**Historical Background**

We were one people, Germans living in numerous tight-knit villages on the South Russian steppe, earning a living, raising families, practicing our religion, speaking the language of our forbearers. There were differences: we came from various German-speaking areas of Europe, we spoke various German dialects, we arrived in different groups at different times (the earliest in the mid-1700s), we settled in different areas of southern Russia (the Black Sea/Crimean Peninsula and the lower Volga River Valley), and we practiced different Christian faiths, Roman Catholic and Lutheran, Mennonite, Hutterite, & Reformed. But to the Imperial government and our Russian neighbors, language and religious differences dimmed: we were Germans living in Russia, an estimated 1.8 million in hundreds of villages by the end of the 19th century.

Our move to Russia was prompted by trying conditions at home: wars, famine, land shortages, military conscription, and religious intolerance. In exchange for developing south Russia, we were granted privileges, including exemption from military service and taxes; but when the government revoked the agreement, we set sail for North America beginning in 1874. Conditions in Russia worsened, so beginning in 1878, additional shiploads of Germans left Russia for South America, partly because of the receptivity of the governments of Brazil and Argentina, and partly because of restrictions in North America. Religion played a role in South American emigration. Sizeable numbers of pacifist Mennonites made the move because of the absence of military conscription along with numerous Roman Catholics because that was the official religion of both countries.

“There was so much poverty in Russia.” Argentinian Elsa Grauberger says in the documentary, *We (Never) Don’t Forget*. Grauberger’s relatives were part of a group that arrived in South America in 1912 leaving behind a Russia torn by the aftermath of the 1917 revolution, the famine of 1921-23 (caused not by crop failure, but by Soviet policies), and rising prices. Relatives and neighbors who stayed behind suffered additional periods of famine, political repression, persecution, corruption, and many died as a result of Russian, then Soviet, government policies.

In Canada and the United States, mention of German Russian relatives in another America dimmed with each passing generation. With the help of historians and media specialists, a family reunion, *We (Never) Don’t Forget*, has been arranged. This documentary explores the questions: How is the South American branch of the family doing? Where, exactly, do they live? After generations of time and distance, how are we alike or different?

**Agrarian Environment**

The bucolic South American landscape with grain and bean fields unfurling to the horizon and farm equipment in use or parked near farm buildings is familiar to North American viewers, but our grazing cattle, strutting poultry, and farmyard dogs disappeared a generation ago.
In Canada and the United States, German Russian wheat farmers helped turn their nations into breadbaskets. South American Germans from Russia have also been instrumental in expanding their country’s agricultural sector, making Brazil a major exporter of soybeans (the Pampas city of Santa Rosa is known as the soybean capital of the country). Wheat production rose considerably during the 20th century, allowing the country to be a major world exporter, but declined in recent decades because of their government’s economic and fiscal policies.

Is that a tone of pride when Robert Racho talks about one commodity in Brazil’s agricultural sector? Rightly so. He’s not talking about just any beans, his pride is Brazilian black beans. Shiny ebony on the outside, tender and mellow when cooked, *feijoles Negros* (even cans of North American processed black beans carry the term) are a popular dietary staple in Brazil and all of Latin America. Black beans are increasingly consumed in North America outside of predictable Latino, Cajun, and Creole communities. Brazil’s German from Russia played a role in expanding black bean production.

The landscape and farm activity are familiar, but there are geographic and cultural differences. While North American farmers are planting crops during the spring months of April and May, South American farmers are harvesting the crops planted in November and December and North American farmers measure in bushels, acres, and miles while South Americans use kilograms, hectares, and kilometers.

**Land & Climate**

A land of varied climates and stunning scenery (the opening and closing scenes are of the majestic Iguazu Falls on the border between Brazil and Argentina), South American Germans from Russia had to become acclimated to life below the equator (a subtropical to temperate climate). After difficult years trying to make a living in the tropical rainforest of southern Brazil, some Germans from Russia settlers moved to the grasslands of Argentina where they commenced being grain farmers.

**Land of Immigrants**

Following the journeys of Columbus between 1942 and 1502, Spanish and Portuguese conquistadors arrived in Latin America in search of gold and land. Few Europeans besides Spanish and Portuguese emigrated before the end of colonial control when the new republics encouraged immigration. However, it was not until the late 1880s, about 50 years after independence, that waves of immigrants began arriving. Consequently, both Brazil and Argentina, like the United States and Canada, are ethnically diverse.

Periods of intense immigration to Argentina, pre-1870 to post-1945, reached an all-time high between 1880 and 1916, with predictable spikes before and after the world wars, making Argentina one of the world’s leading countries of immigration in modern times. Today German is among the top five languages spoken in Argentina.

German immigration to Brazil is small compared to the immigration of other nationalities such as Portuguese, Italians, and Spanish, and small compared to North American numbers. Nevertheless, Brazil has a sizeable population from German-speaking areas of Europe, some who date their ancestors’ arrival to 1818, decades before other groups arrived. Germans have made their mark on architecture, manufacturing, and agriculture. Understandably, the Spanish language has grown as a second language (Brazil is surrounded by Spanish speaking countries), but German is the third most spoken language and a German-Brazilian newspaper continues to be published in the country’s largest city, São Paulo.
During the early settlement of Germans from Russia, the German language was spoken in high places. An interviewee notes that when the original German colonists met with Brazilian Emperor Pedro II (who reigned from 1831 to 1891) about relocating to Argentina, he spoke to them in German. Both his mother and stepmother were German royalty.

**Languages & Names**

South American Germans from Russia speak Spanish (Argentina) or Portuguese (Brazil) and, as is evident in the documentary, some also speak High or Dialectic German as well as English. Language is not only a means of communication but also embodies and articulates a culture: interviewees comment on the importance of preserving and using the German language as a tool in preserving their heritage. In North America, German language skills have dramatically decreased with the passing of grandparents and parents. The few descendants of American and Canadian Germans from Russia likely acquired the skill in an academic setting.

In North America, Johann, Heinrich, and other German names of immigrants became Americanized: Johann became John, Heinrich became Henry, Müller became Miller. In this reunion we meet and hear from Roberto, Estevão, Armando, Claudio, Florentina, Pedro, Carlos, Jorge, Juan, Geraldo, Fabian, and others, all with hearty German surnames. In some cases, both the Latino tilde and the German umlaut grace the names of speakers.

**Status of Heritage & Culture**

Gratitude, pride, and commitment are reoccurring themes in numerous documentary scenes. Gratitude to parents and other forbearers for their choices, efforts, and sacrifices is freely and firmly expressed by the South American Germans from Russia we meet. Spoken words, scenes of ethnic celebrations, name’s day observances, and family gatherings bear witness to the pride people have in their heritage and the commitment to pass the culture along to the next generation. Roberto and other speakers note the role the church and family continue to play in retaining and transmitting the culture. By contrast in many North American Germans from Russia families, Sunday as “visit the family” day faded during the last generation, and acknowledging that “we stand on the shoulders of the ancestors” may be implied in carefully assembled family genealogies, but it is rare to read or hear the tribute.

Gratitude and pride of German Argentinians and Brazilians (*Deutschargentinier* and *Deutschbrasilinar*, respectively) to parents and other relatives are firmly expressed in statements such as “I just love my grandpa” (from a young male professional, not a child) and “I am grateful to have been born into a good family,” from Peter Pauls.

Commitment to passing along the heritage is evident as interviewees comment on using technology and other means to reach the younger generation. “What I do with my library? I give it to young people,” proclaims Peter Pauls against the background of his extensive collection of history and heritage books.

While those in the sepia-toned photographs from family albums look remarkably like our relatives, seeing the vitality of the South American Germans from Russia culture and hearing specific examples of values and commitment from ordinary people has impressed North American Germans from Russia, leaving them perhaps a little envious and sad. Have we been remiss in preserving our heritage?

**Acceptance, Assimilation, Allegiance**
During the period of high anti-German sentiment, WWI until after WWII, the loyalty of South America’s Germans from Russia was challenged as noted in the documentary. Targeted by Nazis who unsuccessfully attempted to gain their support (“You are our ethnic brothers.”), the German colonists were harassed by neighbors and the state. German schools were closed and conversations in Germany were regarded with suspicion and were reported to authorities. Roberto talks about the destruction of important genealogical papers and family keepsakes destroyed because they were written in German.

Nevertheless, mentioning German and South America in the same sentence brings questions, if not thoughts, about Nazi support. Names like Eichmann and Mengele, as well as the book, and later Hollywood film, The Odessa File, spring to mind. Let’s address that issue now with a review of the facts. Although Argentina officially remained neutral, the country secretly, but actively, supported the Nazi regime. After World War II, President Juan Perón’s government participated in establishing and facilitating escape routes out of Germany to South America for high-level Nazis. The similarity of the culture to Europe compared to other countries and the presence of long-established German populations, which would facilitate “blending in,” undoubtedly influenced Nazi war criminals trying to escape justice. Thousands of former German military leaders reached the continent and many of them settled in or passed through Argentina. In 1998, the Argentine government acknowledged its collaboration and labeled it “a painful and shameful” episode. In his 2002 book, The Real Odessa: Smuggling the Nazis to Peron’s Argentina (the word Odessa used here is an acronym for a lengthy government title), Argentinian writer Uki Goñi gives a detailed and documented account of the project.

Music

Wherever Germans settled, they brought with them their wonderful musical tradition. What North American German from Russia doesn’t have memories and stories of their music-making relatives – Sunday song fests “because your grandfather loved to sing,” the pump organ even in modest households cherished for decades until it was replaced with a piano, stories of uncle buying a mail-order accordion and teaching himself to play, and German bands made up of farmers and small businessmen that provided music at wedding and community dances.

Both lively and soulful music permeates We (Never) Don’t Forget: church choirs, small amateur bands, and both ballroom and folk dancing. Armando Reisennawer, explaining the departure from Russia, promptly and flawlessly sings in German Now the Hour is Here as his ancestors did in the late 1880s. Brazilian Peter Pauls remembers his ancestors by playing a farewell song on his harmonica. “My father played the violin. We all played music,” notes Argentinian Elsa Grauberger. Even though times were hard during that first Christmas in the Brazilian jungle, the people put aside their suffering and celebrated by singing Silent Night, remarks Florentina Gruhlke.

The small stringed instrumented played with mallets by Buenos Aires resident Germán Sack is a dulcimer (hackbrett in dialectic German according to scriptwriter and humanities educator, Lewis R. Marquardt). Common in the Ukraine where they are known as tsimbals (also tzimbals), dulcimers can still be heard in Volga German gatherings.

Cuisine

“Food traditions carry across generations and geographic locations. Some things I’ve eaten down there, I could have eaten in Kansas as well,” notes Brent Mai, Director of the Center for Volga German Studies at
Concordia University, Portland, Oregon. Viewers will recognize the use of dough products in scenes of making *strudla*, *knepfla*, *grebble*; the shredding of green cabbage, and the appearance of and reference to *kraut bierocks*, *kvass*, and *schnapps*. And, yes, that is *Kuchen* in the center of the table. With the exception of the language, the well-used, handwritten cookbook looks strikingly similar to the ones kept by our mothers and aunts.

Are those potatoes nestled against the pork roast? Neither producers nor scriptwriters were present when the scene was filmed, so we are left to guess. *Manihot utilissima*, the tuberous root referred to as *Manjorca* (Portuguese for mandioca), is a potato substitute in Brazil and to a lesser extent in Argentina, and is vaguely known in North America as cassava or yucca. Like potatoes, cassava’s utility and versatility are well established. Cubed and cooked, the tuber looks like boiled or roasted potatoes, pureed, it resembles mashed potatoes, dried and grated, it looks like bread crumbs or grated cheese. Cassava flour made from dried and ground tubers is the most common flour in Brazil. Several cassava by-products line the shelves of well-stocked pantries in South American homes. If North Americans have eaten cassava, it was likely in the form of tapioca, a concentrated starch used to make a pudding of the same name and a thickening agent for fruit fillings and other food preparations.

But wait. Can Germans survive without their beloved *Kartoffeln*? Potatoes are eaten daily in Argentina where they are an important agricultural crop concentrated around Buenos Aires and Santa Fe. The crop is abundant enough for export. Because much of Brazil is tropical, potatoes can only be grown in the more temperate areas of southern Brazil so they remain a minor crop with relatively low consumption. Take a closer look. Are those potatoes or *Manjorca* next to the pork roast?

“I use frequently black sugar, black beer, spices,” says Argentinian Mirta Kreng. Unknown to most North Americans, black sugar is a minimally processed, brown-black, moist, deep-flavored sugar, especially popular in China (Brazil is a major producer of sugar and enjoys a lively trade with China). *Schwarzbier* (black beer), a dark lager with an easygoing taste, is more familiar to Germans. According to aficionados, some of the best is produced in Brazil (predictably, other top-rated black beer is brewed in Germany and Wisconsin). What precisely Mirta meant about spice use, we do not know, but in contrast to German foods, South American cuisine is flavored with a variety of peppers, including cayenne, chili, and malgueta.

“We use a lot of mutton,” says Argentinian Roberto Racho (sheep along with cattle are raised on the Pampas). In contrast, lamb and mutton consumption among North American Germans from Russia is very limited. The meat was not part of the diet on the Russian Steppe and remains a footnote in the cuisines in German-speaking Europe. Common meat products in both Argentina and Brazil are sausage, chicken, and pork.

**Story behind the Story**

*We (Never) Don’t Forget*, is another captivating documentary by the award-winning team, executive producers Bob Dambach, Director of Television, Prairie Public Broadcasting, and Michael M. Miller, Director and Bibliographer, Germans from Russia Heritage Collection/NDSU (both of Fargo, North Dakota) and scriptwriters Dona Reeves-Marquardt and Lewis R. Marquardt, Austin Texas. According to Miller, the idea for the 2015 documentary took shape at a meeting during the 2010 AHSGR convention, Lincoln, Nebraska. What followed were months of researching, identifying potential interviewees, and
filming. About 30 videos shot during three trips to South America were woven together into the seamless, informative, and heart-warming 60-minute video.

So, how is the South American branch of the Germans from Russia family doing? Just great. Despite the differences in our origins and history in the Germanys, the time lapse since we left tight-knit colonies in South Russia, the distance between the Americas, and the geographic and cultural differences, the family reunion made possible by the resources of GRHC/NDSU Libraries, Prairie Public Broadcasting, and five generous private donors, was immensely enjoyable and educational. We are one. And we (never) don’t forget.