German Russians: a saga of terror, intolerance, pride

By SYLVIA PAINE
Staff Writer

The average American, well fed and comfortably housed, can scarcely comprehend the lost feeling of the homeless. But for Americans of German Russian ancestry, that understanding runs in their blood.

Most of those who settled in North Dakota, where there are more German Russians than in any other state, are secure now, and their children are rooted in America. But many feel a tug of fear when they think of those who stayed behind, suffered through a revolution and two world wars, and still face restrictions on their religion and their language.

Tim Kloberdanz, instructor in anthropology at North Dakota State University, descends from Germans from Russia who settled in Colorado. He says local German Russians are trying to contact and possibly help their families emigrate from the U.S.S.R.

Kloberdanz compares the plight of German Russians to that of Jews: they are not easily allowed to leave.

An article published in the Journal of the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia states that Soviet officials hesitate to let German Russians leave because they are good workers and because mass emigration would create a bad impression of the Soviet Union

The Germans are anxious to leave because they feel their religious and cultural life is slipping from them in the U.S.S.R. But generally they are considered well-vised if they have relatives living in Germany who have invited them.

Some in North Dakota are reluctant to discuss their efforts on behalf of their relatives, fearing that any publicity might impede the delicate negotiations. Mrs. Christ Leingang, however, hopes publicity may lead to locating an aunt, possibly two, whom she knows to be living in Siberia. Leingang lives at 2001 19th Ave. S., Fargo.

Her father, Adam Baumstarck, left Russia in 1913 for North Dakota, where he planned to work on a farm and send for his family within a year. He never saw any of them again. War broke out in 1914 and seven brothers were lost. His parents died of starvation in 1922. And during the "eastern holocaust" of German-Russian fighting in World War II, his three sisters were shipped to Siberia with other Germans living in Russia.

Although Baumstarck died 10 years ago, a letter addressed to him was received this summer by his wife, of Linton, N.D. The letter was from a sister, Liza Huber, now living in Norderstedt, Germany, and she told of another sister still in Siberia.

It had been 11 years since the last letter, and although Mrs. Baumstarck had informed the sisters of her husband’s death, they apparently did not receive the information.

Asked how she believes the relatives are faring in the U.S.S.R., Mrs. Baumstarck shakes her head sadly and says, in her heavy German accent, "Not good." She believes they need to be located.

Kloberdanz says Germans remaining in Russia are often working as unskilled laborers. Gone are the great big colonies and prosperous farms of fertile western Russia, where Germans were involved in the arts. As Catherine the Great showed the Russian peasants how to farm.

INGRID RILMAND

The closeness of the German Russian families ties the two. German and hated for being Russian, their wish to preserve their fading traditions, and a newly developed pride in ethnicity have renewed their efforts to find relatives in the old country.

But besides that, they are just beginning to learn the story of those who stayed behind — a story untold for years because those who lived through it have tried to forget it. Only the curiosity of the younger generation is now drawing the painful memories out.

Ingrid Rilman, 42, Stockton, Calif., told the local Historical Society of Germans from Russia what happened to those who had hoped to remain in the land they had known as home. She visited Fargo-Moorhead recently to talk about her novel, The Great Russian: "The Saga of Three Women Who Survived." The book draws on her own terrifying experiences as a Berlin, Russia, in 1945.

But hers was not an isolated case. Kloberdanz’s wife, Rosie, said her grandmother’s story of the eastern holocaust is almost identical.

When other Germans left in the early 20th century, Rilmand’s ancestors, who were Mennonites, tried to stay in Russia and believed the country which had welcomed them would protect them.

The Germans were an industrious and self-contained group within Russia, with their own language, churches and schools.

But with the Bolshevik revolution beginning about 1917, it was no longer good to be different, religious or middle class. The Germans were seen as if hell’s gates had opened, as if Russia had betrayed them,” Rilmand said.

The German Russians were terrorized and stripped of their land in those days of anarchy, which were created by wave of starvation in which many of Rilmand’s family died — the same famine which killed Baumstarck’s parents.

More Germans fled the country in the 1920’s, but all said they believed Russia would recover. Instead, Russia shut its gates and sent whole villages of the “outside-ers” on remote Paraguay jungle, where it took two days to catch their way through the bush to the next colony.

There were few men, most having been exiled in Siberia. Rilmand and later found her father in the U.S.S.R. He had remarried, having been told his family was dead. The Germans in Paraguay were incredibly poor, hidden by ants and infested by insects — a demeared people.

Curious, intelligent, but with no outside intellectual resources, Rilmand was restless. She marrie

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Rilmand, born in the Ukraine in 1936, scarcely remembers her father, who was sent to a hard-labor camp in Siberia in November 1941. Women and children were to be deported.

But Hitler’s army marched into Russia in one month later, Rilmand, her mother, grandmother and the American girl waiting at a railroad station for deportation. It was a brutal night, a morose society, a cruel cussing — when suddenly a silence fell which lasted all night.

When the sun rose, the German army was afoot, there was a twoday occupation that provided some relief and restoration of Jewish identity to the German Russians.

But when the German army was on its way, many stayed, the German Russians and all far. She married a British scientist, he is in private practice in the education of exceptional children.

She can raise English only 11 years ago, yet with that tool she has found a voice to express the plight of the German Russians.

Her novel, which received the California Literature Medal Award this year, tells of three generations of women. The first, representing her grandmother’s times, speaks of the religious steadfastness, the cultural unity of her people during Czarist Russia.

Her mother’s counterpart represents the times of great upheaval, when faith seemed to disappear.

Her own counterpart represents the children who came out of the war and no longer fully understood the heritage or how all the trouble came about.

"As a Russian German and a person who has come incredible distances, in the beginning the temptation to say it was all for her own culture was hurting me," she said. "I knew only to throw out the entire experience, never call myself Russian again, never call myself again.

Like the German Russians in North Dakota, once taught for their ethnic background, she raised her two sons the American way. They do not speak German.

The strength of the German Russians, Kloberdanz says, is their relentless quest of their history, manifests the same feeling Rilmand experiences.

She turned from her writing toward American culture "with all my passion," she said. "Now I am proud to be American, not just to be Russian. I do not know the cultures that were there."