

Proverbs of Volga German Settlers in Ellis County

by Marie Gabel

The Volga German settlers that came to American brought many treasured customs, proverbs, and superstitions with them. They were known to use proverbs and superstitions freely during work and play. Proverbs were used as lessons for friends and children, alike. Children were gently prodded or strictly corrected by the use of a proverb.¹

Sister Mary Eloise Johannes, in her *Study of Russian-German Settlements in Ellis County*, lists a number of proverbs or *Sprichwoerter*. Not all of them are exclusively Volga German, but they are among those most commonly used by these people. Sister Mary Eloise's translations are idiomatic, rather than literal:

1. Wer auf Gott vertraut, hat wohl gebaut. He who trusts in God, builds on a firm foundation.

2. Arbeit macht das Leben suess. Work renders life sweet.

3. Dummheit und Stolz wachsen auf einem Holz. Stupidity and pride sprout from the same stem.

4. Wer Pech angreift, besudelt sich. "He that toucheth pitch, shall be defiled with it." (Ecclesiastes 13:1)

5. Jung gewhnt, alt getan. Trained in youth, molded for life.

6. Wie der Herr, so das Geschirr. As the master, so his business.

7. Mitt Got fang' an, mit Gott hoer' auf, das is der beste Lebenslauf. Begin with God and end with Him, that is the best plan of life.

8. An Gottes Segen ist alles gelegen. Everything depends upon God's blessing.

9. In allem, was du tust, bedenke, dass du sterben musst. In your every undertaking, consider: some day you will have to die.

10. Ein gutes Gewissen ist ein sanftes Ruhekissen. A good conscience is a soft pillow.

11. Übung macht den Meister. Practice makes perfect.

Interview with Lawrence Weigel, Hays, Kansas, June 25, 1970.

12. Es ist noch kein Gelehrter vom Himmel gefallen. There is no royal road to learning.

13. Eine Hand waescht die andere. One good turn deserves another.

14. We einmal luegt, dem glaubt man nicht. Selbst wenn er auch die Wahrheit spricht. He who tells one lie will not be believed even though he tell the truth.

15. Geduldige Schaf gehen viel in den Stall. Tame sheep can be stabled in great numbers; meaning, that children who are well trained live peacefully and in harmony.

16. Unverhofft kommt oft. It is always the unforeseen that occurs.

17. Der Mensch denkt; Gott lenkt. Man proposes, God disposes.

18. Wer nicht hoeren will, der muss fuehlen. He who ignores authority, must take the consequences.

19. Es ist nicht alles Gold, was glaenzt. Not everything that glitters is gold.

20. Wer nicht arbeiten will, soll auch nicht essen. He who refuses to work, should not eat.

21. Frisch begonnen ist halb gewonnen. Well begun is half done.

According to Sister Mary Eloise, "These *Sprichwoerter* are commonly used by older people to point out certain lessons to their children and are uttered quite spontaneously. Almost all of them are expressions that reveal a deep-seated sense of religion."²

Other *Sprichwoerter* which have been transferred orally from generation to generation and are still commonly used today include the following (an attempt has been made to reproduce these in dialect):

22. Kleina Kinder, kleines Kreitz; grossa Kinder, grosses Kreita. Small children, small worries; grown children, great worries.

23. Kleina Kinder sitzen auf der Schertz, grossa Kinder dir-ganems Hertz. Small children sit on the apron (lap), grown children cause heartaches.

24. Lefel, Gafel, Scherr und Licht, sin fur kleina Kinder nicht. Spoon, fork, scissors, and lamp are not for little children.

25. Der Apfel fällt nicht weit fon Schtam. The apple doesn't fall far from the stem, meaning that a child grows up with many characteristics of the parents.

26. Errer Fadder und Mudder das es dich wohl auf der Erde geht. Honor father and mother so things will go well with you on earth.

27. Des Behmya must dir beigen so lang vie des klein ist. You must train the branch while it is still young, meaning you must train the child while it is still young and pliable.

Sister Mary Eloise Johannes, *Study of Russian-German Settlements in Ellis County* (Washington, D.C. Murray and Heister, 1946), pp. 128-129.

28. Ein brafes Weib, ein hertzliches Kint, is der Himmel auf der Erde. A good wife, a lovely child, is heaven on earth.
29. Der Schuster und der Schneider han de schlesta Gleider. The shoemaker and seamstress have the poorest clothes.
30. Morgen Stund hadt Goldt in Mundt. Morning sun has gold in its mouth.
31. Morgen, Morgen, nur nicht Heuta, saagen alla faula Leita. Tomorrow, tomorrow, not today, lazy people always say.
32. Yeh Schspaeder hier, yeh schpaeder dort, wer nicht eilt, der komt nicht fort. Later here, later there, if you don't hurry, you'll never get anywhere.
33. Ven ich Heit nicht kom, kom ich Morgen. If I don't get there today, I'll get there tomorrow.
34. Beglachen nicht den Morgen, das mie und Arbeit geebt. Don't complain about the morning that brings you work.
35. Schiebe keine Argeit auf bis Morgen das du duhen kanst Heit. Don't push off until tomorrow what you can do today.
36. Mit denga kan mir ken hengen. You can't harm anyone with thoughts.
37. Noch den gedanen Arbeit is gut rehen. After your work is done, it is easy to rest.
38. Alt wie eina Kuh, lant mir der zu. We keep learning even when we grow old.
39. Noch Frad cumt Laad. Following silliness comes sorrow.
40. Noch der Not, kommet der Tode. After a lifetime of hardships, comes death.
41. Stilles Vasser lauft dief. Still waters run deep, meaning you can't tell what is going on in a quiet person's mind.
42. Eichen laubt schtinkt. Self praise is not good.
43. Lefel and Gafel derft ihr nicht fergessen sunst mist ihr mit der Finger essen. Don't forget the knives or forks, or else you'll have to eat with your fingers.
44. Mir kan ein auf der Starn gooken aufer nicht in Kehern. You can look at a person's forehead but not know what goes on in his mind.
45. Der Fadder muss schaffen feehrs Braut, das Weib und Kinder leiten keina Noht. The father must work for the daily bread so the wife and children aren't in need.
- Two other proverbs that are extensively used by this group of people, but for which I do not have the German, are the following:
46. Work like you have life everlasting, but be ready for death.
47. When you do a job, do it well; for people never ask how long it took, but who did it.¹

Interview with Mrs. Joe Breit and Mrs. Nick Gabel Hays, July 1, 1970

Sister Mary Eloise points out that "Proverbs that have a tendency to be of a superstitious nature are occasionally found among the people also." She gives one example:

48. Helle Metten dunkle Scheuer. If there is snow on the ground and a bright moon shining during midnight Mass on Christmas Eve, the granaries will be filled by a good harvest.⁴

The Volga German people who settled in America were conservative, religious and hard-working people. They worked tirelessly for bare essentials but found time to enjoy life. In spite of the hardships they encountered, it was customary to complete their work before relaxing or taking part in leisure-time activities. Faith, religion, and God were generally interwoven with ease as they spoke.

Proverbs might be utilized to draw conclusions about the beliefs and value system of this group of people: they believed in God and favored religion (1, 7, 8); they stressed the importance of work to man and pride in things accomplished (2, 16, 17, 20, 37, 38, 47); they felt charity and a good relationship between men was a necessary ingredient of life (13, 29, 45); they displayed a belief in the hereafter along with rewards on earth (9, 28, 40, 46); great emphasis was placed on industriousness, early training and obedience (30, 31, 32, 34, 35; 5, 10, 15, 18, 21, 24, 26, 27); and perseverance (11, 12) and preparedness (16, 43) were stressed. A person's right to privacy of thoughts (36, 41, 44) was valued. They were aware of the variety of influences a person possessed through stages of life (22, 23) and allowed for environmental and hereditary influences (25). Proverbs 3, 4, 14, and 39 warned against vices and undesirable traits, lest one suffer the consequences.

From the foregoing analysis, it may be concluded that these people used proverbs to convey or remind children and adults of lessons that might be learned from a succinct saying.

⁴Johannes, p. 129



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