

“If God Would Have Mercy”:

Post-WWII Refugee Life in Germany Sustained through Correspondence and Religion

By: Torie Jones

“Oh my dear ones in the Lord, I have been so fed up with life—I would rather be with the Lord already than to keep wandering aimlessly around here. But the dear God wants it this way, so I will suffer silently until He says ‘it is enough’. Help us pray that God will deliver us from this evil.”¹ German-Russian refugee Frederika Herrman wrote this on February 6, 1949, from her temporary home in Mönchshof, Germany. She was referring to the living situations of German-Russian refugees residing in Germany after World War II. This letter was written to family members, Johannes and Christiana Schock, who lived in America reporting about life in Germany and pleading for assistance. Her letter was not the only one. Many refugees wrote to family members living outside of Europe following the war. The religious beliefs of the German-Russian refugees, reflected in Frederika Herrman’s letter, and contact with family members sustained them and provided a reason to survive the horrible conditions in Germany after World War II.

The Germans from Russia are a unique ethnic group. Their history is marked with migration and persecution, along with periods of prosperity. Starting in 1763, Catherine the Great of Russia issued a decree inviting Germans to immigrate to newly acquired Russian territories. Among others, she promised land, freedom from military and civil service, religious freedom, and an advance loan. Fifty years later her grandson, Czar Alexander I, reissued the invitation, including several of the original promises. Many groups of Germans migrated at

¹ Frederika Herrman to Johannes and Christina Schock, February 6, 1949, Johannes and Christiana (Ehni) Schock Letter & Photograph Collection, 153.1.173, Germans from Russia Heritage Collection, North Dakota State University Libraries, Fargo.

different times starting in 1763 through the mid-1810s. They came from various regions of Germany for a variety of reasons, including economic collapse and religious oppression.²

One of the groups first migrated to West Prussia, now Poland, from the Württemberg region of Germany in the early 1800s. They resided there for just over a decade, surviving the Napoleonic wars and ensuing economic chaos. In 1813, Czar Alexander I's manifesto was heavily circulated in Poland, and these same residents were willing to answer the call. Many became colonists in the newly won region of Russia known as Bessarabia. These colonists were mostly farmers and tradesmen who made their living off the land. Despite many of nature's trials such as droughts, diseases, and crop failures, they persevered and were able to live comfortable and sometimes even prosperous lives in Bessarabia.³

Over time, the Russian government started rolling back some of the promised rights, leading to more restricted lives. Some people were prompted to immigrate again, this time to North or South America. Those who stayed were forced out of Bessarabia in 1940, spent time in temporary camps, and eventually resettled in Poland in 1941. They lived in this occupied region until 1945. At the end of the war, the quickly advancing Russian army forced them to flee to Germany transitioning the people from colonists to refugees. During the flight, the former colonists lost most of their possessions and became separated from family members. In the end, some families were scattered though Russia, Poland, Siberia, and the four German occupation zones. At this point, the Germans from Russia either strengthened their faith and relied on it

² Joseph Height, *Homesteaders on the Steppe: Cultural History of the Evangelical-Lutheran Colonies in the Region of Odessa, 1804-1945* (Bismarck: North Dakota Historical Society of Germans from Russia, 1975), 3.

³ Adam Giesinger, *From Catherine to Khrushchev: The Story of Russia's Germans* (Lincoln: American Historical Society of Germans from Russia, 1981), 35, 37.

more, or simply let it go, feeling that God had betrayed them. Both sides are evidenced through letters sent by the Schock and Ehni families.⁴

Both the Schock and Ehni families were Germans from Russia. The Schock family was able to trace their heritage and found themselves as a part of the group of Germans who migrated first to Poland and then Bessarabia in 1814. They were a founding family of the village of Borodino. The Ehni family remained in Germany until migrating to Borodino, Bessarabia, in 1818. Both families were Lutheran, maintaining these beliefs through the many migrations, separations, and eventual persecution. The Schock and Ehni families were united in marriage by Johannes Schock and Christiana Ehni in 1906. Four years later, Johannes and Christiana immigrated to Turtle Lake, North Dakota, with their young family, leaving large families behind in Bessarabia. After World War II, they received almost four hundred letters from family members and friends living as refugees in Germany. These letters, focusing on religion and food supplies, documented the social and living conditions after the war.⁵

Many historians writing about the Germans from Russia simply relate the facts and timing of what happened to this varied group of people. Some documents include first-hand accounts of parts of the migration, such as Joseph Height in Chapter 4 of *Homesteaders on the Steppe*. He also includes first-hand accounts throughout other chapters, but to a minimal capacity. This simple re-telling also relates to the religious life of the Bessarabian villagers, which became a focus for them. Religious life was important to the colonists, and many villages were formed based on religious affiliation. Bessarabia was originally settled by Protestants with

⁴ Giesinger, *From Catherine to Khrushchev*, 1, 37; Martin R. Schock, *The Migration of Schock from Unterheinriet, Germany and Ehni from Gutenberg, Germany through Borodino, Bessarabia (Romania) to Turtle Lake, North Dakota U.S.A. and Beyond* (printed by the author, 2002), 11, 12; Ute Schmidt, *Bessarabia: German Colonists on the Black Sea*, trans. James T. Gessele (Fargo: Germans from Russia Heritage Collection and Deutsches Kulturforum östliches Europa, 2011) 308-323, 331, 344.

⁵ Schock, *Migration of Schock from Unterheinrit*, 7, 21.

the exception of one Catholic village. When the colonists first arrived, they were demoralized because of the lack of pastors and religious leadership and guidance. As more Germans moved into Russia, the need for pastors increased. In 1816, there were only eleven parishes in Bessarabia and one pastor. By 1863, there were 70,000 people, twenty three Lutheran parishes, and inadequate pastoral care. Because of the overall lack of religious leaders, Pastor Johannes Bonekemper started advocating that in addition to attending church services when they were available, people should hold religious exercises in small groups at home. This idea gained traction across all German-Russian settlements and consisted of periods of Bible study, prayer, and hymn singing. This method of religious observance continued through the years and grew in popularity as the parishes continued to expand.⁶

Being such a large ethnicity with a varied history, the Germans from Russia have entire books written about specific regions. One such author is Ute Schmidt, who wrote specifically about Bessarabia. After recounting the colonist's evacuation from Bessarabia and flight from Poland she summarized how they were able to survive the conditions:

Other than the former colonists' tangible qualifications, coming to their aid were the infused attitudes and self-images of colonist society-Protestant ethic, self-help, sense of community, initiative of one's own, pioneer spirit-to adjust to the completely different situation. Countless examples show that settling in and gaining a foothold of the many *Bessarabier* succeeded for the very reason that they were able to fall back on their traditional skills and hands-on approach and thus find validation in their new world.⁷

Her statement is true, but she is missing the connection these people had with their brethren who immigrated to North and South America before the upheaval of World War II. She

⁶ Schmidt, *Bessarabia*, 106; Giesinger, *From Catherine to Khrushchev*, 166, 168, 174, 175.

⁷ Schmidt, *Bessarabia*, 347.

does capture the importance of religion, but fails to notice that ultimately, it was these people's familial connections and correspondence that helped provide the will to survive.

The flight out of Poland left the former colonists, now refugees, homeless, with only the clothes on their backs. They received temporary housing and ration cards for food supplies, but both were inadequate. A niece, Helena Weißhaar, wrote on June 22, 1947, "There is nothing to be had in these ruined, crushed towns, and no hope for the future. The situation is worse than in the year 1940....Until now we are a big burden for the people because we have nothing of our own—not even a bed or table or anything to sit on— As for bed linens or underwear—don't even speak of it!"⁸ This letter was written towards the beginning of those kept by the Schock family and the sentiments are echoed by many people through the following years. The food rations they received were almost never adequate. Most of the refugees were living off of bread and potatoes as meat and fat were only available in the smallest quantities. There were times when they could not even fill their ration cards because of the lack of food. A niece, Erna (Fickel) Schmiedel, wrote in April 1947, "The basic supplies are gone and it is still a very long time until the new harvest. I don't know how we will manage. We get 200 grams of butter (= 7oz.), 6000 grams of bread (=13.4 lbs) and 600 grams of meat (=1.33 lbs), per month, and the next two weeks we will be without even a slice of bread and without potatoes."⁹ These measurements equate to almost a cup of butter, and a modern loaf of bread is about 1.5 pounds equating 9 loaves of bread for this family. These rations had to provide for Erna's family consisting of her husband and two children and possibly her parents. The food and clothing situations were a few of the reasons why Johannes, Christiana, and their German-Russian

⁸ Helena Weißhaar to Johannes and Christina Schock, June 22, 1947, Schock Collection, GRHC, 153.2.022.

⁹ Erna (Fickel) Schmiedel to Johannes and Christina Schock, April 12, 1947, Schock Collection, GRHC, 153.1.124.

neighbors were willing to send gift packages, mostly containing food and clothing, to the refugees.

Through the many letters Johannes and Christiana received, it is clear that the German-Russian refugees clung to their faith as a grounding point. They transcribed Bible and hymn verses, and wrote prayers in the letters they sent. Many mentioned the religious services they attended, almost as proof of their continued faith. They were still going, even though life around them was crumbling. In 1947, Christiana's brother, Israel Ehni, wrote, "And now I must tell you that I go to church every Sunday and how sad it is that there are so few people in church. They can always have cinema and theater like that was going to get them into heaven."¹⁰ Religious instruction had become a part of growing up German-Russian in Bessarabia, to the point it became a part of their identity. In 1948, Magdalena (Füller) Schock wrote about the Germans, "They say 'what good does it do you to go to church and pray, or cry and complain? All that won't help!' I told some of them yesterday that I was born into it and I want to die with my faith and trust in God, for here they don't know that a holy day is to be kept holy they may know it but they don't do it!"¹¹ Magdalena's comments about the faithlessness of the Germans in not observing religion are repeated in many letters sent by other German-Russian refugees.

Some of the church services refugees were able to attend were led by former Bessarabian pastors. These were held in the larger German towns whenever a pastor was in the area and were reminiscent of those held in Bessarabia. Refugees looked forward to the services. Christiana's brother, Israel, wrote, "The third of April, I am going to Bremerverde [a town in north Germany]—there will be a pastor from Bessarabia and one can again meet many—I am already happy

¹⁰ Israel Ehni to Johannes and Christina Schock, April 3, 1947, Schock Collection, GRHC, 153.2.067.

¹¹ Magdalena (Füller) Schock to Johannes and Christina Schock, March 22, 1948, Schock Collection, GRHC, 153.1.066.

about it.”¹² Even though people had to travel for these events and often did not have much money, they were willing to spend it for these worship services. During the years following WWII, with the German-Russians scattered across Germany, it was only during services such as these that many were able to gather with their fellow refugees. Elisabeth Schock echoed Israel’s sentiment, writing, “Pastor Kern held church services— it was nice and one is so happy to see his own people again, even if I didn’t know them before.”¹³ These services became a point of contact and a touchstone for the displaced refugees. Here they were able to find lost friends, or at least hear news about missing family members. Even though everything thing else had been taken from them, this was one part of their old religious traditions they were able to retain.

Correspondence with family members no longer in Europe was also a critical survival factor for the refugees. Johannes and Christiana Schock emigrated in 1910. While there are no letters to prove it, the level of comfort with the letter writers indicates there were letters sent before 1945. When life is calm and without threat, people go about their routines without realizing the things they take for granted. Johannes and Christiana’s family members had their address, but only those who corresponded regularly would have had it memorized before the evacuations from Bessarabia. After 1945, German-Russian refugees were scrambling for a point of contact. Many of the families were able to settle in relatively the same area in Germany. It was at this time that those who had the address memorized utilized it. From this point forward, Johannes and Christiana almost acted as an address book. It was through them that many family members, both immediate and distant, were reconnected. Those thought to be missing were found again and updates on the prisoners of war were shared. Through the worst of times, it was

¹² Israel Ehni to Johannes and Christina Schock, April 1, 1948, Schock Collection, GRHC, 153.2.083.

¹³ Elisabeth Schock to Johannes and Christina Schock, July 13, 1947, Schock Collection, GRHC, 153.1.008.

both the words from family members and the Bible that sustained the refugees. Magdalena (Füller) Schock wrote:

I have all your letters near at hand and when I get depressed I reach for your letters and read through them and it gets easier for me. And then the books! —Oh how good God is to reveal His Holy Scriptures to mankind. They afford one so much comfort and help for here people's hearts are cold and hard as stone. They have no compassion. They only ridicule when we go to church to listen to the pastor.¹⁴

This vital combination of both religion and family helped the refugees maintain a part of their former identity, one upon which they could start to build a new life.

Germans from Russia are a tough people with varied life experiences. They migrated to a new country to better their lives and some chose to migrate again, out of Europe entirely. A commonality through it all was their faith and familial ties. The Schock's and Ehni's Lutheran faith was an integral part of their lives in Bessarabia and after. Because the colonists were mostly teaching themselves through home Bible study, prayer, and hymn singing, their faith became ingrained in their daily lives and their identity. This enabled them to take their faith and practices with them after they were kicked out of Bessarabia. Had there been more pastors at the time, there is a chance this internalization would not have occurred. It is well documented that religion was important to the colonists, but having two specific families to use as a lens to examine that part of their life adds a complexity and view point that is invaluable. Religion is not simply about the number of people in church or how many pastors there are in a certain region; at its core it is about people. The very nature of religion, especially Lutheranism as the Germans from Russia lived and wrote about it, allowed the refugees to carry it with them, even as they lost almost all of their worldly possessions. This cultural religious identification and strong familial bonds

¹⁴ Magdalena (Füller) Schock to Johannes and Christina Schock, May 17, 1948, Schock Collection, GRHC, 153.1.007.

maintained through correspondence enabled the refugees to not just live through the harsh conditions of the 1940s, but survive and grow.