

## Some Reflections on German-Russian Humor

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**(In 2001 I translated the dialect tales of Hermann Bachmann, a German colonist school teacher and linguistics scholar who wrote a collection of humorous anecdotes about the German colonists in the Beresan colonies.<sup>1</sup> In my Introduction I included a brief discussion of the flavor of these tales. The discussion below explores some aspects of the German colonists' folk humor, which was not included in the original Introduction.)**

Some of Bachmann's tales bear the unmistakable imprint of the ancient prototype of *Hanswurst* (literally, "John Sausage"), a popular figure of jest and ribaldry throughout German speaking realms. The first recorded appearance of "Hans worst" was in a 1519 production in Rostock of the "Ship of Fools" (*Narrenschiff*), in which he was portrayed as a clumsy rascal with a face resembling a sausage. In 1541 Martin Luther wrote a tract entitled "Against Hanswurst," in which he railed against the peasantry as "vulgar sows" and "asses." Luther described Hanswurst as a great "blockhead" (*Tölpel*) who wanted to appear clever, yet who was very clumsy in speech and behavior. Despite the derision (or, more likely because of it) Hanswurst blossomed into a popular clown in stage performances throughout central Europe. He served as a foil, a form of comic relief in more serious dramas such as the Faust story. Carl Jung noted that there is a mercurial quality to this buffoon-like trickster figure, he is an "altogether negative hero and yet manages to achieve through his stupidity what others fail to accomplish with their best efforts."<sup>2</sup> Hanswurst has remained a popular figure among the common folk, celebrated in jokes, tales, and street performances in market-places throughout Central Europe. He is still featured in *Fastnacht* celebrations, where he often appears as a fool swinging an armlength leather sausage. His name appears in various forms throughout the German speaking realms, as *Wurschtl*, *Hansnarr*, *Hansdampf*, *Kasperl*, and *Bejazzel*.<sup>3</sup>

German-Russians were quite familiar with Hanswurst and they too used him as a popular figure of jest and derision. Arnold Marzolf defines this archetypal character as "...a windbag, a blusterer, a busybody and a blockhead. His purpose in life seems to have been to hoax, to chafe and to tease; thus, he came to be known as a clown, a jerk, and a buffoon."<sup>4</sup> Marzolf insightfully notes that Hanswurst is symbolic of dichotomies deep within the German-Russian psyche, which he characterizes as having a tendency to swing between extremes of seriousness and buffoonery. The serious end of the

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<sup>1</sup> Hermann Bachmann, Through the German Colonies of the Beresan District and Colonist Tales, Forward by Joseph Schnurr, Translated with Commentaries by Roland V Wagner, published by the Germans from Russia Heritage Collection, North Dakota State University Libraries, North Dakota State University, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Carl Jung, "On the Psychology of the Trickster Figure," in Paul Radin, The Trickster, New York: Schocken books, 1972, p. 195.

<sup>3</sup> Friedrich Kluge, 1960, p. 288.

<sup>4</sup> Arnold H. Marzolf, 1990, p. ix.

continuum is represented by the character “Ernschtina,” a symbol of feminine propriety, and her opposite by “Hanswurscht,” the eternal male *Spassvogel*.<sup>5</sup>

The swing between these poles is sometimes very subtle and not obvious to the outsider. Ethnic Germans in general have often been stereotyped by their “Ernschtina” demeanor – that is, labeled as being overly proper, humorless, and sometimes even dour.<sup>6</sup> Vossler too has noted that German-Russians may seem “stern,” “mostly humorless” to some people, and their jokes may seem “harsh.”<sup>7</sup> There is a tendency to not give compliments lightly, and sometimes even to say the opposite of what is meant for fear of tempting fate or promoting the sin of pride (*Hochmut*). The predilection for dark humor is shared by other ethnic groups as well, most notably Jews, which may reflect their common and often difficult history. The experience of being farmers on the steppes of Russia, then homesteaders in the Midwest, surely engendered a natural pragmatism and caution, expressed in the proverb, “Caution is the mother of wisdom.”<sup>8</sup>

But there has always been much more than just grimness and dark humor. As any anthropologist can testify, humor is found in all societies, yet it is often overlooked because it is typically the least understood aspect of folk culture. What is regarded as “funny” often falls utterly flat when translated into another cultural context because the subtle allusions and double-meanings are lost on an audience of outsiders.<sup>9</sup> Yet for every stereotype there are always opposite and equally true counter examples of when “Hanswurscht” rose to the surface. Geiger, for instance, commented: “The Volga Germans, known to be *Spassvögel*, loved to play pranks on the Russians.”<sup>10</sup> Vossler notes an enduring and distinctive style of verbal fun (*Spass*) wherever German-Russians are found, whether in North Dakota, Siberia, or among the *Aussiedler* returnees to Germany.<sup>11</sup> There is a rich treasure trove of one-liners, both informal folk expressions

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<sup>5</sup> *Spassvogel* means, literally, “fun-bird.” The closest English equivalents would be “trickster,” “clown,” or “goofball.”

<sup>6</sup> For excellent discussions of the so-called “dour, humorless German” and other such stereotypes, the reader should consult Hermann Eich, *The Unloved Germans*, New York: Stein and Day, 1965, and Adolph Schalk, *The Germans*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1971.

<sup>7</sup> “An Interview with Ron Vossler,” available on internet at: [http://www.nd-humanities.org/html/ron\\_vossler\\_.html](http://www.nd-humanities.org/html/ron_vossler_.html).

<sup>8</sup> *Vorsicht is die Mutter der Weisheit*

<sup>9</sup> An interesting parallel case is the American Indian, also often characterized as “stoic” and “humorless.” Yet in the course of my own anthropological fieldwork with the Navajo I found a distinctive and rich tradition of humor, albeit more under-stated than by the standards of modern American mass entertainment.

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Geiger, “*Winzigkeiten aus dem wolgadeutschen Idyll zu Grossvaters Zeiten*,” *Heimatbuch der Ostumsiedler*, Stuttgart: *Landmannschaft der Deutschen aus Russland*, 1955 issue, p. 87. Most issues of the *Heimatbücher* contain several pages devoted to humorous tales, jokes, and anecdotes.

<sup>11</sup> Ron Vossler, “Prairie ‘Spass,’ the Folk Humor of North Dakota’s Germans from Russia,” available on internet at: [http://www.nd-humanities.org/html/ron\\_vossler\\_.html](http://www.nd-humanities.org/html/ron_vossler_.html). Other sources dealing with German-Russian folk humor include Height, 1972; Arnold H. Marzolf, *That’s the Way it*

(*Redenarten*) as well as more formal proverbs (*Sprichwörter*), which encapsulate “distilled peasant wisdom” passed down from one generation to the next. These one-liners are often used as wisecracks, puns, and put-downs to spice up daily banter. Nicknames (*Beinamen*) are very common, typically lampooning a person’s faults, foibles, habits, or idiosyncrasies. People play with their rich dialect, often turning words into double-entendres. Replies to greetings, such as *wie geht’s* (“how’s it going?”) can be twisted in various ways, sometimes risquely. As in all societies, young people typically have a large repertoire of “ritual insults,” which enhance prestige in the eyes of one’s fellows. Bachmann provides a good example with the *Schelmliedle*, the “smart-alecky” or “teasing” songs, that the teenagers boisterously sung in the streets at night. There were (and still are) many “fool” stories (also called “noodle” stories by Vossler) among German-Russians. In the USA these often revolved around humorous difficulties with the English language, or encounters with other ethnic groups or religions. Some of these “fool” stories harken back to the love for the old Hanswurst theme.

There is also another form of humor still much loved by the German-Russians, involving longer narratives about mutual friends or relatives, which are affectionately told and retold in great detail whenever people gather. As a child I recall listening to stories like these, told in a mix of English and German dialect by the older members of my family (emigrants from the same German Beresan colonies about which Bachmann writes).

One typical story was about my dad’s poor, nervous, old *Bas Machdlena* (Aunt Magdalene) who one night walked into her kitchen and saw someone’s coat left hanging on a broom, leaning against the wall, in the kitchen. She was frightened and let out a loud scream. When her husband entered to room she proclaimed in a quivering voice, “someone’s standing in the kitchen!” He told her to calm down, it was just a pair of overalls left there.

Another example was *Vedda Ludwig* (uncle Louie) who loved his liquor, he regularly got drunk. On Christmas eve he played the role of *Belzenickl*, which was kind of a folk version of Santa Claus. *Belzenickl* was supposed to show up dressed in a heavy fur coat rattling chains to frighten the children, among Germans from Russia in North Dakota *Belzenickl* would be chased off by the Christ-child (*Grischtkindl*), played by a girl dressed in beautiful white costume who would leave gifts. On one Christmas Eve the family heard a loud crashing on the front porch, the entire door and walls shook. The childre were petrified, they thought it was the real thing, *Belzenickl* had actually come to carry them off in big sack that he had slung over his shoulder. When grandpa checked he found that *Vedda Ludwig* was outside, he had come crashing against the front door, shaking the entire house, terrorizing the children, he was drunk and he had passed out on the front porch. Grandpa had to bring him inside to sober him up, otherwise he would would have frozen to death outside.

These tales unfolded slowly, with background details carefully sketched, then there was an inevitable build-up to a punchline, always involving a trick on someone, a scheme gone haywire, or something foolish, often under the influence of alcohol (which

figured prominently in some stories, as also in Hermann Bachmann's tales: those were the days when taking "a little *Schnäpfe*" of whiskey didn't have the stigma of today).

The reader will recognize all these forms of humor in Bachmann's tales. Although today's audience may no longer understand the dialect, these tales will nevertheless have a familiar feel, harkening back to the types of yarns that our grandparents loved to tell. The style of narration and the situations that tickled their sense of the silly were quite similar, whether on the steppelands of Russia or the prairies of the USA (compare, for example, poor, frightened *Bas Machdlena* above with Bachmann's tale no. 16, or *Vedda* Ludwig story above with tale no. 7). There is an innocence to these stories, yet there is also that distinctive barb which Ron Vossler has noted. Although the historical and social context differs drastically from that faced by German-Russians in other parts of the world, the dynamics are similar. Rather than revolving around awkward adjustments to the new cultural environment of America, Bachmann's characters are often stuck in the midst of a transition from the old lifestyle under the tsarist regime to the modern utopia supposedly offered under Communism.