

Mischt for Fuel

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In Bessarabia, "Mischt" was a very important fuel source, since we were not near a forest from which to obtain firewood. "Mischt" was the byproduct from cows and horses - the manure that collected in the barns and animal pens. These areas were always kept well-bedded with straw, of which we had an abundant supply. When the manure was cleaned out on a regular basis throughout the year from the areas that housed the animals, the underlying bedding of straw was also taken up and became part of the raw "Mischt. "This raw "Mischt" was carted outside and collected in a pile called a "Mischt Haufa" or simply "Mischte" toward the rear area of the farm yard. Here it was left until the weather became dry and hot enough to turn the raw "Mischt" into blocks of dried "Brennmischt. "Often the "Mischte Haufa" would become quite warm, even to the point of steaming as the mixture began to rot.

In the early summer, the manure that had been collected over the winter in the "Mischt Haufe" was ready to be further processed into "Brennmischt". It was taken and spread quite thickly on the ground in an area known as the thrashing square which was a hard-packed dirt area in the back section of the farm yard. Every family farmstead had one of these thrashing areas. At harvest time this area was used to thrash grain by use of stone-rollers pulled by horses.

The raw "Mischt" was spread out evenly about 4-6 inches thick on the thrashing square, then was "batschat" (beaten down) with any available device to compact it. The method used depended on the amount of manure to be compacted, the implements available, and the custom of the family. Mostly this process was done by human strength, although some families also utilized horse power to get the job done. The compacted end product was referred to as "Brennmischt".

After compacting, the "Mischt" was left to dry sufficiently until it could be cut into blocks that would hold together. Some folks cut the "Mischt" into squares, others cut it into rectangles the size of a large brick, like my folks did. The "Mischt "blocks were generally referred to as "Mischt Batza. "After cutting, the "Mischt" "Batza" was piled up into a "Kopitze" (a stack) that was generally a somewhat round pile 6-8 feet high and 4-5 feet wide. As the "Mischt" "Batza" was stacked up, plenty of spaces were left in the stack to allow moisture to escape, since even by this time the "Mischt" was not entirely dry.

Before thrashing time, as weather and work schedules permitted, the "Kopitze" was dismantled, and the "Mischt" was taken and stacked in a "Mischt-Schopf" which was a shed used exclusively to store dried "Mischt". Because there was a lot of straw in the "Mischt", the blocks held together and were fairly easy to handle when dry. The straw also enhanced the amount of burnable energy that was contained in the blocks of "Mischt". These blocks of "Mischt" could be counted on for burning quite a while in our mud-brick furnaces that were our means of heating our houses. Poor folks who had no animals to produce "Mischt" went out into the pasture to collect dried cow paddies (cow pies) - these also burned well due to the residue of grass and hay from the feed

of the cattle. Cow paddies did not burn nearly as long as blocks of "Mischt", but they did burn hot and many housewives preferred them as fuel for their cookstoves. Many times my mother sent me out to the pasture to collect dried cow paddies, as she found them a practical source of hot fuel for her fire. To the end of our stay in Bessarabia (until 1940) we had mud-brick ovens and stoves. Metal stoves that burned coal or wood were nearly unheard of, as such stoves and their fuel were far too expensive for most villagers to afford. Despite their source, the "Mischt Batza" burned clean and did not smell at all. They did leave a bit of dust behind when not handled carefully. My "Oma" Opp had an old blanket called a "Mischt-Placht" that she used to keep her floors protected from the "Mischt" dust. The "Mischt-Placht" would then be stored in some place out of the way when not in use.