

THE INHERITANCE

The Epic Journeys of the German-Russian Pioneers

Why did German immigrants struggle to establish new homes on the Russian frontier, and then, later, on the wild and lonely Dakota plains? This three-part series tells the story of the Meidinger family: their dreams, their bravery, their faith. It calls out from the past the names of the men, women, and children who boldly sought a new and better world, twice.



Part I

By Alma Baumann

The history of the Meidinger family in its early pioneer days is of great interest. Our forefathers were a devout people who trusted God to guide them when they set out for new and strange lands. They remembered Him as they sought better lives for themselves and their descendants.

The farthest back the family can be traced is to Georg Meidinger, born in about 1627. In the records

at a church in Neipperg, Wuttemberg, Germany, the words "farmer" and "citizen" appear after his name. (The village of Neipperg is about 35 kilometers north of Stuttgart.)

During the Thirty Years' War from 1618 to 1648, most of Neipperg was destroyed. The duke of Neipperg, who lived in a castle overlooking his village and vineyards, went to Switzerland

after the war to get servants to work for him. Among those people were the Meidingers.

This history will mostly lead up to Adam Meidinger Sr., the patriarch who established his family on the Dakota prairies.

Georg Meidinger married Anna, who was born in Neipperg about 1631. They had two sons. The son who was the forerunner of Adam

Sr. was Johann Bernhard Meidinger, born in 1658.

The following traces some of the lineage of the early Meidingers:

Johann Bernhard married Margaretha Elizabeth Trojan, to whom were born two sons. One was Hans Bernhard or Johann Bernhard, born on October 29, 1683. He married Elizabeth Catharina Muth and they were the parents of seven children.

Andraes was born October 11, 1715 and later married Maria Elizabeth. They had three children who grew to adulthood. Johann Wolfgang was born on May 15, 1737 and married Catharina Barbara Schmid.

Their five children reached adulthood, Johann Leonhard being born on February 14, 1762. He married Elizabeth Margretha Alt.

They had three children but only Johann Leonhard Jr. survived through his childhood years. He married Maria Barbara Muller. They were the parents of Adam Meidinger Sr., according to Jon Amon, a great-great-grandson of Adam Meidinger Sr.

Amon taught school in Germany, and traced the Meidingers from Switzerland to Neipperg.

(In 1980, a great-great-granddaughter of Adam Sr., Judy Rothfusz, and her husband, Ralph, of Cleveland, Ohio, visited the village of Neipperg. Much of the village today is as it was when the Meidingers lived there. The old church was being renovated at that time. The same building which was the school was still standing, and so was the house where the Leonhard Meidingers lived.)

(There were no Meidingers presently living in Neipperg, but in the cemetery behind the church were tombstones with the Meidinger name on them. The castle where the duke lived is now occupied by distant relatives of the duke. The village of Neipperg is nestled in a valley.)

Records at the Evangelical church in Neipperg show that Johann Leonhard Meidinger, his wife, and six of their eight children left for Russia in 1831. Two of their children had died, one in infancy and the other a four-year-old.

No records have been found as to why the family went to Russia at

CIVILIZATION

Civilization is the eternal sacrifice of one generation to the next.

Bulwer-Lytton, Alice

that time as there was no large migration, but several families must have decided to go. The children of Leonhard and Maria were J. Gottlieb, 16; J. Leonhard, 11; Adam Sr., nine; J. Jacob, seven; Johanna Barbara, four; and Justina Freiderika, two.

The people who departed from Germany broke ties with families and said farewell to familiar surroundings. They were ready to travel a thousand miles or more to a strange land.

Those journeys usually lasted several months. The journeys meant an unbelievable series of hardships, like travelling among strangers and facing disease and sometimes famine. By the time most of the Germans reached their destination in southern Russia, they were a new people. Then, when they reached southern Russia, they found themselves in

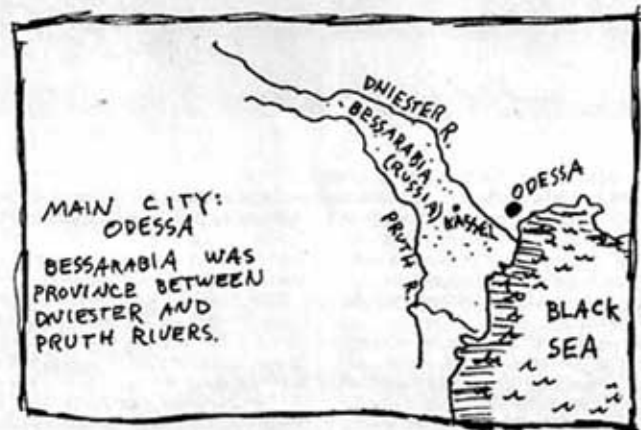
a different culture and a different language.

The Leonhard Meidingers settled in the dorf, or village, of Kassel, which was located on the elevated left bank of the Dniester River about 100 miles northwest of Odessa.

The first German colonists going to that area arrived in the fall of 1809. They stayed at neighboring dorfs of Gluckstal, Neudorf, and Bergdorf until spring. In the spring, the dorf of Kassel was established.

It was called Kassel in memory of a deceased pioneer, David Ficke, who had come from Kassel, Germany.

The colonists at Kassel were mostly farmers. The soil was of good quality and they were able to raise all kinds of grain together with beautiful vineyards. Seeing



Dark clouds of locusts swept across the steppes in 1828 and 1829, devouring crops and polluting water in streams and wells. Their loud munching sounded like herds of cattle feeding in cornfields.



The Meidinger family in America.

Left to right: Adam, Christina Neher, Jacob, Iva Ohlhäuser, Andrew, Fredricka Buyer, and John. Seated is the American patriarch, Adam Jr. (who was later called Adam Sr.).

those vineyards perhaps persuaded the Meidingers to stay there as they had worked in vineyards at Neipperg.

At first, the houses at Kassel were made of stamped earth, as building stone was scarce and the wood from trees was of poor quality. If building stones were used,

they had to be hauled from other quarries, a great difficulty.

The Russian government gave the colonists 18,760 acres of land and 36,789 rubles for their expenses in getting settled, and 3,310 rubles to buy grain.

For the most part, life in the dorfs continued as before for the

Germans at Kassel. They retained their language and much of their way of life.

The census of 1816 showed the population at Kassel as being 461. By 1885, it was 2,256.

The early settlers endured many hardships such as droughts, locust invasions, snakes, and wolves. But

they managed to recover their losses and move forward to a brighter and happier day. They were poor. They realized, however, that hard work and upright behavior were the foundation for a better life for the individual and the community.

The church at Kassel was Evangelical Lutheran. A large community school had also been built, which could take care of 285 pupils. It was used for a school and a prayer hall.

Besides learning to read and do sums, the children received the kind of religious instruction which teaches young people faithfulness to God, patriotism, obedience to authority, and devotion to their jobs.

It was said the colony owed its well-being to the preaching of the pure gospel. That information was taken from the Chronicle of Kassel, written by the church schoolmaster, D. Winter, on April 26, 1848.

The German settlers gradually

Farming in the Russian Colonies

The early German colonists in Russia had a severe problem in their lack of adequate farming equipment, according to historian Joseph S. Height in his landmark work, *Homesteaders on the Steppe*. The colonist struggled with a primitive brush harrow, instead of an iron-tooth harrow. His plow was a crude contraption made of wood, which was used by the Russian peasants.

The Russian plow had only one metal part, a pliable iron plowshare. It was so cumbersome that it required six oxen to pull it and three men to operate it. Also, poor construction made the plow in need of constant repair.

Due to such handicaps, it usually took two to three farmers, working together, one day to plow two acres. It is not difficult to understand why the steppe did not become truly productive agriculturally until five or six decades later.

To begin with, each pioneer settler received 12 bushels of seed grain for his first planting. He probably was able to cultivate about 10 acres of virgin steppe.

More acres were added in each decade by stint of arduous, time-consuming work. In 1859, there were 811 German families owning land in the Liebental district. By then, the average holding per family had spectacularly risen to 113 acres.

**They
Shall
Prosper
Unto a
New
Land**



free land, exemption from military service, and control of their own schools, churches, and local government.

The colonists believed those promises would last forever.

But, in 1871, the German settlers lost their political status and were reduced to Russian peasants. In 1874, they lost their exemption from military service. It was after that decree that the colonists quickly immigrated in large numbers to other countries until World War I stopped their departures.

It is estimated that 300,000 Germans left Russia. Many went to America, and especially to the Dakotas, as they had heard of the advantages there.

All of the children of Leonhard Meidinger stayed in Kassel and died there, except Adam Sr. and his family.

However, many of the children of Leonhard's brothers and sisters emigrated to America, following the paths blazed by Adam Sr. and his sons.

Their destinies lay in still another adventure of immigration, an adventure fraught with sadness, farewells, and long and difficult travel. But it was an adventure too that was filled with the exhilaration of forging a new civilization on the wind-swept Dakota plains. □

IN THE NEXT issue, *Part II of the Meidinger saga continues with some of the family finally arriving on the American frontier.*

Read about Gottlieb, the first Meidinger to reach the Dakotas, and how he is dumped from a boat on the wild Missouri River—and has to trek hundreds of miles to find safety.

prospered. They enjoyed independent lives, free from harsh governmental regulation. Soon, as the German children grew up, they married, and more land was needed.

Adam, for example, married Katharina Reich at Kassel in 1840. Their children were Christoph, born October 10, 1884, who married Christina Meyer; Adam Jr., born December 28, 1846 and married Frederika Miller in 1866 (she was born April 3, 1848 in Rumania); Eva was born in 1849 and married a Mr. Derr (after his death, she married Jacob Kruz).

Jacob was born in December 1851, and he married Rose Miller (after her death, he married Katharina Spitzer, a widow); Gottlieb was born October 1, 1854 and married Barbara Meyer; Johann was born January 1, 1858 and married Magdalena Schnaibe; Christina was born in 1860 and married Christian Rott.

Many Germans continued to move to Russia. The desire for private property and low-priced land attracted them.

Empress Catherina II of Russia also offered foreigners financing,