Mack Family History and the Germans from Russia

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For:

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Introduction:

This paper is a brief history of the Mack family that immigrated to Russia from Germany in 1809 and to America from Russia in 1901. The information contained in this writing is not intended to provide a wealth of genealogical data with names, birth dates, deaths, or other such pertinent genealogical information. The purpose of this writing is to give the reader a brief history of how the Anton Mack Family came to Russia from Germany and how his descendants lived to eventually immigrate to America. Enough factual data is provided to get a general idea of the family history or to complete additional research by interested family members. Woven into this family history is information gathered from a variety of sources as noted at the end of this document. The paper is being written as an assignment to an on-line class about the background of "Germans from Russia". A number of papers, excerpts and articles were reviewed as a part of the class. This paper incorporates that information as well as other sources in support of the Mack Family History. The "Germans from Russia" are a well documented ethnic group with a diverse background that unfortunately leaves them unknown to those who do not seek to understand them.

Catherine the Great:

The year was 1772 when Georg Antonio Mack was born to Johannes Michaelis Mack and Catherina Neubert. The records for this birth are recorded in the church registry located in the city of Obergrombach, Baden, Germany(1). Although more research is needed, we can assume that Johannes was a farmer who lived in this area and attended the Catholic Church where the marriage and baptism records were kept. Georgio Antonio Mack or Anton, as he is later identified, married Maria Anna Fes also in the town of Obergrombach, Baden, Germany.
The year was 1809 and at the age of 37 Anton had four children with his wife Maria. Their names and ages were: Melchoir, 10, Joseph, 8, Mathias, 3 and Paul, 1(2). We assume that Anton was a farmer like his father Johannes who farmed in the Obergrombach area. At this time in many parts of Germany there were a number of issues that may have played a part in Anton's decision to leave his homeland for a place called Russia. Wars were common in the area with young men being conscripted into service without a choice. Religious freedom was becoming a concern as well. Of significant importance though was the lack of adequate farm land that would provide for a means of subsistence for him and his family. With four sons who would eventually start their own families and lives of their own, Anton must have thought that now was the time to look for new opportunities and fortunes for the sake of his family.

On July 4, 1763, when Anton was only 9 years old, Catherine II, Czarina of Russia, (Catherine the Great) issued a Manifesto proclaiming the virtues of the new Russian empire while offering a variety of enticements to those who would immigrate to this new land. The response to this first Manifesto had limited affect however. A new Manifesto was issued on February 4, 1804 by Alexander I, Czar of Russia, who was the grandson of Catherine the Great. This Russian proclamation may have provided the impetuous that was needed for Anton and many more Germans to make a difficult and courageous decision to take their families on a long journey to a new far away land. The Manifesto issued by the Czar Alexander I included a number of critical aspects that would have been important to Anton at that time. There were 12 aspects to the Manifesto but the most important ones were probably the following:

Freedom of Religion

Exemption from taxes for a period of 10 years

Freedom from military and civil service
Free land of 60 dessiantines for each family

We can only imagine what it may have been like to make the difficult decision to move your family far away from your homeland and your loved ones. But for Anton and his family, it was a decision that would change the history of his descendants.

**Journey to a New Land:**

Germans immigrating to Russia traveled overland to the city of Ulm on the Danube River, in Germany. This part of the trip could have taken many weeks in itself. The Russian government hired immigration agents to assist the immigrants in the long trip to the Russian steppes. It was in Ulm, Germany that groups of immigrants would congregate as they readied for the long journey. Prior to the year 1809 when Anton would have arrived in Ulm, most of the journeys to Russia took place by starting down the Danube River and traveling much of the way to Russia by river. During the time of Anton's arrival in Ulm however, Napoleon was waging a war against Austria on the upper Danube and many parts of the river journey were too dangerous to traverse. Based on this knowledge it appears that Anton and his family would have made an overland journey to Russia by way of the German states of Saxony and Silesia and the Polish province of Galacia.

The trip itself presented many opportunities to perish before even reaching the borders of Russia. The trip could take anywhere from 3 months to over a year depending on the time of year they left Germany and what the conditions were like on the trip. Food was sparse and sickness such as typhus, dysentery, and intermittent fever took many lives. When reading about the significant loss of life by many immigrants on this journey, it is amazing to realize that my ancestors were actually successful in reaching this new land.
If the immigrants were strong enough and lucky enough to have reached the new land they must have been severely disappointed in what awaited them. The first shelter they had was typically an earthen shelter dug half-way into the hard soil with sod walls and a thatch roof. In the dead of winter, the inside of their "home" would be covered in frost. Many died of exposure before acquiring adequate shelter. Within a year or two the immigrants would build more significant structures called Semeljankas that were the precursor to the sod homes their ancestors would later build on the prairies of North Dakota.

Anton and his family located in a Catholic settlement of villages known as the Kutschurgan District of the Black Sea area in Russia. The town name was Elsass and was located approximately 35 miles to the northwest of Odessa, Russia. The village initially consisted of about 60 families. It was here that Anton took possession of his free land, built his sod home, broke virgin ground to plant the seeds of his crop and was able to worship his God without fear of persecution. For almost a century his ancestors would multiply in this land.

**Life on the Steppe:**

Although life was initially very difficult for the immigrant to the Russian Steppes, they soon came to prosper in this land. The Germans were well known for their farming abilities and soon turned virgin grassland into rich wheat fields, pasture land and vineyards. For three generations the ancestors of Anton each prospered more than the previous. These "Germans from Russia" (GFR) as they became to be known, fought hard to maintain their culture and history as they knew it and as it was passed down through the generations.

Anton and his descendants maintained a life that was based on hard work and a strong religious conviction. All of the villages of the Kutschurgan District were Catholic. This was how
the initial village areas were settled. It was rare that villagers from different areas or religions would mix with others. It would be difficult to imagine that any of the descendants of Anton up to the immigration to the United States were anything but Catholic.

Although living in the land of Russia, Anton and his descendants would not have associated much with the local Russian peasants. The German immigrants believed they were superior to the Russians in the ways of farming and work ethic. They constructed well organized village towns and were the first in the area to initiate crop rotation. Their efforts and success in farming helped Odessa to become one of the most important grain export harbors in the world at that time. Other than some of the indigenous clothing items and a few Russian "slang" words, the GFR maintained their culture and identity in this Russian land for over a century.

The 1811 and 1852 Census Records of the Kutschurgan District and the 1893 Elsass Family Listing tell us the following about Anton and his descendants. Anton and Maria Anna who arrived in Elsass, Russia in 1908 had the following children who were all born before their arrival in Russia: (1) (2)

Franciscus Melchoir

Joseph Raymond

Maria Genoveva

Franciscus Mathias

Paul

Franciscus Melchoir who was born March 1, 1800 in Obergrombach, Baden Germany would become the ancestor that leads to descendants that eventually immigrate to America. He and his wife Maria would continue to live in Elsass and have the following children: (1) (2)

George
Ludwig
Sebatian
Katherina

George(1) was born on April 21, 1832 in Elsass, Russia and would later marry Magdalena Stabbler in the Catholic Church of Elsass, Russia. George(1) would be eventually be the oldest ancestor to immigrate to the United States. George(1) and Magdalena have the following children:

Johann George
Katherine
Margaretha
Magdalena
Martin
Barbara
Augustin

Johann George Mack was born January 29, 1867 in Elsass, Russia and would marry Margaretha Ziegler in Elsass, Russia. Johann, his wife, most of his children, and his father George would all immigrate to the United States. The following children with the exception of Laura, George, Frank and Ambrose, my grandfather, would be born in Elsass, Russia.

John
Valentin
Walter
Antony
At some point in the evolution of this cultural phenomenon things began to change for the worse. Land was becoming scarce. Promises of exemption from the military were being rescinded. Economic difficulties and political unrest changed the situation for the Germans in Russia. Words about the opportunities and fortunes to be had in America began to ring loudly in the ears of the GFR.

**America:**

It was in the year 1901 that Johann and his wife Margaretha decided they would leave the Russian Steppes for the new world. They would leave with their children and Johann's father. The trip to America would begin with a retracing of the path that Johann's great, great grandfather Anton would have made when traveling to Russia some 90 years earlier. The overland journey would take them from Elsass, Russia to Antwerp Belgium where they would board a ship by the name of the Haverford. The trip across the Atlantic was dangerous. The length of travel was usually 30 days and in most cases travelers were packed into tight quarters below deck. Sickness, hunger, and death were a familiar part of the journey. A box of earth was taken on the ship to be used in burials at sea as a reminder of the land they came from.
They arrived as many did at that time on the shores of New York at Ellis Island. The "processing" of these immigrants took up to two weeks and some cases resulted in family members being sent back to where they came from due to sickness or other disabilities. This would have been devastating to these families who couldn't even speak the language of this new land. Johann, his wife, his children and father, made it through and looked west for new opportunity.

**North Dakota:**

Johann Mack and his family made their way west from New York by way of rail car. If they were like many of those heading for the northern plains they probably came to North Dakota by way of South Dakota where most of the established rail lines ended. We can't be sure at this point of why Johann and his family came to North Dakota and specifically the area around Karlsruhe, ND. We know that there was plenty of "new land" and that this land was free when being homesteaded by these new immigrants. Demographic data finds a "German / Russian Triangle" that is formed with a base in central North Dakota leading to a tip in north central North Dakota. This "Triangle" was made up almost entirely of "Germans from Russia".

It has also been said that this land was much like that of the Russian Steppe. Wide open with windblown grasses ready to be cultivated into rich farm land. For some reason, these hardy Germans from Russia must have also enjoyed the difficult winters of the Steppe and of North Dakota.

The GFR were starting from scratch much as they had done when initially migrating to Russia. They built new homes, many of sod to begin with and broke the native prairie soil in order to farm the land. Many of the initial immigrants to this land stayed in touch with their
relatives and friends through letters and correspondence that was documented in the *Dakota Freie Presse*. This was a German language newspaper that was founded in 1874 and published in Yankton, South Dakota. The newspaper served the GFR in many ways. Most importantly was that it provided a link to their homeland, friends, and family while they adjusted to their new life in the Dakotas.

We noted that Johann came to north central North Dakota with his wife and children who were born in Elsass, Russia. Of the four who were born in America, the last to be borne by Johann and Margaretha was Ambrose Mack. Ambrose was born on May 12, 1912 in Karlsruhe, ND, eleven years after his father's arrival in America. Ambrose moved away from the "German Russian Triangle" to East Grand Forks, Minnesota where he married Mary O'vsak. They had seven children. The third born child of this marriage was Edward, born August 7, 1939. Edward married Bonnie Jean Deziel and twenty years to the day, August 7, 1959, Murray Mack, the author of this paper was born.

Murray married Susan Wolf in 1983. They have two children, Spencer and Madison. It's interesting to note that his wife Susan's ancestors come from a town in Russia not more than 75 miles from where the ancestors of Murray came from. Their meeting would have been an unlikely event some 150 years ago when Catholics and Lutheran rarely interacted.

**The past, the present and the future:**

There are not many of us who have asked the question, “Where do I come from?” I asked myself that question and went on a journey that was as interesting and exciting as a good mystery novel. Now that I know where I came from, I ask the question, “Who am I now”? Am I German? Am I Russian? Am I American? What other nationalities and cultures are a part of me
that have yet to be discovered? This journey has taught me at least one thing. Knowing where I come from and being able to ask intriguing questions about what that means in the present will help to carry my heritage into the future.

**Conclusion:**

I would like to thank a number of people for their help and encouragement as I take this journey into my heritage. First to my ancestors who are no longer living, I would say thank you for having the fortitude and strength to forge ahead in the hopes of finding a better life. I believe it has had an immeasurable impact on who I am today and the life that I have. To my wife for helping me with German traditions that she is very familiar with and her opinions on this subject matter. Also my thanks to her for allowing me the time to take on this family history research project. To my children for listening to at least some of what I'm trying to tell them about their heritage. To Jess Clark, the Germans from Russia instructor, who pushed me to research and understand my heritage beyond simple place names, people and dates. I know now that there is much more to learn and understand. Finally, to the members of the Heimat Facebook group for their insightful input on the discussions about this subject. I look forward to many more years of learning and hopefully someday teaching others something about "The Germans from Russia".
References and Sources:

1. Karl Stumpp, *The Emigration from Germany to Russia in the years 1763 to 1862 Part I and Part II*. Part I, Page 632 and Revision List #57 on page 634 of Part II.

2. *Odessa Archives, 1893 Elsass Family Listing*, Germans from Russia Heritage Society, From a translation of File 70-1-274 Page 75

3. *Paradise on the Steppe* by Joseph S. Height

4. *Memories of the Black Sea Germans* by Joseph S. Height

The following articles provided background information for this paper:

5. Excerpt from *F.W. Sallet and the Dakota Freie Presse* by La Vern J. Rippley

6. Excerpt from *Are We Germans, or Russians, or Americans? The McIntosh County German-Russians During World War I* by Gordon L. Iseminger

7. Excerpt from *The McIntosh County German-Russians: The First Fifty Years* by Gordon L. Iseminger

8. Excerpt from *The Russian-Germans in the United States of North America, Preparations for Immigration* by Georg Rath

9. *Ellis Island: Gateway to America* by Jean Roth

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