over there stood the young fellows in high boots, snow-white shirts and dark, stiff felt hats, self-conscious and foolhardy. Yes, fur trousers, fur vests, fur hats, the everyday costume of the Bulgarians, were prohibited today.

Well, look at that! Feoder has spotted Frosika, his chosen one. He approaches her, swinging the waving handkerchief in his right hand and in a flash he has wrapped it around her left wrist and is now holding her tight. Wlas has also captured the beautiful Irina. With pounding hearts and

flushed cheeks, the girls listen to the marriage proposal of the boys and try, at least in appearance, again and again to tear away to free themselves. All in vain!

Over there, in the shade, however, the parents sit at the tables with Kolatsch (round yeast braid or cake) and wine and watch the goings-on of the youth. Now the young people agree. The bride is presented to the groom's parents for their expert opinion. Oh, she would like to sink into the earth in front of them! But now the fathers of the couple have come together for an extensive deal. It is about the dowry that the young couple is supposed to bring into the marriage. The size of the land, the number of horses, the agricultural implements which the bridegroom receives for his equipment are determined. The bedding and body linen that the bride has had in the chest for a long time, the furniture and home equipment, the number of cows and sheep and poultry will be precisely determined and invoiced. In the meantime, the mothers of the newly engaged have gathered at the table of the men and given their consent, they drink to the well-being of the young couple, to the new acquaintance and relatives. The bride and groom, however, leave for the dance. Again and again, new brides are picked out "like raisins from the cake" and, after more or less vehement refusal—that is the way it has to be!—dragged before their parents. By the evening, the couples should all have found each other. The old ones, however, fix the day of the wedding for the autumn, when agricultural work has become less urgent. Cases where the engaged "have to get married" or even illegitimate children are expected hardly ever occur among the Bulgarians. Smoking would put at risk a girl's good reputation and is therefore out of the question. This is the exclusive privilege of old gypsy women!

Even before the wedding, the huge dowry chest is filled with the objects of value collected, spun, woven, crocheted and knitted over the years. The groom's horses are no longer harnessed to work these days, but groomed, cleaned and fed all the more carefully. On the day of the wedding, flowers and silk ribbons are woven into the mane and tail, all buckles and metal parts of the horse's harness are polished to a high shine.

In the house of the bride or, if so agreed, also in the house of the bridegroom, tables, chairs and benches are collected from the whole neighborhood and relatives. Whoever enters the house is entertained—and how! Around noon, the bride is brought in and the young couple, followed by their family and relatives, proceed to the church. A stand up (*standesamtliche*) wedding alone is not enough! It would take too long to describe the entire wedding ceremony according to the strict Orthodox rite. Now (*Bald*) the bridegroom, now (*bald*) the bride are given the golden crown of honor under the glittering ceremonial canopy (*Baldachin*), now (*bald*) they have to kiss the Bible, now (*bald*) the cross; now (*bald*) there is singing, now (*bald*) reading from the Holy Scriptures; until the priest stretches out his hand to the bride and groom and expresses his congratulations, as a sign that the ceremony is over. Now the whole group goes to a noon meal. Before entering the wedding house, the bride and groom have lined up to receive the congratulations of the guests and the wedding gifts—usually in clinking coins. The father of the bridegroom points out the seats to the guests; the "father of the wedding", an older relative chosen by the father of the bridegroom, raises a toast to the bride and groom, and soon everyone is busy at the richly set table. Usually a chicken soup comes first, then roast lamb or poultry, rice with raisins, pudding, coleslaw and various vegetables and of course plenty of wine and schnapps. The last serving is made up of various pierogies (type of pie with different fillings),

which should not be missing. At the upper end, where the bride and groom sit, each guest has his glass; at the lower end, where it is particularly loud and lively, the brandy bottle or the wine jug circles from mouth to mouth, glasses are not necessary here! There are no speeches, eloquent speaking or other recitals, but the musicians, some violinists, trumpeters and drummers provide a good atmosphere.

After the meal, the large dowry chest is brought into the residence of the newly married. This is one of the highlights of the festival. It is done under great fanfare. In front of the procession, on the first wagon, the musicians have taken their seats, in the second wagon the bride and groom, in the third wagon follows the dowry chest and in the following further wagons the best man and bridesmaids follow. So it goes through all the streets of the village, where there is no lack of windows, doors and gates of idle bystanders.

When the dowry chest was finally set down after this tour, there were often still horse riding competitions or team wagon competitions of the young men, who, whipped up by the consumption of alcohol and blinded in their greedy ambition, let the horses run through the streets at swift speed. The proud winner was celebrated by everyone.

For the evening meal there was pork knuckle, sausage platters and sheep's cheese, pickled cucumbers, tomatoes, stuffed peppers, pickled watermelons and sweets at the end. Only late and only reluctantly did the guests head home.

Honeymoons were unknown. For the young woman, it was now much more important to settle in with the family of her husband. In a patriarchal custom, the father-in-law and mother-in-law determined the work duties of the daughter-in-law. They were happy to have gotten a new worker. Often only after years, when the children who had arrived in the meantime had grown up a bit, but the grandparents had become old and frail, our wedding couple could think about working and living in their own, independent way. Certainly, a lot of self-control and willingness to sacrifice was part of the everyday life of such a marriage, but, as a rule, the young people were obedient and hardworking, undemanding and contented and therefore happy.

The fact that German guests were also invited to such family celebrations of foreigners again and again may be seen as proof that we knew how to get along well with the foreigners there, and that when the Germans were resettled in 1940, they wept bitter tears for them.

[Translation Ends]