spent 10 days visiting Odessa, Ukraine; the former Bessarabian, Black Sea and Crimean German villages; Stuttgart, Germany; and Alsace, France.

Julie Opp Burgum, Joanne Mertz Gauper, Esther Mertz Opp, Pam Opp Galagher, Lori Gauper Kishel, Allean Mertz Boschee and Karen Boschee Horge took the trip.

In preparation, Burgum researched the Mertz and Opp family histories. Through the German’s from Russia Web site, she found information dating as far back as 1775.

The tour group arrived in Frankfurt, Germany, spent one night and traveled to Odessa where they split into smaller groups and ventured out to visit their families’ ancestral villages. The Mertz family journeyed to Glueckstal in Moldova. This village was important because it is where

Opp, Gauper and Boschee’s father came from. He was three years old when the family came to the United States in 1906.

Because the villages were so far from Odessa, travelers stayed with host families. Burgum, Galagher and Opp stayed at the home of Martha Kamerer, the only German-speaking person left in Glueckstal. She served a feast and the next day, sent them on their way with food and a bouquet of fresh-cut peonies.

The Mertz family found an old Lutheran church where they think their ancestors might have attended. Little evidence is left from the Germans who settled on the land in Glueckstal, but they did find a German tombstone lying against the church. “The Russians tried to destroy all evidence that the Germans had lived there. Pieces of tombstones have been found in bridges and other building projects like the foundations of big dairy buildings,” Burgum says.

The next stop was Neu Glueckstal, a daughter colony, where Opp, Gauper and Boschee’s grandparents came from. There, they discovered a Russian Orthodox cemetery. “We found German tombstones that were hidden by overgrown lilac bushes,” Gauper remembers. “Some of the tombstones were so weathered, you couldn’t read them.”

“It was very meaningful,” Burgum says. “Others in our group were taking pictures of our family. They all felt the significance of it – this is where we felt our ancestors were buried. It made the whole trip worthwhile.”

After returning to Odessa and rejoining as a group, travelers attended a church service at St. Paul Church with a German-speaking pastor. A woman translated the service in Russian. They also visited the Black Sea and saw the Tomb of the Unknown Sailor. Before returning home, the group traveled to Stuttgart and Alsace.

Knowing where one comes from is an important aspect in keeping anyone’s family history alive. Visiting the land and getting to find out firsthand where their family lived was a great experience for the Mertz family. For some, this is a very emotional journey. For the Mertz family, not only did it help them understand where they came from, it also made them appreciate what their ancestors went through to get to the United States.

Next year’s Journey to the Homeland Tour is scheduled for May 20 through 30. To learn more, contact the Germans from Russia Heritage Collection at 701-231-8416 or email director Michael Miller, Michael.Miller@ndsu.edu. The registration deadline for next year’s tour is March 1, and each tour is limited to 15 to 25 people.