



Convention News

“Keeping our German Russian heritage alive!”

July 26, 2019



Jake Loos demonstrates how to make blinna.

Thursday had a full roster of events for those wanting to immerse themselves in the German Russian culture. Five panelists shared their memories of “Growing up Roosian.” Convention attendees had the opportunity to see blinna and German sausage being made, and were treated to samples of these traditional GR foods. Other cultural highlights included a presentation by German Sack on Volga folk songs and a sneak preview of a documentary about the Dutch hop.

Panelist Jerome Siebert didn’t know that he was GR until his mid-50s. Siebert explained, “I knew I had a German heritage but our family never talked about those times because of the hardships.” Siebert discovered he was GR in 1992 when he went to Russia at age 14. His sister-in-law called and told him he needed to go to Dinkel because it was his father’s village. When Siebert returned home, his family took him to a historical center in Fresno and provided him with a lot of research material.

In contrast, Nick Bretz grew up fully aware of his GR background because of the prejudice he endured as a child for dressing ‘funny.’ In school, there were frequent fights between the youth of different cultures. And his mother had become so sensitive to prejudice that she swore meadowlarks were calling her family “dirty Roosian beet workers.”

Other panelists recounted more positive childhood experiences. “As a child I didn’t know the world had anyone but Germans in it,” said Donita Rotherham, moderator for the panel. “At five I met a man who had white hair and spoke perfect English. Most people I know spoke German or had an accent. I asked him why he was speaking English. He told me he wasn’t German. I asked my dad about this. I wondered how they knew how to clean and cook if they aren’t German.” She concluded by saying that she wishes she hadn’t run away from her GR heritage as a child, but said she is immersing herself in GR culture in her retirement.

Later in the day, some convention attendees took part in food demonstrations. “Blinna is one of the easiest and fastest German Russian foods to make,” Paul Loos told the crowded room at Immanuel Church. He showed his audience how to prepare the sponge (yeast starter), the first step of making blinna.

Jake Loos then gave a little history of the blinna. He explained that it had spread throughout Europe and into Russia. He said blinna was a food with flavor that filled the belly. “Sharing it with family and friends who have never eaten it is a way of sharing who we are with other people,” he said.

Valerie Kemper grew up eating blinna and other GR foods. She came to this convention, her first, because her GR great grandparents, grandparents, and parents had lived in Lincoln. On Kemper’s visit, she went on the North and South Bottoms tour and saw her family’s house. She brought her cousin with her to the convention because she wanted her to experience GR foods.

Lisa Zyriek and her mother Caroline Hughes also came to this convention because of its location. Both sets of Zyriek’s grandparents were GR and lived in Lincoln. The N/S Bottoms tour has given them a new perspective of GR history. And they’ve taken the opportunity to access records of interest. They’ve also met cousins at the convention that they didn’t know they had. Equally important, they treasured the opportunity to be with people who share the same traditions, such as blinna and other German foods. “The volume in the room goes up because we’re all talking about the same background.” The blinna demo was special for another reason. “Having it feels like home, like when we had grandma here. One of my last memories is of her making blinna. Grease was splattered everywhere.”

In the afternoon, foreign speaker German Sack entertained his audience by playing several folksongs on the dulcimer. His largest selection was of dance songs, which he said are very common in the Volga region. Sack shared that, “You can play one song over and over. People will dance all night with the same song.” Sack also played slower songs and a song for children. At times the audience sang along. If you missed Sack’s performance, you can catch it again at 10:45 a.m. on Friday and again on Saturday.

Storytelling Contest Winners

Among Germans from Russia, storytelling is an important oral and written tradition that ensures the continuation and enhancement of GR history and heritage among future generations of Germans from Russia. The annual AHSGR Storytelling Contest invited members and non-members to capture the GR experience through storytelling. Winning entries were announced and read today. Prize money was also awarded.

ADULT WINNERS

Christine Antinori: “Maternal Instincts”

Eleanor Sissel: “The Krummy Quarter”

Shirley Wilcoxon: “Why I Am Passionate About Genealogy”

ADULT HONORABLE MENTIONS

Shannon Bickford: “The Happiest Day”

Olga Lomov: “The Wulf Family”

YOUTH

Abigail Kingry: “My Family History”



Christina Zahn awards Eleanor Sissel with second place.



Shirley Wilcoxon reads her entry.