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Beginning in 1762 people from Germany were invited to come and settle in Russia. Their descendants are now known as “The Germans from Russia.” From 1762 to 1861 it is estimated that about 100,000 Germans went and settled in Russia. In this new land the Germans built their own houses and cultivated the land.

They also built their own schools and churches. Eventually both the Protestants and the Catholics produced clergy from their own group.

Anton Zerr of German-Russian lineage was born in 1849. He was ordained a priest in 1872 and was named a bishop in 1889. He was the first bishop from this group of Germans in Russia. Bishop Zerr died in 1932 and was buried in the Selz cemetery. But because of grave robbers and the terror of the communists for everything that had anything to do with religion, his body was moved and buried in a secret place. In recent years there was only one lady left alive who knew the secret location of the grave. In 2009 local people were digging a grave and came upon a burial vault several feet down. When the vault and coffin were opened, they recognized it was Bishop Anton Zerr because of the priestly vestments and a crucifix. The elderly woman confirmed it was the secret location of the grave.

What happened next is that several groups worked together to raise the funds to put up a nice memorial which was completed in 2012. Bishop Zerr is now buried in the Selz cemetery which is the ancestral village of all the Vetters who came to Emmons County.

Elizabeth Zerr married Wendelin Wangler in Russia and came to Napoleon. One of the Wanglers’ daughters was Veronica who married Joseph Vetter, and they became the parents of August Vetter from Linton. Austin Vetter is a son of August and Loretta Vetter of Linton, and now is the first son of Germans from Russia in North Dakota to become a bishop.

Elizabeth (Zerr) Wangler was a second-cousin-once-removed to Bishop Anton Zerr. Fr. Austin Vetter is down three generations which makes him a second cousin four times removed from Bishop Zerr. (The author admits that it is a very distant relationship, but never the less it is interesting and fascinating to study genealogy.)

In May of 2019 Bro. Placid Gross of Richardson had a chance to visit the burial place of Bishop Anton Zerr in Selz, which is about 40 miles northwest of the city of Odessa in Ukraine. Above, he stands next to the bishop’s memorial.