Mennonite Folkways
by Norma Jost Voth

With this issue, the Bulletin welcomes Norma Jost Voth as a regular columnist. In “Mennonite Folkways” Norma will explore the distinctive foods, festivities and traditions of the Mennonites from Russia.

Everyone bakes at Christmas.
At Easter, merely those who can.
At Pentecost, only the rich man.

— Old Low German saying

“...It was like we couldn’t help...”

Wiehnachte backt yiedemaun
Oostra mau wää doaq kaun.
Onn Injste dan dee rikje Maun.

Everyone bakes at Christmas.
At Easter, merely those who can.
At Pentecost, only the rich man.

When young Katherine Epp of the Chortitza Colony accepted Franz Bartel’s proposal for marriage, Katherine’s mother thought it proper that her daughter learn to make a good Easter paska. Katherine enrolled in a cooking school run by an elderly Russian woman to learn the art of making this tall, round ceremonial bread.

Good Friday Eve the Russian “paska students” and Katherine arrived early. Wearing a crisply-starched white apron, the instructor explained the meaning and ritual behind this ancient holy bread. Paska making—the most important baking event of the year, using fine white flour, butter, sugar and many, many eggs—would take all night. The Russian brick oven, already fired, warmed the room for the yeast starter to rise. At midnight the instructor went about with a white napkin, dabbing the perspiring girls’s foreheads. In keeping with the solemnity of the season, they sang hymns and prayed to pass the long hours of the night, waiting for the dough to rise.

Paska making continued Saturday. “Much kneading makes fine-textured paska.” Knead they did. When the dough finally pushed its way to the tops of the tall containers, the teacher checked the oven, closed her eyes and prayed aloud, “Bog na pomotsch” (“God help me”), crossed herself and gently eased the loaves in to bake. More prayers, more waiting. The pasky (plural) came out tall, handsome and delicious.
ve Easter without Paska"

Frieda Neufeldt Warkentin, of Reedley, California, carries on her Grandma Bartel’s family paska recipe. One Easter the results were troubling. (Less than perfect paska nearly spoils the weekend.) Frieda retracted the ingredients and suddenly remembered, “I forgot to pray ‘Bog na pomscht’ and cross myself!” Frieda Warkentin continues the ancient tradition, now always mindful of the ritual and the Russian woman’s reverent prayer asking God’s blessing and help in making this bread holy.

While Russian Orthodox Christians around them kept a strict Lenten fast, decorated eggs and prepared elaborate foods for Easter, Mennonites celebrated with Anabaptist simplicity. For them Holy Week began on Thursday. Mary Dirks Janzen remembered their Gnadenfeld, Molotschina, congregation observing foot washing that day; Anna Lohrentz of Winnipeg says that in the Crimea her mother baked the now-almost-forgotten Gründonnerstag Kringel (Green Thursday coffee ring).

Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and even part of Saturday were solemn days in the home. Good times, good humor and loud, boisterous behavior drew sharp reprimands from parents. Former teacher Kaethe Kasdorf of Hillsboro, Kansas, remembers that after church on Stelle Friedach (Silent Friday) “we children sat on chairs alongside our elders who were black because of mourning—remembering Christ’s betrayal and death on the cross. I just dreaded that day. I was so glad when Easter morning arrived and we could laugh and run again.”

Mennonite paska baking began Friday afternoon; of course, every woman wished hers to be tall like the Russians. “I remember the Russian Orthodox women walking in a line, one behind the other, wearing babushkas, holding their best pasky high as they took them to the church for blessing. They looked almost like a row of geese,” recalls Canadian Margaret Peters Toews. The late Helen Penner Lingenfelder of Newton, Kansas, joked: “Russians made their so high you could eat yourself puklych (hump-backed) ‘til you got to the icing which was only on top.”

Many families adopted the beautiful Russian greeting, “Christos Voskres” (“Christ is risen”) and the children responded, “Voistynu Voskres” (“He is risen indeed”). A few elderly Canadians remember the “happy” peal of the Russian church bells in the distance and Russian carolers walking through Mennonite villages on Easter day. “Our Mennonite Brethren youth adopted this custom,” says Helene Rempel of Hillsboro, Kansas. “As teenagers we went caroling after midnight on Easter Eve.”

Families welcomed the Russian workers back from their homes after Easter, continued Kaethe Warkentin. “They always brought beautifully decorated, hand-painted eggs (pysanky) as gifts.” Wondering why we didn’t adopt the pysanky tradition, Anna Bergen Franz of San Jose, California, speculates: “We took things from the Russians that were practical. Probably we thought, ‘If you’re going to do something artistic, it should have value, like putting such artistry on a pillow case but not eggs!’ We lived with a work philosophy. You shouldn’t be sitting and reading a book (or decorating eggs) when you could be sweeping under the bed.”

Paska, Stelle Friedach, eggs, caroling, church services—all are remembered—but most fondly the warm, sweet, fresh paska coming from the brick oven. As the late Canadian professor Gerhard Lohrentz said, “It was almost like we couldn’t have Easter without paska.”

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