Mennonites from Russia's Christmas and New Year's Traditions and Foods: Memories of Plates, *Päppanät*, and *Portzeltje*

by Helene Warkentin—December 2025

This Christmas season, amid preparations, dinners, and family gatherings, you might also be taking some time to reflect. Have you ever wondered about Mennonite Christmas and New Year traditions of the past, and where they originated? How did children celebrate? What about church and family gatherings? Can Mennonites from Russia really trace their ancestors' journeys from Flanders and Friesland through Poland-Prussia and Russia to Canada or Paraguay via their recipes?

If our grandparents are no longer with us, where can we find information about the past? The Mennonite Heritage Archives (MHA) in Winnipeg holds numerous first-hand accounts of everyday life in the past that include discussions of traditions and foods. Books such as *The Mennonite Treasury of Recipes* are filled with recipes collected years ago and still followed, and *Faspa* by Eleanor Chornoboy will refresh readers' memories. The MHA or the Canadian Mennonite University Library have these books, including some by an American writer whose interest in Mennonite culture saw her embark on a remarkable mission.

In the 1970s and '80s, Norma Jost Voth from Hillsboro, Kansas, living in San Jose, California, began researching Mennonite traditions and foods by interviewing about 60 Mennonite women who had grown up in Russia. In Kansas and California, British Columbia and Manitoba, they shared their memories of the past and their continued customs. Voth framed her study with this collection of hundreds of stories and recipes from Mennonites from Russia, including her own family.[1] She called her collection "Folkways"; that is, a people's traditional cultural practices, social conventions, and modes of thinking.

Who is Norma Evelyn Jost? Her ancestors came to Kansas from the Molotschna Colony in Ukraine in the 1870s.[2] Born in Hillsboro in 1923 and baptized in the First Mennonite Church, she later joined Lehigh Mennonite Brethren Church. In 1956, Norma married Alden Voth. In 1959, Alden graduated with a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago. They moved to California where Alden taught Political Science at several universities, including San Jose State University from 1963 to 2009. They had a daughter and a son, both

---

[1] Norma Jost Voth, *Peppernuts Plain and Fancy*, (Herald Press: Scottdale, PA) 1978; *Festive Breads of Easter*, 1980; *Festive Cakes of Christmas*, 1981; *Festive Cookies of Christmas*, 1982; *Festive Breads of Christmas*, 1983; *Mennonite Foods & Folkways from South Russia, Volume I,* (Good Books: Intercourse, PA) 1990; *Mennonite Foods & Folkways from South Russia, Volume II,* (Good Books: Intercourse, PA) 1991; *The Festive Christmas Cookbook: A Treasury of Old Traditions, Recipes and Lore of the Christmas Season*, (Brand: Galahad Books, New York) 1996.

[2] She may or may not be the Norma Jost who graduated from Mennonite Bible Seminary, Elkhart, Indiana, in 1955, the only female student. See MHA, MAID Series XV-19.3 Item 1992-14-2257 The 12 graduates of June-July/1955 at Mennonite Bible Seminary, (Elkhart).

born in California. The family also spent two years in Cairo, Egypt, where Alden taught. Their son predeceased them; their daughter lives in San Jose.[3] Norma and Alden were "active in a ministry to prisoners and their families".[4] Alden died in 2017; at the time of this writing, apparently Norma still resides in San Jose.

Between 1978 and 1996, Norma Jost Voth wrote and published eight books based on her interviews and research about Mennonite foods and traditions. Several focus on festive foods. Her major volumes venture beyond that. *Mennonite Foods & Folkways from South Russia Volume I* starts with *Tweeback* (double buns) and covers breads, soups, meat dishes, salads, preserves, Christmas baking, and more. *Volume II* includes wedding customs, education, church, menus, and traditions and foods associated with celebrations.

Readers may wonder why this cultural, social, and literary project was important to Norma Jost Voth. In *Volume I*, she informs us that her mother "was the family historian and a faithful keeper of Mennonite foods and folkways".[5] She views her heritage "with gratitude". She cautions that "With the passing of every grandparent, …some family tradition or knowledge is lost for all time. If we are to preserve these traditions and treasures for our children and grandchildren, we must record them while we can".[6] In *Volume II*, she commends all the mothers and grandmothers who, "during both the "golden years" in Russia"… "and the dark years following the Revolution", and life on the prairies or at the edges of jungles, "determined to make life as normal and bearable as they could for their families…. They were survivors who passed their legacy on to us…. Let us not forget".[7] Voth's collections of memories and recipes are her profound tribute to Mennonite culture.

In her chapter "Christmas baking", Voth states that Mennonite families in Russia observed Christmas "simply and quietly".[8] The stories her subjects related about the Christmases they experienced in South Russia, now Ukraine, in the early 1900s reveal many similarities.[9]

Mary Dirks Janzen (1905-1995) of North Newton, Kansas, told Voth about her childhood in Gnadenfeld.[10] Christmas preparations began with school children copying special poems into booklets with decorated covers. In her home, the adults and older children decorated a spruce tree on Christmas Eve, just before everyone went to church for the school Christmas program. A tall decorated tree lit with candles stood at the front. The story of the Nativity that their teacher had taught them was very special to the students. After

---

[3] GRanDMA; and https://www.legacy.com/us/obituaries/thekansan/name/alden-voth-obituary?id=17126030.
[4] Norma Jost Voth, *Mennonite Foods & Folkways from South Russia Volume I*, p. 480.
[5] *Mennonite Foods and Folkways, Vol. I*, Acknowledgements, p. 9.
[6] *Mennonite Foods and Folkways, Vol. I*, Introduction, p. 17.
[7] *Mennonite Foods and Folkways, Vol. II*, Introduction.
[8] *Mennonite Foods and Folkways, Vol. I*, p. 340.
[9] *Mennonite Foods and Folkways, Vol II*, pp. 78-82, 275.
[10] All dates are from the database GRanDMA Online at https://grandmaonline.org/gmol-7/individualProfile.asp

all poems were recited and *Stille Nacht* was sung, the excited children received "small paper bags…filled with nuts, an orange, some hard candy, an apple and a German storybook".[11]

At home, before the children went to bed, everyone set up plates at their places on the table for the *Wiehnachtsmaun* to fill during the night.[12] On Christmas morning, the children woke up early, thrilled to find their plates filled with nuts and the only gifts they received all year. Gifts for girls were often gloves, an apron, a doll, and German story books, while boys got a carved wooden horse, a penknife, or a hand-sewn shirt. Mary went on: "Before the Revolution, a local seamstress made our clothes from fine material, trimming our dresses with velvet edgings and pretty buttons". After breakfast, they gave their parents their decorated booklets and recited the poems they had memorized. Then it was off to church for "the Christmas message and beautiful *a cappella* singing by the choir".[13]

Mary recalled that, in Gnadenfeld, they celebrated Christmas for three full days. After the church service, they came home to dinners and with visiting relatives enjoyed *Plümemoos* (a sweet plum compote), baked ham, cucumber and beet pickles, and two kinds of bread. "Coffee was served for *Faspa* along with *Zwieback*, butter and jam or watermelon syrup". Coffee was for the adults, while the children drank *Pripps*, made from roasted barley or rye. Her mother had prepared enough food "to last for three days of festivities as…all the relatives came".[14]

Kaethe Kasdorf Warkentin (1915-2007) of Hillsboro, Kansas, described Christmas celebrations in Osterwick that had lasted for three days. Christmas tree decorations, like their traditions, she said, came from Germany. In her home, after the Christmas Eve church service, the children placed their plates under their tree. Tucked into their beds, they listened to their father filling their plates with nuts and candy. Next morning, the children got up very early. Impatient with excitement, they knocked on the *Grot'stow* (parlour) door, eager to see their decorated tree. First, they had to recite their poems to their parents; then they were allowed to see the tree and candles for the first time and get their plates—full of jam-filled cookies, an apple, and sometimes an orange. Their gifts were "mostly practical things—a new skirt, blouse or an apron" for the girls After breakfast, the adults went to church and the children stayed home with a servant. For dinner, they had baked ham, cherry *Moos* or *Plümemoos*, and *Zwieback (Tweeback)*. On the second day of Christmas, their grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins arrived. As Kaethe recalled, in the afternoon, the children walked to the homes of neighbours, aunts, and friends in the village to recite poems, sing carols, and receive little gifts: embroidered handkerchiefs filled with candy and nuts.[15]

---

[11] *Mennonite Foods and Folkways, Vol. II*, pp. 79-81.
[12] Literally, the Christmas man: Santa Clause.
[13] *Mennonite Foods and Folkways, Vol. II*, p. 80.
[14] *Ibid.*
[15] *Mennonite Foods and Folkways, Vol. II*, p. 81.

Anna Reimer Dyck (1903-1989) of Niverville, Manitoba, grew up on a large farm estate in the Kuban, east of Molotschna and north of the Caucasus in Russia. Christmas was similar, though. She remembered preparing gifts of embroidery, crocheting, and paper decorations around the table under a lamp, while apples baked in the oven.[16] Christmas programs were presented by the school one year and by the Sunday-school the following year. Students sang carols, recited poems, and performed plays, all in German. Each child received a bag of treats. Later, her family went to her aunt's home where everyone sang carols, and children received more bags of treats. Back home again, the children quickly went to bed, despite their excitement. Next morning, the family, their servants, their farm workers, and refugees all joined to celebrate in the large parlor. They sang carols around the decorated Christmas tree, and then their mother uncovered their plates full of sweets and gifts. After breakfast, it was off to church, then dinner at home and visiting. Next day, after church services, visiting and feasting continued—for some families, until Epiphany.[17]

In Winnipeg, Mia Reimer DeFehr fondly recalled that after the Christmas Eve program in church, "the young people, accompanied by their youth leader, went caroling into the wee hours of the morning. They stopped at as many as forty places to sing…. But none were too tired to be on hand Christmas morning to sing in the choir…."[18] Imagine the fun!

In Calgary, Susanne Rempel (1912-2006) from Sagradovka, provided a contrast: "During Communist times, Christmas was no longer celebrated…. Outwardly [Mennonites] celebrated New Year, but deep, deep down they were celebrating the birth of Christ. There were usually humble gifts. Beautiful…cookies on a plate…a real treat, for we rarely got anything like candy".[19] Voth notes that, in the hard times during the Civil War and after: "Elaborate baking, especially during the last years in Russia, was…limited by poverty, war, and famine".[20]

Norma Jost Voth recounted her own family's experiences in Russia before and during the 1870s. Families did not decorate evergreen trees on Christmas Eve, and only the small children received gifts. Children recited poems for their parents on Christmas Day. Everyone attended church, and returned home to a dinner of the traditional baked ham, fried potatoes, *Plümemoos*, followed by oranges, apples, and nuts, and spicy peppernuts in the afternoon and evening. When families gathered next day at the grandparents', children recited their poems and received treats such as bags of candy.[21]

---

[16] *Mennonite Foods and Folkways, Vol II*, pp. 81-82.
[17] *Mennonite Foods and Folkways, Vol. II*, p. 82.
[18] *Mennonite Foods and Folkways, Vol. II*, p. 82.
[19] *Mennonite Foods and Folkways, Vol. II*, p. 83. An unpublished biography of Susanne Rempel by her granddaughter Debbie Kirkpatrick Schowalter is at the MHA, Winnipeg.
[20] *Mennonite Foods and Folkways, Vol. I*, p. 340.
[21] *Mennonite Foods and Folkways, Vol. II*, p. 78.

Did you note the pattern? During the good years, children found unwrapped gifts beside their plates, families attended church services on the three days of Christmas and came home to dinners of baked ham—and everyone visited for days.

In their migrations, Mennonites' foods changed according to their location. Over the 250 years of living in Poland-Prussia, their Frisian and Flemish menus had begun to include foods and flavours their Polish and German neighbours enjoyed. In Russia, they borrowed more recipes from their Ukrainian and Jewish neighbours.

At Christmas time, Mennonite mothers baked peppermint cookies, *Prjanike*, peppernuts, molasses cookies, honey cookies, and more sweet treats. Anna Derksen Rosenfeld (1912-1990) of Steinbach reminisced: in Grünfeld, Schlachtin, South Russia, "we baked cookies just for Christmas. It was always something special".[22]

Pfefferminz Kuake, or peppermint cookies, were known in Russia as *Gruzniki*. Baking-ammonia (today replaced by baking soda and powder) dissolved in cream or buttermilk, and peppermint oil were the main ingredients. Gerhard Lohrenz (1899-1986) of Winnipeg recalled that, in Neu Schoensee, Sagradovka, at Christmas, "the peppermint cookies were especially popular. The cookies were white, soft, and had a special fragrance".[23] Margaret Klassen Sawatzky was "always so glad for these cookies".[24] Eva Bartel Nickel stored her fresh peppermint cookies in "a five-gallon crock".[25] Agatha Martens lived through hard times: "During the famine we had nothing to eat at Christmas. But somehow we scraped together a little sugar and flour and baked a cookie".[26]

Do you remember your own grandmothers' jam-filled cookies? In Russia, they were called *Pryaniki*. Today, some families call them jam-jams. For children, the best part is the jam filling. I've watched my grandmother roll the soft dough out, cut it into circles, fill each circle with a spoonful of wild-plum jam, and fold the edges so that they were sealed. Wild plums grew in abundance across the prairies, Anna Derksen Rosenfeld pointed out. She mentioned that because the dough is soft, "It is easy for the filling to run out…. In Canada we often use wild plum or gooseberry jam, both of which jell quickly and will not run. Sometimes women make their jam very thick just for these cookies".[27] After baking, the warm jam-filled cookies are glazed with thin icing—a real treat indeed!

You may have heard of or perhaps tasted *Päppanät*—those spicey little Peppernut cookies associated with Christmas, and baked in the Netherlands, Scandinavia, the Baltic countries, and northern Germany. In the past, for some families, Christmas had only truly

---

[22] *Mennonite Foods and Folkways, Vol. I*, p. 341. See her obituary in *Der Bote*, 12 Sept. 1990, p. 7. Anna was a central figure in creating *The Mennonite Treasury of Recipes*, (Steinbach, Manitoba: Derksen Printers) 1961.
[23] *Mennonite Foods and Folkways, Vol. I*, pp. 352-353.
[24] *Mennonite Foods and Folkways, Vol. I*, p. 353.
[25] *Mennonite Foods and Folkways, Vol. I*, p. 353.
[26] *Mennonite Foods and Folkways*, *Vol. I*, pp. 341.
[27] *Mennonite Foods and Folkways*, *Vol. I*, pp. 348.

arrived when the Peppernuts were made! Voth tells readers that "our grandmothers in Russia…baked very plain peppernuts… crisp and very spicey".[28] Today's recipes may include candied fruit, nuts, dates, and be softer. While most are cookies, some *Päppanät* are yeast-based sweet and spicey buns. Peppernut-cookie dough is rolled into long, narrow rolls and snipped into small, button-like pieces, then baked.[29] Storing cookies in jars or crocks in a cool place for weeks allows spices to blend.[30]

Peppernut recipes have travelled far with Mennonites. In Winnipeg, Tina Berg used a recipe that a "90-year-old woman from Danzig" gave to her "grandmother, who lived in the Molotschna Colony".[31] Louise Schroeder, also of Winnipeg, grew up in Danzig; she remembered that, before World War II, at Christmas they always made Peppernuts "small, like…buttons".[32]

Helen Nickel declared that, in Russia, "Mother's peppernuts were so hard you could hear them crack when you bit into them". Mary Friesen said, "ours were so hard you kept them in your mouth to dissolve, like hard candy". In Kansas, Yvonne Jost Dunn's "Dad liked them hard so he could dunk them" in coffee. The cookies that Georgina Kornelson Johnson's mother baked were soft: "She placed them close together on the pan then broke them apart".[33] To go with all those delicious Christmas cookies, it was hot coffee for the adults, and warm, milky *Pripps* for the children.[34]

What makes these Peppernuts so special? It's the assortment of spices! Spices were long considered a luxury that only the rich could afford. The spice trade in the Middle Ages brought exotic, expensive spices from Arab lands into Europe via caravans across the Alps. In the 1600s, the Dutch East India Company made them more affordable for Europeans and in the new settlements in the Americas.[35]

Voth's first book focused entirely on *Päppanät*. In it, she itemized the spices used, all from far-away places: cinnamon bark from Indonesia and Vietnam; cardamom seeds from India, first brought to Scandinavia by Viking sailors; anise from the Middle-East; white pepper from the Equator; cloves from laurel buds in the West Indies; ginger root from India; and nutmeg seeds from the tropics.[36] Peppernuts were indeed exotic treats for Mennonite children.

---

[28] *Mennonite Foods and Folkways*, *Vol. I*, p. 366.
[29] Freezing the dough first makes cutting it easier, is my experience with "Helene Ewert's Spicy Brown Peppernuts" recipe in *Peppernuts*, p. 31.
[30] *Peppernuts*, p. 7.
[31] *Mennonite Foods and Folkways*, *Vol. I*, p. 398.
[32] *Mennonite Foods and Folkways*, *Vol. I*, p. 397.
[33] *Mennonite Foods and Folkways*, *Vol. I*, p. 377-378.
[34] *Mennonite Foods and Folkways, Vol. I*, p. 405.
[35] *Mennonite Foods and Folkways, Vol. I*, p. 399.
[36] *Mennonite Foods and Peppernuts*, pp. 16, 22, 26, 30, 38, 44, 54.

Growing up, Anna Penner Derksen liked the pepper in her recipe; she said, "it gives the peppernuts a little spicey, hot flavour".[37] The mother of Helen Peters Epp "made only the yeast peppernuts…. She used lard in the recipe, and the spices were cinnamon and…nutmeg or pepper".[38] Ethel Abrahams mentioned that her mother Helene Ewert's "recipe is large… but families were big then".[39] Her recipe calls for 1 pound of butter, 8 cups sugar, 6 eggs, 6 spices, and 15 cups of flour! (I follow this recipe when making *Päppanät*—halved.)

In all the stories and recipes for cookies, no mention is made of cocoa and chocolate.

While traditions were generally similar, minor differences between the 1870s and 1920s Mennonite groups existed. Having halvah and decorated Christmas trees evidently depended on a family's immigration history. In southern Manitoba in the 1950s and '60s, most homes of the 1920s group had both, but often those of the 1870s group did not.[40] This distinction has since faded.

Voth, a descendent of 1870s immigrants, makes no mention of halvah in her books, but it seems to be a staple in many Mennonite homes today. Halvah, a tasty, sweet snack made from sunflower or sesame seeds, originated in Persia and is popular around the Mediterranean and Middle-east regions. It found its way to stores in South-Russia in the late 1800s and early 1900s, after the Mennonites' initial emigration. There, on the Russian steppes, Mennonites developed a taste for halvah, and in the 1920s, they brought their taste for it to Canada. In Manitoba, they were delighted to discover a good supply of halvah in stores run by Jewish merchants in north-end Winnipeg. By 1937, Riediger's Supermarket on Isabel Street carried it.[41] When my own grandparents settled in the Grunthal area, they found halvah at Guenther's Grocery Store in the village in the early 1930s.[42]

One Christmas in Manitoba around 1960, my *Russländer* mother offered halvah to our visitors, neighbours whose ancestors had come to Canada in the 1870s. They said they had never seen halvah or tasted it, so it was new to them. We kids watched the neighbour children strongly resist tasting the delicious halvah. Perhaps our mention of the ingredients didn't help: our grandfather always told us, with a grin, "Halvah is made from camel milk. See—on the halvah container—a picture of the camel!"

Turning to New Year, how did Mennonites in Russia and Canada end the old year and begin the new? First, by attending church on *Niejoasch'owend*, New Year's Eve, also called *Sylvesterabend*.[43] Anna Rempel Dyck from Gnadenfeld recalled wearing her best clothes

---

[37] *Mennonite Foods and Folkways, Vol. I*, p. 383.
[38] *Mennonite Foods and Folkways, Vol. II*, p. 83.
[39] *Peppernuts,* p. 31.
[40] Based on my observations as I remember them.
[41] "Heinrich Riediger fonds," Mennonite Heritage Archives, Winnipeg.
[42] Conversation with D. Guenther, third-generation storekeeper at Grunthal Grocery, Dec. 9, 2025.
[43] Voth mentions the term but does not explain that it is the German word for New Year's Eve, named after fourth-century AD Pope Sylvester I. Did Mennonites borrow the term from their German neighbours in Poland or Prussia?

and "Sunday shoes" for the Christmas Eve church-service that began at 9, with singing lasting until after midnight. Mia Reimer DeFehr of Winnipeg remembered that, in the Kuban, the evening was spent in church in reflection and gratitude.[44]

Traditionally, mothers made additional treats for New Year's Day: *Portzeltje*. That day, children could stuff themselves full of *Portzeltje*, and everyone continued visiting! These well-known treats are also known as *Niehjoahsch'küake* (New Year's cookies, fritters). In *Plautdietsch*, the word *Portzeltje* refers to the way these fritters roll over while deep-frying. Voth suggests that "This tradition may have come with the Dutch Mennonites from Holland in the sixteenth century, for the Dutch still make fritters [Oliebollen]…. Throughout northern Europe, frying cakes on this day symbolized fatness and prosperity" …and in Prussia, "it was customary to make fritters on New Year's Day…mountains of sugared raisin fritters for the noon meal".[45] In the Russian Empire and then in the Americas, "Mennonite women…continued their old West Prussian tradition of baking *Portzeltje*".[46]

In a chapter titled "Fritters, Fried Cakes and Biscuits", Voth has advice from the "experts"; eight women offered their secrets for the "Perfect *Portzeltje"*.[47] Essentially, to make *Portzeltje*, spoonfuls of the raisin-filled, soft yeast dough are dropped into deep hot oil or fat where they fry into puffed-up golden fritters. While cooling, they are dusted with icing sugar. One enthusiast, Kaethe Kasdorf Warkentin, informed Voth that "Portzeltje were special and you had to have more than one".[48] Good advice!

Readers, you may be thinking about your own family traditions and foods. Are you following or reviving certain favourites? Some family traditions will remain familiar and welcome, while others fade over generations for various reasons, including general attitudes regarding cultural and family history.

What role can our traditions play? Norma Jost Voth believes "Traditions provide a link to the past. They bring comfort, security, and blessing in times of change and transition".[49]

Preparing and savouring cherished or rediscovered family favourites is a memory aid, a means of evoking our forebears, their foods, languages, traditions, and history in a tangible way. It binds us to our past.

May the comforting aroma of spicey peppernuts and the taste of warm, raisin-filled *Portzeltje* live on in your kitchen and in your memories.

Search Deutschland.de for details about how Germans celebrate new year's eve, the saint's feast day, Gregorian calendar reformation in 1582, and the older pagan celebration of *Rauhnächte*.

[44] *Mennonite Foods and Folkways, Vol. II*, pp. 107 and 108.

[45] *Mennonite Foods and Folkways, Vol. II*, p. 105.

[46] *Mennonite Foods and Folkways, Vol. II*, p. 112.

[47] See the section "Perfect *Portzeltje*? Listen to the experts" in *Mennonite Foods and Folkways, Vol. I*, p. 135.

[48] *Mennonite Foods and Folkways, Vol. II*, p. 112.

[49] *Mennonite Foods and Folkways, Vol. II*, p. 85.