

Bird-shaped Easter Bread: A Tradition of the Germans from Russia



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Activity, Time and Materials

ACTIVITY:

Having family members from the “Old Country” has been a blessing for many of us. The tradition of baking bread was both a necessity of life and an art form. Holiday celebrations such as Easter prompted folks to transform something “everyday” into something “special.” Bird-shaped bread at Easter time symbolized the long-awaited coming of spring and the renewal of one’s spirit. This activity includes the recipe and process for baking the bread, as well as directions for making bird shapes from the dough. The aroma of baking bread helps facilitate recollection and the sharing of memories, so, if possible, one should have bread baking in a nearby oven. This activity is designed to involve the elders in the bread-making process and to encourage the recollection of family traditions. Working with the dough will also be physically therapeutic to those whose hands may be arthritic. Actions involved include the gentle kneading of walnut-sized pieces of yeast dough, as well as the rolling of short ropes from it. Invite anyone who is interested to help with the initial mixing of the dough ingredients. Staff, kitchen staff, family members, and volunteers can lead this activity. The finished bread birds can be placed in baskets or bowls and serve as edible decorations for a special meal.

TIME:

Three hours and fifteen minutes over four sessions.

MATERIALS:

- An oven
- A large bowl
- A wooden spoon
- Flat baking sheets
- A pastry brush
- Measuring cups
- Measuring spoons
- A metal spatula
- The book *Sundogs and Sunflowers: Folklore and Folk Art of the Northern Great Plains*

Prepare a loaf of bread so that it can be baking during your discussion of bread-making traditions.

INGREDIENTS FOR THE TRADITIONAL, BIRD-SHAPED EASTER BREAD:

- 6 ½ cups white flour
- 2 cups lukewarm water or milk, as you prefer
- 1/3 cup lard or solid shortening
- 2 packages dry yeast (2 Tbsp.)
- 1/3 cup white sugar
- 1 Tbsp. salt
- 2 eggs, at room temperature
- Currants or raisins to use for the eyes (or alternatively, black food coloring and toothpicks)

Extra flour for kneading

½ cup milk plus 2 Tbsp. sugar mixed to paint on the baked bread.

(This will give it a glossy finish.)

“THREE PLAGUES” (LONELINESS, BOREDOM, HELPLESSNESS):

This activity invites participation on many levels and addresses all three of the plagues. Sharing memories within the group promotes social interaction and alleviates boredom. As the residents will be actively involved in the process of making the bread dough, shaping it into bird shapes, baking it, and then preparing decorative baskets of birds for the dinner table, the sense of helplessness also will be addressed.

ASSOCIATED MEDICAL STUDY:

M.M. Tse et al. “examined the effects of an 8-week integrated pain management program (IPMP) on enhancing the knowledge and attitude toward pain management among staff; and improving the pain, quality of life, physical and psychosocial functions, and use of non-drug therapies for the elderly in nursing homes. Nursing home staff . . . and residents . . . were recruited from ten nursing homes. Nursing homes were randomly assigned into an experimental group . . . with IPMP or control group . . . [and] without IPMP. The IPMP consisted of pain education for staff and physical exercise and multisensory stimulation art and craft therapy for residents. Data were collected before and after the IPMP. The staff demonstrated

a significant improvement in knowledge and attitude to pain management, with the survey score increasing from 8.46 ± 3.74 to 19.43 ± 4.07 Among the residents, 74% had experienced pain within the previous 6 months, with pain intensity of 4.10 ± 2.20 . Those in the experimental group showed a significantly better reduction in pain scores than the control group, from 4.19 ± 2.25 to 2.67 ± 2.08 Group differences were also found in psychological well-being, including happiness, loneliness, life satisfaction and depression . . . and the use of non-drug methods. . . . These results suggested that IPMP is beneficial for staff, and is effective in reducing geriatric pain and negative impacts. Management support and staff involvement in the program are important for its long-term continuation.” [Abstract]

--Tse, M.M., S.K. Vong, and S.S. Ho. “The Effectiveness of an Integrated Pain Management Program for Older Persons and Staff in Nursing Homes.” Archives of Gerontology and Geriatrics 54, no. 2 (March–April 2012): e203–e212.

Cover photo: Bird-shaped Easter bread baked by Lila Hauge-Stoffel.

Activity Plan

SESSION I (45 MINUTES):

1. The person directing this activity will engage the participants in a discussion and sharing of memories of bread making, which can be further encouraged by the smell of fresh bread being baked in the oven.

Note: Prepare a loaf of bread so that it can be baking during your discussion of bread-making traditions. While reminiscing works well for people in the early stages of dementia who are trying to hang onto memories, it may be frustrating for those in the middle to late stages of the disease. Stimulating the use of other senses, such as sight, touch, taste, and smell, may aid in better invoking memories. Try utilizing other senses in this activity plan, such as smell (by baking bread during the discussion) and taste (by serving the fresh-baked bread during or after the discussion). Show pictures of bread making from the book *Sundogs and Sunflowers*.

2. The person leading this discussion can ask such questions as:

- Do you recall someone in your home making bread? If so, whom?
- Can you recall whether you like the smell of fresh bread baking?
- Was the bread baked in the house or in an outdoor oven?
- Did you get to help make the bread?

- Where did the bread sit while it was rising? (Was it in the sun, on the back of the stove, in a warm oven?)
- Did you have special bread for holidays? If so, what made it special? Was it decorated?
- Did you eat the fresh bread with butter? Syrup? Jelly?

3. For samples of the various kinds of traditional breads and to encourage conversation about them, the person directing this activity should read from among the following selections and show pictures, where relevant, from the book *Sundogs and Sunflowers*:

- folklore item “37. A Big Batch of Dough,” page 80, Chapter 3
- folklore item “5. A Silver Dollar in the Bread,” page 196, Chapter 8
- folklore item “46. The ‘Oplatek’ Tradition,” page 218, Chapter 8
- folklore item “74. *Kuchen* is More Than Just a Word,” page 281, Chapter 10
- folklore item “75. Our Family’s *Kuchen* Recipe,” page 282, Chapter 10
- folklore item “78. Norwegian Flat Bread,” page 283, Chapter 10
- picture of *ga-boo-boo* bread on pages 282-283, Chapter 10
- folklore item “80. How to make *Lefse*” and picture, page 284, Chapter 10

(Be sure to listen carefully to what individuals have to say and pick up on their ideas for further discussion. Ask others if they have heard of or shared a similar experience. This will encourage everyone to become involved in a lively conversation.)

SESSION 2 (1 HOUR):

I. The person directing this activity will invite residents to help mix the bread dough using the ingredients and recipe provided in the materials section of this activity plan. (Important Note: Mix the bread dough three hours ahead of the time set for making the bird shapes in Session 3.) Follow the process as described:

- Divide the tasks so that anyone who wants to help has something to do. Volunteers, family members, and kitchen staff will be welcome helpers for this process.
- Mix the yeast in $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of warm water and let it bubble to proof it. If it does not bubble, use fresh yeast and start again.
- Melt the solid shortening until just soft. If it feels hot, let it cool slightly.
- In a large bowl, mix softened shortening, sugar, salt, and $1\frac{3}{4}$ cups of warm water (or milk). Add beaten room-temperature eggs. Stir in completely.
- Begin adding the flour 2 cups at a time, stirring after each addition. Knead the dough with floured hands until it feels silky smooth and not sticky.
- Grease the inside of the bowl and place the dough in it. Cover the bowl with plastic or a cloth and set aside in a warm place to rise.

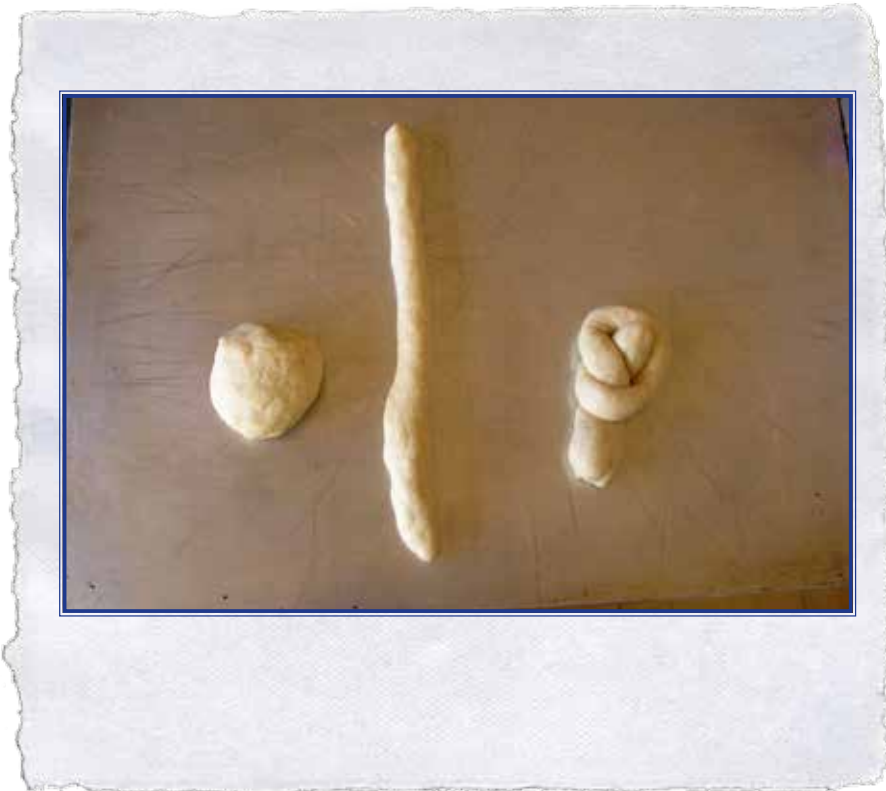
- Punch down the dough and let it rise again to double its original size.
- Knead the dough to remove air bubbles.

Note: As bread-making machines are relatively new kitchen tools with which residents may not be familiar, use the traditional process for making the dough. Involvement in the old process will help generate memories and promote enjoyment of the process. Allow one hour for mixing the bread dough. Again, mix the bread dough three hours ahead of the time set for Session 3. Frozen bread dough can be used, although it is not as “rich” a dough as the recipe included. If frozen bread dough is used, make sure to thaw it beforehand and bring to room temperature according to package directions.

SESSION 3 (ONE HOUR):

I. The person directing this activity will now help the participants form the bread dough into bird shapes:

- First, pull or cut off a golf-ball-sized piece of dough, then roll it into a ball in your hands.
- Sprinkle a little flour on the tabletop, and, using both hands, roll the dough into a rope about 8-10 inches long. Make a loop with the rope of dough and push one end of the rope through the loop. This will be the head of the bird.



- Place the dough bird onto a baking sheet, and, using a small knife, cut slits into the other end of the rope for the bird's tail. Use your fingers to spread the tail feathers out a little.
- To give the bird eyes, cut a currant or raisin in half and place each half into the bird's head where the eyes should be located. Eyes also can be added by dipping a toothpick into food coloring and making dots with it.
- Let the dough rise until it doubles in size. Allow 1 to 1 ½ hours for the dough to rise to double its original size prior to baking.
- Bake the birds in a 350 degree oven for 15 minutes, or until the birds are lightly browned. The baking time will vary depending on the oven.
- While still hot, paint each bird with a mixture of sugar and milk to give it a glossy finish.
- When cool, place the birds in air-tight containers or bags and refrigerate to keep the bread fresh.



SESSION 4 (20 TO 30 MINUTES):

I. Invite participants to arrange the bread birds on colorful plastic Easter grass that has been placed in bowls or baskets. These then can be placed on dinner tables as decorations and be eaten with that evening's meal. Staff may have to point out that the bread can be eaten with the meal. This would be a good time to invite family members to come and join the residents for a meal. Dinner conversation about homemade bread-making memories should be encouraged, which will allow for the participating residents to bask in their accomplishments. This kind of conversation will strengthen family ties, as residents become the embodiment of living legacies.

Note: Some folks are familiar with making a yeast bread wreath for a special occasion meal. This also would make for a great bread-making activity. Very good directions for making such a wreath can be found in the recipe book *Food 'N Customs: Recipes of the Black Sea Germans*, published by the Germans from Russia Heritage Society in 1988. One will find both traditional Easter and Christmas bread recipes on pages 52 and 53.

AUTHOR • LILA HAUGE-STOFFEL:

Lila is a retired professor of art education who loves to bake bread in the tradition of her German-Russian grandmother, Martha. On the Saturday before Easter, yeast dough was formed into little birds that were baked to enjoy with Easter Sunday dinner. Lila continues this tradition and makes the bread birds every year for her family. Currently living at Lake Lida, Minnesota, she also paints and exhibits watercolor paintings, tapestry weavings, and makes traditional willow and pine-needle baskets. Lila holds an M.A. degree in Art Education from the University of Minnesota, as well as an M.F.A. degree in Fiber Art from the University of North Dakota. She has worked with the North Dakota Council on the Arts' *Art for Life Program* since it first began, in 2001. She also has conducted workshops for healthcare providers and has designed and conducted residencies for the elderly in North Dakota, Minnesota, and Arizona. Lila has witnessed firsthand the positive effects the arts can have on the quality of life for the elderly.

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