

Mennonite Folkways:

The Polish-Prussian Mennonite

by Norma Jost Voth

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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"¹—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.² 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 cuisine 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 *Siltflesch* (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 *Schmolt* (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 dumplings 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*,³ 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. *Plumekjielkje* came to be considered almost a national dish, says food historian Dr. Ulrich Tolksdorf.⁴ When Grandmother Jost's family gathered for a 100th anniversary

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celebration, the formerly West Prussian cousins from Germany cooked up enormous pots of *Plumekjielkje*.

Plain to see, we were a meat and *Kjielkje* people. Root vegetables—carrots, beets, turnips, parsnips—and cabbage were *schmaud* (stewed), soured, or sometimes dried. Peas went into porridge. My husband's grandfather, Heinrich A. Flaming, a wheat farmer in Oklahoma, always said he would get all of his vegetables out of the flour sack.

All of our *Mooses* with countless variations were part of the Prussian diet—*buttermooss*, sweet milk *Mooss*, *Wotamooss* (water-based potato soup). *Mooss* is a little like soup. Germans call it *Brei*. Mennonites were also known for their fine orchards⁵ and the fruit, fresh or dried, went into summer fruit soups—wonderful cherry, berry, apple, plum - mooses—slightly thickened with flour, lightly sweetened with sugar plus a little spice. Our standard holiday/Sunday dinner menu of ham, fried potatoes and Plumemoose comes from the delta.

In 1547 Dutch farmers were invited to help drain the swampy lowlands along the Vistula River. Eventually, through years of back-breaking labor, they transformed the marshy landscape into productive farmland and grassy meadows, ideal for dairy farming. Interestingly, to the women goes credit for making their dairy ventures profitable through developing earthenware milk containers that allowed cream to rise. They developed churns and a fine “Mennonite

cheese” known as *Tilsit* (still available today). In 1723 Mennonite women supplied the Königsberg market with 400 tons of cheese.⁶ 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.”⁷ Every old farmstead had its outdoor oven/bakehouse⁸ for 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.⁹

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.”¹⁰

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 *Striezal* (in Low German, *Stretsel*), butter-, raisin-, *Mohn* (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.” Renate Penner Lauf, 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.¹¹

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 *Portselkje* (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 *Portselkje* song while going door to door begging for a treat: “Ekj sach eb Schornsteen ruake, Ekj wist woll waut jie muake...” (I saw your chimney smoking; I knew well what you're making—New Year's *Kuake* [fritters]). Some of

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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 Fasma, 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"¹² (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.¹³ 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. Nott often do we feast on *Plumekjiekje*. However, remnants of that Polish/Prussian kitchen endure: our classic Mennonite bun, *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

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3. Tolksdorf, Ulrich. *Essen und Trinken in Ost- und West-Preussen* (Marburg: E.G. Elwert Verlag, 1975), p. 189.
4. Tolksdorf, pp. 187-189.
5. Tolksdorf, p. 189.
6. *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, vol. 2 (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Mennonite Publishing House, 1954) p. 312.
7. Dyck, Arnold. *Lost in the Steppe* (Steinbach, Manitoba: Derksen Printers, 1977), p. 156.
8. Tolksdorf, p. 249.
9. Tolksdorf, pp. 264-267.
10. Rosenberg, p. 206.
11. Tolksdorf, p. 320.
12. Tolksdorf, p. 361.
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.

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more widely known. Thus, in 1989 the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies in Fresno published *A Homeland for Strangers: An Introduction to Mennonites in Poland and Prussia*, by Peter J. Klassen. Also, in 1998 Dutch Mennonites published attractive brochures about early Mennonite settlement in the Vistula Delta. These were published in Polish, Dutch and German; an English version is in preparation.

This issue of the *Bulletin* depicts some of the remarkable metamorphosis that has characterized Mennonite awareness of this aspect of their heritage. The reader is invited to a journey into an important part of the Mennonite past. Thousands of Mennonites today trace their history back to ancestors who lived in the part of Poland that later became part of Prussia. Subsequently, many of these moved to Russia, and still later, to North and South America. Despite these migrations, however, it must be emphasized that Mennonites maintained an unbroken presence in Poland-Prussia for more than four centuries—twice as long as in Russia, and also longer than in North America.