Mennonite Folkways: The Polish-Prussian Mennonite
by Norma Jost Voth

Napoleon’s French soldiers, winter quartering in the Vistula Delta (then West Prussia) in the early 1880s spoke sarcastically of their surroundings as the “Schmalzgrube” or “Schmalzinsel” —the “lard pit” or the “lard island,” likely referring to the delta farmers’ love of pork—long sausages, smoked hams, cracklings.

When the first Mennonites left the Netherlands in the 1530s and migrated to the Vistula Delta near Danzig, they, like most early immigrants, maintained a solid Dutch kitchen, bringing with them the food patterns from their villages and cities. They remained Dutch for a very long time, even persisting in using the Dutch language in the pulpit for two full centuries. The lowlands along the Vistula River were known as the Dutch area.

The Mennonite kitchen, as we remember it, reflects a surprisingly strong influence of the years spent in the Vistula Delta. Many familiar dishes we may identify as German or Russian are historically Prussian and became a part of our culinary heritage during those years.

While the newcomers to the delta had eaten pork in Holland, there they had also enjoyed fish (fresh and dried), poultry and game. Certainly the pork diet was strengthened by the surroundings Prussian neighbors’ preference for pork. It was economical and convenient. Smoked or cured, a meal could be assembled quickly. Every farm family butchered in late autumn when the weather turned cooler. Ham, spareribs, cracklings, smoked sausage, Siltkjees (head cheese) and Silifleesch (prepared in a pickling solution and eaten with raw-sliced onions and fried potatoes) remained a part of our culinary heritage into the pioneering years in North America.

“The Mennonites were big pork eaters,” said the late historian Gerhard Lohrenz. “When we came to Canada we didn’t know how to cook beef,” commented Tina Harder Peters, Steinbach, Manitoba. My husband, Alden, remembers Schmalt (lard) and syrup sandwiches in his lunch pail as a school boy.

Delta households were known for thrift; daily menus were simple, robust and often starchy, with noodle-type dishes. In West Prussia we learned about their flour-based Kjielkje, Klose and Kjlieta (small hand-rubbed dumpings added to soups). Kjielkje makers say they are different from noodle—they have one egg and the dough is softer. Big bowls of Kjielkje were on the table at least twice a week. Katie Kasdorf Warkentine, Hillsboro, Kansas, remembers grandmothers warning children: “If you don’t eat Kjielkje, you don’t get strong.” My husband heard it often as a farm boy.

At Christmastime Mennonite women made huge pots of Plumekjielkje, a one-dish meal of wide noodles, oven-dried plums and chunks of ham. Even in summer it could be taken cold to the field workers. Plumejjielkje came to be considered almost a national dish, says food historian Dr. Ulrich Tolksdorf. When Grandmother Jost’s family gathered for a 100th anniversary...
cheese” known as Tilsit (still available today). In 1723 Mennonite women supplied the Konigsberg market with 400 tons of cheese. Abundant milk and cream made wonderful Mooses.

“Bread was always on the table,” remembered Mary Dirks Janzen of her childhood in Russia. Sourdough rye, dense and nourishing, sustained families in both Holland and Prussia. Writer Arnold Dyck commented: “When a man works hard and requires real nourishment, it’s rye bread.” Every old farmstead had its outdoor oven/bakehouse or breadbaking—loaves generally weighing 4-6 kilo; the oven doubled for drying plums for winter Kuchen, Mooss, baked fruit pockets, etc. Mennonites continued their Dutch custom of spreading bread with sweet marmalade, lard, cracklings, sausages, or cheese—something new and appealing to their Werder neighbors. Breads with toppings replaced the delta breakfast of porridge.

For most Prussian farmers, the daily diet could be heavy, greasy, monotonous and, simply put, dull. Exceptions were holidays and Sunday. “Among the Mennonites there was much cooking and baking in preparation for visitors,” writes Siegfried Rosenberg, a Werder folk historian. “They were especially hospitable and considered it an insult if a visitor left without having coffee.”

For Sundays and holidays women brought out sacks of wheat (or white) flour to which they added milk, Fett (probably lard) and sometimes eggs, transforming the dough into endless varieties of Kuchen (coffee cakes) or Platz—thin round yeast breads with fruit topping. Birthdays would be occasions for an array of Striezel (in Low German, Stretsel), butter-, raisin-, Mohr (poppy seed)-, or applestretsel.

Luis Schroeder, a native of Danzig (later Winnipeg) remembers Christmas Pfefferkuchen, a spicy dough rolled out and baked in a large pan. She spoke nostalgically: “It was the Danzig specialty for Christmas, spiced with cinnamon, coriander, anise and lemon peel. My mother made it with almonds. On Christmas eve we each got one square.”

Penner Laut, Germany, added, “In Danzig these Kuchen were baked at other times, but at Christmas Omas (grandmothers) added almonds and citron and sometimes brushed them with rosewater.” Pfeffer (spice) kuchen are among the very oldest of recipes made with honey, syrup, lard, wheat flour and eggs. In 1939 it was recorded that soldiers carried slices of simple Pfefferkuchen in their travel gear.

Dutch Pepernoten (peppernuts) may have come with Mennonites from Holland to the delta, we don’t know. These crisp, dime-sized cookies slices share a long history with Pfefferkuchen (see above). Again, Luise Schroeder: “In Danzig we always made homemade peppernuts—milk cans full.” Mennonites who moved on to Russia continued the peppernut baking more frequently than the Pfefferkuchen.

On New Year’s Day the sweet aroma of Portselkie (raisin fritters) frying filled my grandmother’s kitchen. My father and his little brothers stood beside her, politely reciting a very old Low German poem before winning a sugar-drenched fritter. For centuries children in the Vistula Delta have sung that same Portselkie song while going door to door begging for a treat: “Ekj saech Schornsteene ruake, Ekj wist wull waut jie muake...” (I saw your chimney smoking; I knew well what you’re making—New Year’s Knaue [fritters]). Some of Please See “Folkways” page 6
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you readers can finish it in Plautdietsch.

“Fat cakes”—doughnuts, crullers, fritters fried in deep fat—were a symbol of a prosperous New Year all through the Low Countries. Luise Schroeder advises that the secret of good Portselkje is the many eggs. You must beat the egg whites separately until light, she says. From Canada to California many homes still celebrate the New Year baking Portselkje. Others stand in long lines at MCC relief sales, becoming again Werder children, patiently waiting for this heavenly treat.

Zwieback baking has been a part of Saturday’s routine in Mennonite kitchens since West Prussian days. (This baking may even reach back to the Netherlands.) For readers unfamiliar, Zwieback are buttery-rich double buns, one atop the other, baked by the dozens for every Sunday Faspa, holiday, wedding feast and funeral meal. Ulrich Tolksdorf notes that earlier, funeral Zwieback were dainty, the size of a pocket watch.

Some ask, does Zwieback or Tweeback (Low German) bean double buns, one atop the other? Not so, says our authority Dr. Tolksdorf. “Tweybacken means white bread, twice baked” (baked and toasted later). Zwieback were popular ship’s fare in the 17th century. Danzig bakers made “large zwieback” and sold them as Schiffs Brot (ship’s bread) to ships docked in the Danzig harbor. This toasted bread didn’t get stale, mold or mildew. Mennonite families, fleeing Russia for North America after the Revolution, baked large wicker hampers with Reeschkjes, (low German for toasted Zwieback), which often lasted the entire voyage. Once again they became Schiffs Brot, sustaining these families on their long trek to a new homeland.

Migrations of people are reflected in their foods. A friend says, “tell me what you eat and I’ll tell you where you’ve lived.” The delta—now a land of grassy meadows, old farmsteads, vanishing dikes and nearly-forgotten windmills—gifted the Mennonite kitchen with an abundance of simple, hearty country foods. Plain, yes, but good. Looking back over 300 years, most of the old recipes are gone.

Now, in this new land of plenty, so prosperous and abundant in fresh foods, our cooking has changed immensely. The younger generation cooks differently. We cook American. Not so, says our authority Dr. Tolksdorf. Zwieback, refreshing summer fruit soups (Moosses), centuries old Christmas baking—Pfefferkuchen and peppernuts, New Year’s Portseln/Portselkje and nearly everyone loves waffles and Flinsen (pancakes). These treasures from the past linger in our contemporary American kitchen. We shall keep them for our children and grandchildren.

Sources
5. Tolksdorf, p. 189.
8. Tolksdorf, p. 249.
11. Tolksdorf, p. 320.
13. Tolksdorf, p. 239.

Low German spelling is based on Kjenn Jie Noch Plautdietsch? A Low German Dictionary, Winnipeg: by Herman Rempel, Mennonite Literary Society.