

Like most immigrants, the Germans from Russia did not, in their earliest days, intermingle with the local populace. Their quaint German dialect was unfamiliar and, at times, amusing to Sheboygan's more established residents.

Gradually, there was acceptance and integration into the larger social fabric. Second generation Volga Germans who were married in the mid-1930s described the festive ceremonies. Invitations were personally extended by two older male relatives of the bridal couple, or close friends of their parents. Often uncles of the bride and groom were asked to be the Hochzeitslade (wedding inviters; the German word laden means to summon).

First the bride was invited, and next, the groom. After that, the Hochzeitslade made their way from house to house of relatives and friends, carrying their Bandstock (ribbon cane). A guest who accepted the invitation found a ribbon to tie to the Bandstock and usually drank a small toast with the Hochzeitslade.

On the Friday evening, before the wedding, the bridal couple and their young friends gathered for dancing at the hall where the reception would be held. The bride's family made arrangements for the wedding celebration, and it was considered an honor to be asked to cook for a Volga German bridal dinner. The cooks wore white dresses and aprons for the occasion. On Saturday morning, in their own homes, they peeled potatoes and cooked the meat for Broda, the traditional wedding meal. Beef and pork was simmered in water flavored with onions and bay leaves. The meal was left to bake in the large ovens, under the watchful eye of the baker or one of his employees.

Wedding guests, wearing their Sunday best, assembled at the church on Saturday afternoon. The bride, dressed in a white wedding gown and veil, carried a large bouquet of flowers. Her train often swept along for several feet behind her. The groom had a boutonniere on the lapel of his new suit.

Following the church ceremony, portraits of the bridal party were taken to commemorate the occasion; however, from as early as the 1920s it was also possible that a friend with a Kodak folding camera might take a few less formal pictures outdoors.

At the reception hall, food was set out on long tables covered with white paper. Broda was served from the same pans in which it had been baked. The busy cooks also prepared vegetables such as peas and carrots or red beets. There was rye bread, and perhaps a side dish of stewed dried fruit

Many toasts were offered to the newlyweds' happiness and health. Other traditions gave the couple a financial start and even helped pay for the celebration. A Bible was circulated, and money placed on it went to the pastor. Then a dish was passed to collect a cash gift for the cooks. Someone took the bride's shoe, and guests filled it with coins or paper money before returning it. Instead of bringing wedding gifts wrapped in pretty paper, guests pinned paper money to the newlyweds' clothing as the couple circled the hall with their attendants. The money was removed before the dancing began.

By the 1930s many of the old customs had died out. Slowly, they were replaced with other customs, rituals and traditions practiced in America.

During World War I, speaking German was discouraged in many parts of the United States, but not so in Sheboygan. With friends, they used their native Volga German dialects; although each village in Russia had its own unique dialect, Volga Germans in Sheboygan had no problem communicating with one another. At church, at work, or in stores, the German-Russian immigrants spoke High German, which they had learned in the schools of their native Russian villages. Some went to their graves never having mastered English.

But, the younger immigrants went to adult night school classes to learn to read and write English. Those who wanted to become naturalized U.S. citizens often took citizenship classes, where they laboriously memorized English questions and answers about the American political system.

American citizenship had advantages in the work place. For example, it was Kohler Company's policy that: Only native born and naturalized citizens of the United States, or those of foreign birth who filed their first papers for citizenship with the intention of becoming American citizens, will be promoted to positions of trust and responsibility. There will be no discrimination as to employment against those retaining foreign citizenship, but they will not be in line for promotion to responsible positions.

Workers showed such desire to be naturalized that the company decided to set aside a special day for those interested in taking out first papers. April 6, 1916, was the first Naturalization Day at Kohler Company. Each April, for a number of years following, the company provided transportation and allowed time off so that employees could take the steps necessary to become naturalized citizens. The program lasted until the 1930s.

Did Sheboygan turn out to be the land of opportunity for the German-Russian immigrants of 100 years ago and those who followed them? Considering the fate of loved ones left behind - famine, starvation, deportation to Siberia during World War II - and comparing the present circumstances of succeeding generations in both countries, there can be only one answer; a resounding yes.

Perhaps things were not as easy as some envisioned. There were no gold-lined streets or shortcuts. But, with hard work, family cooperation, encouragement from a community of Unser Leit, and trust that God would see them through, the immigrants determined to make the best of what Sheboygan had to offer. And in their determination, they helped build Sheboygan.

*This article is the third of three parts on local Volga German history. Much of the information from all three columns comes from work and research done by Emma Hermann Thieme and Frederick Zitzer, champions of VG history.*



This 1917 wedding photograph of Emily Kaiser and Christ Hicks shows two men (at the far left and right) holding canes tied with ribbons acknowledging the acceptance of wedding invitations. Courtesy of Scott Lewandoske.



Single men who found work at the Kohler Company, could get a room and board across the street from the factory, at the American Club.



On April 11, 1887, the newly formed State Business College held its first class on the third floor of the new Zaegel Building on the southwest corner of North 8th Street and New York Avenue in Sheboygan. It was here that many Volga Germans went to night school to learn English.