Coming Full Circle: Twenty-first-century Reflections on the German from Russia Global Diaspora

By Dr. Eric J. Schmaltz, Professor of History, Department of Social Sciences, Northwestern Oklahoma State University in Alva

Editor’s Note: This piece was the opening keynote address to the Germans from Russia Heritage Society’s (GRHS) annual convention held in July 2014 at Spokane, Washington. This version is slightly modified from the original.

My mind keeps turning to what has been happening to the Germans from/in Russia for the past couple of generations, especially since the 1960s and 1970s. That is, there is a growing sense that circumstances surrounding the German-Russians worldwide are somehow now coming “full circle.” I have experienced this pervasive feeling in more recent years, and I know that others have, too. I have found both in my own writing and that of others the phrases “full circle” or “coming full circle” cropping up time and again. The world seems a bit smaller these days, perhaps sometimes uncomfortably so, but also more interconnected and familiar. More specifically, we are reconnecting with our roots more than ever in this fast-paced world, and, through our own encounters, we are also binding together more substantially our different immigration subgroups worldwide.

Connecting us as an ethnus are shared experiences, events, places, and dates across space and time. For example, we recently have been commemorating key moments in our long Diaspora history, the great dispersal across Europe, to the Americas and beyond. This year of 2014 witnesses the big 250th anniversary of the initial arrival of Germans into Russia along the Volga under invitation of Tsarina Catherine the Great. Equally significant, this year marks the 225th anniversary of Mennonite and other German colonists into Ukraine and the Crimea under Catherine. It is also the 210th anniversary of Tsar Alexander I’s manifesto that made possible the migrations of Germans and others into South or New Russia (Novorossiya) along the Black Sea in what is now western Ukraine, as well as the 200th anniversary of the first German settlements into Bessarabia.

Several more noteworthy anniversaries are taking place in 2014: (1) the 100th anniversary of the First World War’s tragic outbreak, which transformed traditional European society and the German from Russia Diaspora; (2) the 75th anniversary of the Second World War’s terrible outbreak, which also changed the course of history for the ethnic group and so many others; (3) the 70th anniversary of Nazi Germany’s mass evacuation (called the “Long Trek”) of 350,000 ethnic Germans from Soviet Ukraine to occupied Poland; (4) the 50th anniversary of the official Soviet rehabilitation of deported and repressed ethnic Germans after the Second World War; and (5) the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, launching the end of the Cold War. Nor should we forget in this year of 2014 about the 125th anniversary of formal statehood granted to the States of North Dakota, South Dakota, and Washington, where many Germans from Russia came to settle!

Despite all these commemorations, our saga has not ended, and, in fact, it is only beginning. Each generation has to re-imagine the past, starting the cycle of memory all over again—i.e., coming full circle.
This perception of the spirit of the times—or Zeitgeist, to use a most appropriate German term—perhaps stems from my opportunities to travel to parts of Canada, Germany, Alsace in France, Ukraine and Argentina as well as across the United States, where the Diaspora group has lived at one point or another. The beginning of this sense, at least for me, however, goes back to a specific event that occurred more than twenty years ago. It is one brilliant example from my own extended family history revealing how the course of events has come “full circle” only in the past generation. It concerns the late Emma (Schmalz) Rieger, born in 1918 in the German village of Kandel in western Ukraine, who experienced a strange twist of fate later in life. In 1952, after surviving Communism and Nazism, she and her family settled in Minot, North Dakota, as “Displaced Persons” after World War II, sponsored by my great-grandfather, John Schmaltz (1879-1951), a successful, retired businessman in Emmons County, North Dakota. Many years later, in 1993, Emma enjoyed the good fortune to meet Bishop Joseph Werth, an ethnic German native of Soviet Kazakhstan, born in 1954. His ancestors included both Ukrainian and Volga Germans whom Stalin had deported into exile during the Second World War. In 1991, as Communism collapsed, Pope John Paul II appointed Werth to serve as the first bishop of the new Roman Catholic Apostolic Administration of Siberia, Russia, with its headquarters in Novosibirsk.

At the time, Bishop Werth was conducting an ambitious church mission in the United States in order to seek assistance from fellow Germans from Russia for his fledgling congregations. Following the Cold War, it only now seemed fitting that Emma, whose widowed mother Barbara (1899-1937) had cared for the late Bishop Antonius Zerr (1849-1934) during the early days of the Stalinist Terror, and Bishop Werth, the young dissident Catholic priest under the Soviets, could now meet on the North Dakota prairies. In a special action, Soviet police later arrested Barbara and many other dissidents in 1937 in Odessa region, resulting in their executions. The historic encounter between Emma and Bishop Werth would have been unthinkable only a few years earlier, but here Old and New Worlds had now converged, i.e., their long and winding fates had come “full circle.” When she passed away in 2008, Emma had experienced such a sweeping set of amazing circumstances across half the globe. Countless recent stories of our people and even families coming together after all these many years, such as this dramatic and touching episode, have made quite a striking impression on me.

Based on my encounters over the years, a number of articulate and thoughtful German-Russians have begun to express the growing sense that world events for the ethnic group in many respects are coming “full circle” since the end of the Cold War: (1) the reunification of once-separated families across the old Cold War divide; (2) the creation since the 1990s of organized tour groups to former traditional villages and homelands; (3) renewed contacts and missionary outreach efforts worldwide among religious communities (whether Catholic, Lutheran, and Mennonite, etc.); (4) over the last generation, the establishment of major university special collections and heritage societies across the world; (5) ethnic German mass migrations to the “ancient homeland” (Urheimat) of united Germany from the former Soviet Bloc and the former USSR, reaching a peak during the 1990s, which, as scholar Timothy J. Kloberdanz recently noted, in fact represents the largest movement of Germans from Russia in history; (6) the growing public awareness of once-forgotten famine, repression, and gulag letters distributed outside of Stalin’s USSR during the 1920s and 1930s; (7) the accessing of former Soviet archives after the Cold War (an effort which remains tenuous, to be sure, in view of current political events in Putin’s Russia), not to mention the release less than a generation ago of the extensive Einwanderungscentralstelle (EWZ).
genealogical records from the Nazi era; (8) the dramatic rise since the 1990s of nearly instantaneous communications across the Internet or “digital commons”; (9) the promises, surprises, and perhaps perils of the burgeoning field of DNA genealogy (compressing space and time even farther); and (10) a richer appreciation in recent years of the experience of South America’s Germans from Russia. Is it not about time for us to tell the South America group’s story as well?

In particular, the Internet has led in the last generation to the relative implosion of space and time, nearly leveling once formidable cultural, national, and geographical barriers and connecting the world’s distant corners in the process. The German from Russia Diaspora represents no exception to the rule. Now, this development will not necessarily mean the creation of one big, happy global family or social harmony, but it does signify a new historical epoch at the dawn of the twenty-first century. Scholar James N. Leiker rightly observes:

In 1905, the word “community” described people who lived close together and therefore had no choice but to associate out of necessity. A century later, technological advances—cell phones, airplanes, the internet—have made it possible to ignore one’s next-door neighbor and form new bonds or sustain old ones with others living far away. The twenty-first century is an unprecedented time when “community” is no longer dependent on place, meaning that communities of the future will not be defined by the accident of geography but by similar values, shared relationships, a common past, and simple feelings of belonging.... If we are willing to reconsider the meaning of the word “community,” we may find that Antonino [a small German-Russian community in Kansas] and other ethnic networks have not disintegrated but have merely adapted to changing conditions, exactly as people of the German diaspora have done for centuries.*

What we are witnessing, or experiencing, is a phenomenon that some observers have described as “Global reach, local impact.” Perhaps this historical process is also what I mean by the phrase “coming full circle.”

Whether in the Americas or Eurasia, one of the most pressing challenges confronting the German from Russia heritage associations is the aging demographic of those who still more or less identify with the traditional ethnic identity. Tied with this issue is the crucial need to publicize more our Diaspora story to a wider international, or non-German from Russia, audience, as well as to the younger generations. Our special collections at academic institutions, sometimes receiving assistance from the traditional heritage societies, will likely assume even more responsibilities and possess greater resources and capabilities to help us preserve and even promote the heritage over the long duration.

In view of changing circumstances, where are things going today for our ethnic Diaspora, as we embark on new, twenty-first-century frontiers? Scholar Donna Reeves-Marquardt observed at the 2012 American Historical Society of Germans from Russia (AHSGR) convention in Portland, Oregon, that the ethnic group as a whole appears to be on the verge of two possible futures: a renaissance of German-Russian culture and memory, or complete assimilation and eventual cultural death.
Perhaps promising for the future, our academic special collections (in Fort Collins, Colorado, Fargo, North Dakota, and Portland, Oregon) and major heritage associations (the AHSGR in Lincoln, Nebraska, and the GRHS in Bismarck, North Dakota) continue to build upon their contacts and networks with like-minded organizations, groups, and individuals across the globe. As a result, the German from Russia Diaspora experience will probably assume an even more pronounced transnational (international or cross-border) character, one that combines academic resources and contemporary trends in technology and information-gathering with its cultural content grounded in a traditional ethnic identity—a sort of hybrid entity that straddles six continents (Asia, Australia, Europe, North and South America, and even Africa).

Several years ago, German-Russian writer Debra Marquardt now at Iowa State University in Ames noted in an interview with Prairie Public Broadcasting in Fargo that German-Russian immigrants and older generations traditionally had been forward-looking, wishing to move beyond past disappointments and burdens in hopes of improving their and their children’s lot, while today their descendants (at least in North America) living in a world of relative affluence tend to wax nostalgic about a long lost, and perhaps even ideal, past. For Debra Marquardt, the group’s salvation might be centered on a shared, collective memory that we take care to preserve, but also one that is more realistic and can balance our understandings of the past, present, and future. In other words, the group remnant’s task beyond the twenty-first century might be to keep the German-Russian saga alive, but in the process we will also need to simplify and sort out the narrative for future generations, including among those outside of the ethnic group, especially as more and more data become available across greater stretches of space and time.

Though acculturation and assimilation processes persist in making definite inroads within the ethnic group in various countries, a core of dedicated scholars, students, enthusiasts, and others might yet survive who will keep alive vital parts of a resilient group memory and identity. Here is where it is important not just to preserve the collective story among descendants of Germans from Russia, but to help encourage others beyond the ethnic group to become familiarized with our great history as farmers, laborers, pioneers, artists, immigrants, and loyal citizens of different states. Though sometimes underappreciated, we Germans from Russia have played a significant historical role in connecting different parts of the globe, whether in economic, cultural, or religious terms.

In closing, the future appears to be in flux more than ever in the 250-year history of this “people on the move” (Volk auf dem Weg), as the traditional saying goes. The discoveries that await us in South America and beyond represent yet another chapter in the ethnic group’s unfolding historical journey.

Our ancestors, endowed as they were with both human strengths and blemishes, bequeathed to us a legacy worth keeping. Those of us here today are now responsible to carry the torch for them, as it is our memory that will become the future, in a long chain of humanity now stretching across this vast globe. Yes, things are coming “full circle.” We now command so much information at our disposal (sometimes quite literally at our fingertips!) to keep the great story going—to share our odyssey with each other and, not least of all, the world.
Each and every one of you, whether writing a family history or saving photo and scrap albums, or volunteering with a local heritage chapter, or telling family stories to your children and grandchildren, or a student or scholar conducting research, or someone donating heirlooms and documents to special heritage collections, and so forth, you are all performing here and now a vital role in preserving our past and future.

At this critical juncture in our ethnic Diaspora’s history, the GRHS embodies the German from Russia experience—past, present, and future. For that reason, it is indeed an honor to work with you all tomorrow in transmitting our heritage to posterity.

**Endnote**