

## Tailor-made Clothes - Fit to Grow Into

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I have never been a happy clothing shopper. All of my life, the process seemed such a hassle. When we got married, Helgard let me off the hook and did the shopping - she was the one who bought whatever was needed. She has continued to shop for me throughout our married life - that worked for a long time, until I reached old age.

I came from a middle-class Bessarabian family who lived within their means. Regardless of one's standing, money was in short supply. But my two grandmothers and my four aunts were all excellent sewers and handy with the needlework. They stood ready and willing to fill the need for what I needed to wear. All of my clothing was tailor-made of sturdy fabric that was meant to last. Stores in our village did not carry ready-made clothing or even shoes. They carried the goods for people to make the needed items.

My great aunt, /Tante/ Ricka, had an outstanding talent for needlework. She even gave classes in which she taught other village women to improve their hand-work skills. She loved to make beautiful things for the family, both to wear and to decorate their homes. Most notable to me are the baby clothes she made that have been passed down from one generation to the next. To this day I have in my possession a baptismal gown made by my /Tante/ Ricka, in which all the Zacher children and grandchildren - including my children and grandchildren - have been christened.

After I got out of diapers and baby clothes, I wore a long shirt until I was about four. Running around in shirts, my mother didn't have to check me for wet pants. I still remember my first suit of boy's clothes. First came a sailor suit for the summer that was handmade to my measurements. Then came a two-piece suit for colder days. All my clothes, even for every-day, I received gift-wrapped on Christmas from my aunts and grandmas. The everyday clothes were made of grey salt-and-pepper fabric that was stain-friendly and did not easily show soiling. Even our Christmas presents were practical. We had tailors and seamstresses in town that sewed for a living. One of these, Emma K., was a friend of our family. Mom took me there one day to be measured for a suit. I had to stand up on a chair for her to take the measurements. Emma and Mom had so much to talk about that I got tired from standing there on that chair. Then I had to endure the same procedure fitting by fitting until the suit was finished. The same thing happened when I needed shoes. The shoemaker Willi M. was a friend of Mom's - they both sang in the church choir. Again, there was measuring to be done, then fitting along the way. With both suit and shoes, the final product was made about two sizes too big - "for growing room," they said. For years, I wore clothing that anticipated my growth - I barely saw my hands while wearing my clothes, they were so big. Most of the neighbor kids wore hand-me-downs. I was a first-hand wearer, and had to deal with it.

With the clothing came underwear and stockings - all hand-made. The stockings were long enough to reach over my knee-cap. They were knitted from sheep's wool, and were they itchy! We didn't have the luxury of rubber jar rings, so we had to tie up our stockings with fabric bands or elastics that did not work all that well. I remember

running up the street a bit, and my stockings dropped down to my ankles. A bit later my Grandma Opp came to the rescue, bless her soul. She made me a little girdle with two straps on both sides that had buttonholes at the ends. With buttons sewn on the tops of my stockings I could then hold them up with this girdle-belt. Life then became a bit easier for me.

The dirt roads, dirt yards and dirt sidewalks made fancy clothes for kids impractical. I had a couple of shirts with bows on them, and did I hate them. A half-hour outside and they were all dirty, and then Alfred felt the spoon. I remember one aunt in particular - she wanted to see me always looking clean and cute.

Since my wardrobe was small, selecting an outfit was easy. When a shirt collar wore out, Grandma Opp fixed it by turning the collar inside out and it was as good as new! The same happened with sleeves that became worn. If a sock developed a hole in the heel or toe, Grandma knitted a new heel or a new toe for it.

My boots, and also my dad's boots, were made with metal half-round plates on the heels, and cap nails were used on the soles to get more wear out of the boots.

Yes, I do have some pleasant memories about clothes. Dad bought me my first sheepskin cap. Was I ever proud of it! I slept with it the first night. The other pleasant memory is a vest my grandma made me for Easter. It had four pockets on it, and one had a pocket-watch chain attached to it. I slept with that one, too.

As kids, we could hardly wait after winter until we could walk bare-foot. Then we were free! We did not have to pull up our stockings or worry about wearing down our shoes. We wore old pants and shirts and felt really good. Our mothers weren't shouting at us about our clothes. I also feel very fortunate that I had such loving grandmothers and aunts who were so proud that I was a boy.

A while back, my good wife felt I needed some new clothes. I said, "That's fine, I'll go and buy some clothes." "No you won't - I'm going with you!" Then the old memories started coming back to me. We went to the store and looked over their inventory. After looking over several shirts and trying one on, we decided on one that fit me and had a nice design. Then the wife looked at the price tag and said, "It's not on sale." My patience by then was getting thin, so we bought it anyway. Then we bought a pair of pants. The pants we bought without my having to turn, hold still, and get altered. On the way out of the store I said to Helgard, "Now, that was easy - and I don't have to worry about growing into these!" She smiled and said, "All you have to do now is grow up!"