

Life through Letters

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“We always hope that things will change—it just can't go on like this, if we didn't have hope we would have perished long ago.”¹ Emilie (Schock) Amandt wrote this in a letter to her aunt and uncle, Johannes and Christiana Schock, on October 10, 1948. At the time, Emilie was a German-Russian refugee living in Germany and her aunt and uncle were in North Dakota, United States. Life after World War II was difficult in Germany, especially for the refugees. Emilie corresponded with Johannes and Christiana many times and they sent packages to her family containing food and clothing. These things were necessary for the refugees to survive. Johannes and Christiana had a large family they supported in Europe; almost 400 letters from 1947-52 were saved and translated into English by family members. Through this correspondence, it becomes evident that the German-Russian refugees living in Germany after WWII were sustained by their family and friends who emigrated before the world wars. It was this correspondence between the two groups that buoyed the refugee's physical and, at times, mental health.

Germans from Russia are a unique ethnic group with a history of migration. These people were originally from Germanic lands and were lured to Russia by promises from Catherine the Great and Czar Alexander I. The future colonists were also propelled by the thought of leaving behind religious oppression and economic collapse. Catherine the Great first issued her proclamation in 1763; her grandson, Alexander I, reissued the decree in 1804.² Some of the

¹ Emilie (Schock) Amandt to Johannes and Christiana (Ehni) Schock, October 10, 1948, (153.1.018), Johannes and Christiana (Ehni) Schock Letter & Photograph Collection 153, Germans from Russia Heritage Collection, North Dakota State University Libraries, Fargo, ND.

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), 2.

promises to the immigrants included no taxes for the first 10 years, exemption from civil and military services for colonists and their descendants, and religious freedom. Each family also received 30-60 dessiatines of land, which is comparable to 80-162 acres. One acre is roughly equivalent to the size of a US football field.³

While the decrees were issued decades apart, there were many waves of migration spanning roughly 50 years; most dictated by region and religion. The different waves settled in separate regions of Russia. The last region to be settled was that of Bessarabia. These German families took a

unique path, first immigrating to West Prussia, today known as Poland. They then moved, a decade later, to Bessarabia, Russia, which is highlighted in dark green in Figure 1. A decree for the settlement of this region was issued in 1813 promising many of the same privileges as before. It was specifically advertised in Poland.⁴ As noted by a renowned German-Russian historian, Adam Giesinger, “By 1813 the German settlers in Poland were ready to listen to those who promised them a more peaceful abode in southern Bessarabia.”⁵ The combination of worsening social and economic conditions, persecution of some religions, and the revoking of promised rights finally prompted many families to immigrate to these new Russian territories. The recruitment and travel conditions varied for each group. For many of the later waves of migration, Russia focused on recruiting farmers and experienced artisans. They knew they wanted competent people to work their land.



Figure 1: Location of Bessarabia in Europe
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bessarabia>

³ Height, 3.

⁴ Adam Giesinger, *From Catherine to Khrushchev: The Story of Russia's Germans* (Lincoln: American Historical Society of Germans from Russia, 1981), 37.

⁵ Giesinger, 37.

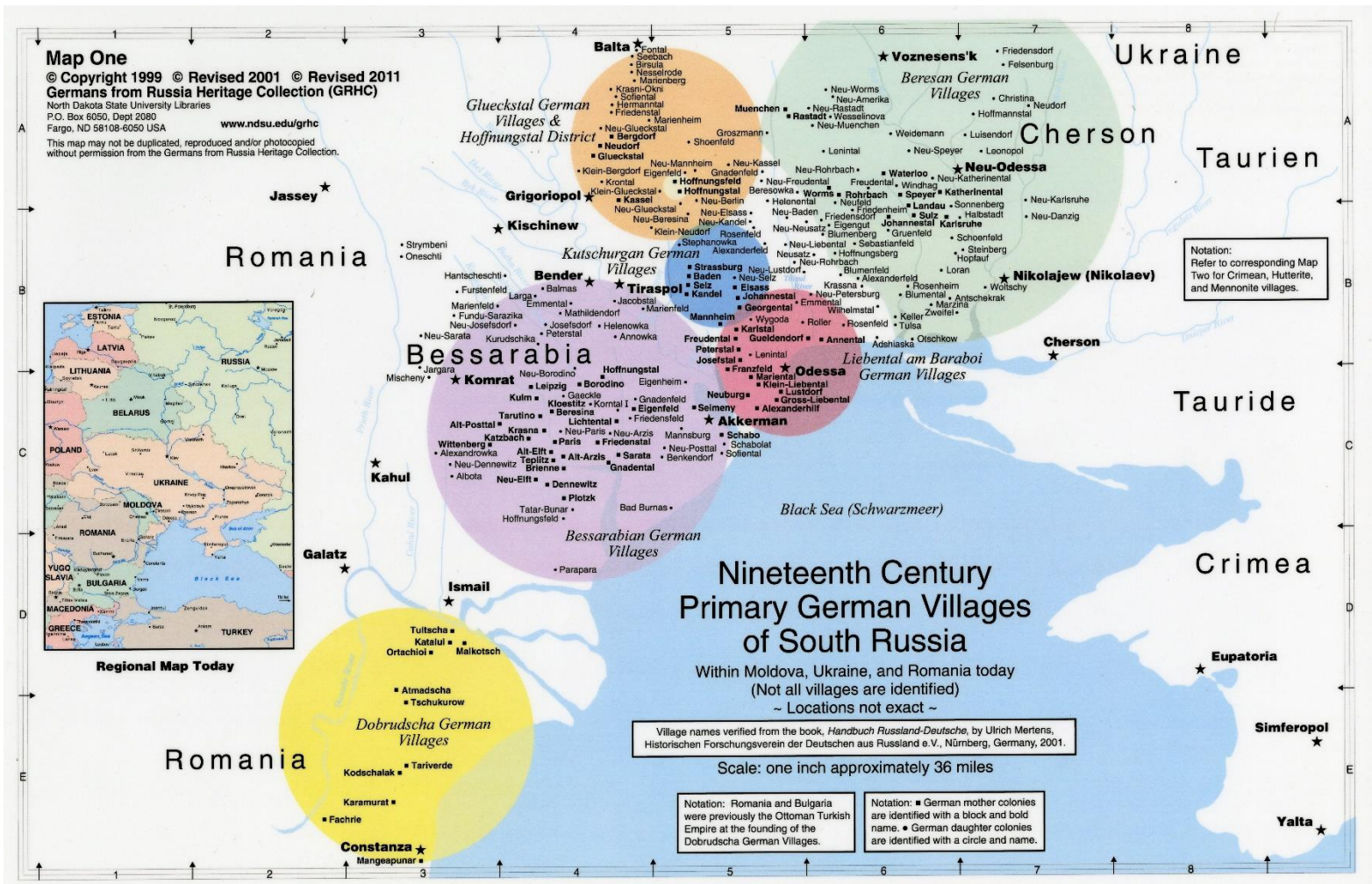


Figure 2: German-Russian Villages

Many people answered the calls for colonists and settled in Russia, creating numerous colonies (Figure 2). These were clustered based on the year of immigration and religion. The earlier settlements formed first in the Volga region and spread from there. The immigrants originally lived in thrifty houses constructed of straw, woven weeds, earthen sod, and stone.⁶ It took a few years for the colonists to gain capital and their footing in this new land. After this was accomplished, they built more permanent homes with packed earth and bricks. Even though nature fought against the settlers with diseases, droughts, crop failures, and fires,

⁶ 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.

they pushed on and forged new, mostly prosperous lives for themselves. Over the years, the Russian government began changing its policies and going back on some of its original promises. When they initially moved in, the immigrants were told they would be free to do as they pleased and govern themselves, but these rights were slowly revoked by changes in the Russian government. New officials were sent to take over local office positions, military and civil service was enforced, and Russian became the mandatory official language even though the colonists did not know how to speak or write it.⁷

Through the early 1900s and both world wars, Bessarabia was governed by different countries and changed jurisdiction many times, causing disruption in the lives affected. Some of the colonists had enough and decided to leave Bessarabia, setting out for North or South America. German-Russian settlements slowly appeared in Kansas, North Dakota, South Dakota, Canada, Argentina, and Brazil. When the Soviet Union took over Bessarabia in 1940, it was the end of the villages as they had existed.⁸ At this point, the colonists prepared to leave the land they had called home for over a century. They were given time to pack their belongings into carts and wagons, and then left. Most settled in West Prussia. Although the move was abrupt, they were able to create a semblance of normal life in the new land, despite Europe being engaged in World War II. Towards the end of the war, the refugees were forced to flee again, this time leaving behind most of their possessions in their haste. They ran from the Russian army advancing towards Germany.

When the people finally arrived in Germany, they were destitute, separated from family members, and had only the clothes on their backs. Instead of immigrants and colonists, they were now refugees, living in camps and dismal housing conditions, trying to get their footing again. It

⁷ Schock, 11, 12.

⁸ Schock, 12.

took years for families to reunite in the aftermath of the war and the flight. They were scattered through the four occupation zones in Germany, with some held in labor or prisoner of war camps in Russia and Siberia. Many young men had been conscripted into service for either the German or Russian armies, and kept in POW camps for years after the end of the war, not returning to their families for years. Some women were sent off to labor camps, or kept in refugee camps until long after the war was over.⁹ Once the refugees gained some semblance of stability, they started writing letters to family members and friends who chose to leave Russia before the around the turn of the century.

Johannes and Christiana (Ehni) Schock received letters from their family and friends in Germany after WWII. When they emigrated from Bessarabia, to Turtle Lake, North Dakota in 1910, leaving behind large families.¹⁰ After the move, they were able to maintain contact with many of their family members and friends. The Schock and Ehni families are an example of how German-Russian people moved throughout Europe, and some eventually out of it. Their story also highlights the ordeals they survived along the way.

Johannes and Christiana's family traced their ancestry back to the 1600s and documented it in *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*. The Schock family originally immigrated to Poland in the early 1800s from Unterheinriet, Germany. In 1814, they immigrated to the village of Borodino, Bessarabia, where Christoph Gottfried Schock was a founding member.¹¹ They traveled with many other families from the area. The

⁹ Elisabeth (Maier) Schock to Johannes and Christiana (Ehni) Schock, January 31, 1948, (153.1.140); Lena (Schock) Schaber to Johannes and Christiana (Ehni) Schock, February 5, 1950, (153.1.106).

¹⁰ Schock, 14.

¹¹ Schock, 7.

Ehni family remained in the Wuerttemberg region of Germany until immigrating to Borodino in 1818.¹² For the most part, the Schock family were farmers until there was no land left to divide, and then some of the family members went into the trades, such as shoemaking and carpentry. Johannes and Christiana were not the only ones in their families to immigrate. Other family members who emigrated settled in Brazil, Canada, or Argentina.¹³ Johannes's brothers, Gottfried and Emmanuel, were the only direct siblings who also settled in North Dakota.

After WWII was over, almost 400 letters were saved from family members and friends spread throughout Germany. When reading the letters it is apparent there were others sent before 1946, unfortunately, most of these letters no longer exist, presumably destroyed during World War II so the family could not be labeled as German sympathizers. Through the letters that remain, the authors shared the horrors of their evacuations and reflect on their peaceful lives back in Bessarabia. The conditions these families were living in and the day-to-day struggle to survive were the most prevalent and powerful stories.

While most letters only mentioned the evacuations fleetingly, some authors recounted the horrors in detail. One of the best descriptions was written by a childhood friend of Christiana:

When we had to leave Poland we were 20 days and 20 nights under God's "free" heaven. Those most contemptible devils of Poland robbed us of everything we had -clothing, bedding -everything. Then we had to go through the Polish "Control" where we were beaten and pushed around like dogs. My dear ones, I can't write down all we had to endure and suffer. Then they stripped my husband down to his undershorts and me, down to my undergarment and made us walk in our stocking feet for 80 kilometers (50 miles) through all that frost and ice. You can imagine our misery -the bread was frozen hard as a rock -children cried to God as streams of bloody vomit flowed. We were in the thousands and thousands, one after another. By day we were allowed to drive 1/2 kilometer then we had to halt while the Poles came, and from wagon to wagon, with rubber truncheons (policeman's clubs), they beat innocent children and old men to death. All the other men were carried off and are gone without a trace to this day. It was to

¹² Schock, 21.

¹³ Schock, 30-33.

scream to the heavens to see. Thousands of our poor women were forcibly violated and raped under God's open skies, and only God knows what we had to go through.¹⁴

The Germans from Russia had their control taken from them. They could no longer dictate their own lives, instead following the orders of those with the guns. They were personally humiliated and lost all they owned. An old friend wrote, "Yes, dear friends, during the flight we lost everything -homeland, all goods and chattel, children - everything! Not even a pillow under our heads -everything was left in strange hands and here we have to starve!"¹⁵ While this situation was common with most of the letter writers, it was not the case for everyone. Johannes's brother wrote, "We have been dealt a very hard lot and can't do anything to change it. We were able to save most of our things and after a two-month flight we got to the area near Bremen. We were in English hands (zone) but the people there wouldn't do anyone any harm. From there we had to come down here to Schwabenland, to Wurtemberg and that's where we find ourselves now."¹⁶ Most of the refugees were sent to settle in the Wurttemberg region of Germany. The Germans made this decision because the ancestors of the new refugees originally immigrated from that region.

Most of the refugee families were from an agricultural background, in Bessarabia this dictated the food they ate through the seasons and years. Some of the family members were able to maintain this agricultural identity after the move to Poland in early 1940-41. Some of the letters refer to their past agrarian lifestyles and how without it people were losing their purpose, "And so our poor, good Bessarabien farmers are again hanging their heads, as well as others who

¹⁴ Annette Hager to Johannes & Christiana (Ehni) Schock, May 21, 1948, (153.2.041).

¹⁵ Gottlieb Reiner to Johannes and Christiana (Ehni) Schock, June 8, 1947, (153.1.211).

¹⁶ Friederich Schock to Johannes and Christiana (Ehni) Schock, March 12, 1947, (153.1.156).

hoped in this way to find a new homeland. Many aren't hanging them anymore and many more will bite the dust because of this rationing."¹⁷ Being removed from their former lifestyles was hard on the refugees, especially when many were accustomed to providing for themselves and their family using the land.

When one had such an abundant and diverse food culture and supply, it was hard to adjust very quickly and abruptly to a lesser one. This is what the German-Russian refugees experienced as they were removed from the culture they knew. Many letters refer to the 'Old Country' [Bessarabia] and how well-off they were before the evacuations-or flights, as they are referred to in the letters. A friend wrote, "I can see that you found your fortune when you left the old homeland and went to America. Towards last we were doing quite well too, in Bessarabia."¹⁸ This was in reference to Johannes and Christiana, the letter recipients, being able to send care packages to family members and friends in Germany containing food and/or clothing after WWII.

Some letters referenced the number of packages Johannes and Christiana sent including the conditions of the packages, what they contained, and who was able to wear what article of clothing. In a letter from a niece, Martha (Renke) Füller, dated April 15, 1948, she mentioned the fact Johannes and Christiana had sent 70 packages overseas to family and friends. Her family received three packages, for which she was very grateful.¹⁹ This letter was sent in the middle of the time period when Johannes and Christiana were corresponding with relatives and providing aid. A letter sent almost a year before Martha's mentioned that Johannes and Christiana had sent 32 packages so far.²⁰ In just under a year, Johannes and Christiana were able to send almost 40

¹⁷ Benjamin Schock to Johannes and Christiana (Ehni) Schock, November 22, 1947, (152.1.131).

¹⁸ Johannes Schock to Johannes and Christiana (Ehni) Schock, February 27, 1948, (153.1.204).

¹⁹ Martha (Renke) Füller to Johannes and Christiana (Ehni) Schock, April 15, 1948, (153.1.048).

²⁰ Samuel Ehni to Johannes and Christiana (Ehni) Schock, May 11, 1947, (153.2.023).

packages containing a mix of clothing, household goods, and food with the support of their family and friends.

Johannes and Christiana settled within a strong German-Russian community in North Dakota which provided them with the resources and connections necessary to support their family members in Germany. They often had help from their children and neighbors to fill the packages, many who were thanked in letters from the recipients. Some of Johannes and Christiana's neighbors had also emigrated from Borodino, or other German-Russian villages.²¹ The families in Turtle Lake were all members of the local Lutheran church, helping them to stay connected.²² Johannes and Christiana had eight children, most of whom were married with families of their own during this period.²³ The children were great supporters of the packages, with many of the children's clothing being donated by them. This support enabled Johannes and Christiana to send almost a package a week across the Atlantic from May 1947 to April 1948. The total number of packages Johannes, Christiana, their family, and neighbors sent is unfortunately unknown, but there can be argument that these packages were vital to the survival of the recipients.

Food resources quickly dwindled after the war; refugees were provided ration cards. Although the ration cards were a great concept, they were not always useful because the items the refugees needed were too expensive or, at times, unavailable for purchase. On December 1, 1947, a sister-in-law, Magdalena (Füller) Schock wrote, "This month I got 100g of side pork (3.5 oz) and Erna [Magdalena's granddaughter], 100 g of butter, on our ration cards."²⁴ The 3.5 oz of

²¹ Schock, 37, 89.

²² Schock, 39.

²³ Schock, 133-166.

²⁴ Magdalena (Füller) Schock to Johannes and Christiana (Ehni) Schock, December 1, 1947, (153.1.060).

meat is comparable to a deck of cards and the butter is a half-cup in modern measurements.²⁵

These amounts were common through 1947 and 1948 although they varied depending on location and time of year. Many of these small portions had to last people for extended periods of time and be split between multiple family members. Erna (Fickel) Schmiedel, a niece who lived with her parents, husband, and two children wrote, “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.”²⁶ At times, some of the families were living off of only potatoes with nothing else to sustain them. The refugees received very little meat and fat and their health suffered for it. Another niece reported, “When we go to the doctor we are told to eat better, and that just isn't possible. As long as there was war there was food, now that the war has ended so has the food.”²⁷ The lack of food led to many hospitalizations and illnesses caused by simple malnutrition. The lack of nourishment also led to people not healing well or quickly when they were injured or sick. When a person was too weak, they were unable to work. Without the work, they could not earn the money necessary to purchase goods with their ration cards. This led to a vicious cycle of sustained malnutrition for themselves and their families.

If the refugees were fortunate enough to live close to crop fields, they were able to simply clean the fields after harvest. Unfortunately, every other refugee was doing the same thing, reducing how much each could find to supplement their ration cards. A niece commented, “Now I will let you know that we walked around the fields the entire Autumn looking for ears of grain

²⁵ Kathleen Zelman, “WebMD Portion Size Guide,” WebMD, 2008, http://www.minneapolismn.gov/www/groups/public/@health/documents/webcontent/convert_264742.pdf.

²⁶ Erna (Fickel) Schmiedel to Johannes and Christiana (Ehni) Schock, April 12, 1947, (153.1.124).

²⁷ Anna (Weber) Engel to Johannes and Christiana (Ehni) Schock, November 10, 1947, (153.2.057).

so we would have a few to thrash out from day to day. What can one do! There wasn't much loose grain as you can imagine when there are thousands of people gleaning and each wants something to live on.”²⁸ While this method of providing for a family was not always successful, it was a step closer to living and a step farther away from starvation. Those who were lucky enough to live on farms fared a little better. They were at least able to plant a garden to supplement their ration cards. Christiana’s brother, Israel Ehni, was one of the fortunate who lived on a farm. Many of his letters mentioned his family’s fortune to have potatoes available, otherwise they would have starved. He also wrote about the conditions in town, mentioning many times just how dismal they were.²⁹ While living on a farm was better than living in town, none of the housing situations were ideal.

Some of the families were able to barter for goods or received money in packages so they were able to purchase the goods they needed. At times, the money was stolen from the envelopes or packages, so it was safer to send food items, even though these were often stolen as well. A friend wrote, "We can't buy anything with money, because all the merchants will trade only for scarce food items, which we don't have - when you have to live on ration cards there is never anything left over.”³⁰ Many people shared this experience. They used items they collected or received in care packages to trade for the more important, life sustaining items. A niece, Emilie (Schock) Hildebrandt, wrote, “Yesterday I received a package and promptly had to trade a shirt for some potatoes and bread for today. That's the way one has to help himself - and to think how once we had enough of everything ourselves!”³¹ This trading system was a way of life for many

²⁸ Emilie (Schock) Amandt to Johannes and Christiana (Ehni) Schock, October 10, 1948, (153.1.018).

²⁹ Israel Ehni to Johannes and Christiana (Ehni) Schock, (153.2.065-153.2.099).

³⁰ Johannes Schock to Johannes and Christiana (Ehni) Schock, February 27, 1948, (153.1.204).

³¹ Emilie (Schock) Hildebrandt to Johannes and Christiana (Ehni) Schock, May 18, 1947, (153.1.087).

years. Not only were hard goods traded, but also special food items. Magdalena (Füller) Schock wrote, "I traded cocoa for bread and flour. Until now I always traded coffee from what you sent me, and Getts had sent me at that time, but it is all gone."³² This was a decent system, until they ran out of the special food item, then they were back where they started, but hopefully with a fuller belly. This type of trading also occurred with non-food items. Magdalena also wrote, "If it possible and you are of a mind to do it, could you send me some coffee so that I could get some money. Our preacher wants to give me some wood for some coffee if I can get some."³³ This letter was written in January, when heat was more important than food for survival.

The black market was another opportunity for bartering. The currency of the time was worth nothing, forcing people to trade in the black market. Even here, prices were exorbitant. Many of the goods that hit the black market should have simply been available for resale, but people were greedy and knew they would be able to get higher profits if they went straight to the market. A friend commented, "The farmers get everything, but they trade everything possible. What they should trade in food, they hide and sell to the black market."³⁴ The black market was thriving but mostly inaccessible to the poor refugees unless they had just received a package from North America containing items they could barter.

The food situation was indicative of the living conditions of the time. There are more needs in life than food, even though it is one of the most important ones. These include living in clean, heated and ventilated, slightly spacious living quarters, in addition to having clothes. Clothing was a need many refugees struggled with. Most initially arrived in Germany with only the clothes on their backs which were soon threadbare and falling apart.

³² Magdalena (Füller) Schock to Johannes and Christiana (Ehni) Schock, September 25, 1948, (153.1.072).

³³ Magdalena (Füller) Schock to Johannes and Christiana (Ehni) Schock, January 26, 1949, (153.1.076).

³⁴ Johannes Schock to Johannes and Christiana (Ehni) Schock, February 27, 1948, (153.1.204).

The food items in the relief packages were really important, especially if there was some kind of oil or starch, but more important were the items of clothing. If people did not have enough money to spend on food, they definitely did not have enough for new clothes. Many times the women asked for thread so they could patch the clothes they had, but it was hard to patch something that was in such poor condition. A niece wrote, “So dear aunt and cousins don’t be offended if I have to beg some more, but if possible, please send me some more thread and elastic. Elastic is not available and very little thread. One needs to mend every day and hardly knows how anymore.”³⁵ Textiles are abundant in life, used not just in clothing, but also in bed sheets and housewares. These items were also needed, but not necessary for survival. A niece, Emilie (Schock) Amadt wrote, “Winter is coming and the children need shoes and clothes and we have no money—also bedding—I have hardly any covers or cases to put on the beds.”³⁶ This was a commonality in many letters; they barely had clothing and were always in need of other textiles.

Even if the people did have left-over money, or an abundance at all, clothing prices were exorbitant. A friend wrote, “A pair of shoes costs 20 - 22 Mark. My daughters each get 30 Mark per month. Perhaps now they can buy the shoes and clothes they need. Until now it was impossible to buy anything and if you and the Walckers had not sent us shoes and clothes, they would have had to go barefoot and in shreds.”³⁷ The modern day, United States, equivalent to this would be a pair of shoes costing roughly \$4,800.³⁸ These packages not only sustained people, but helped them retain the little bit of dignity they had left. Clothing continued to be a

³⁵ Emilie (Schock) Hildebrandt to Johannes and Christiana (Ehni) Schock, March 18, 1947, (153.1.085).

³⁶ Emilie (Schock) Amandt to Johannes and Christiana (Ehni) Schock, October 10, 1948, (153.1.018).

³⁷ Johannes Schock to Johannes and Christiana (Ehni) Schock, June 27, 1948, (153.1.207).

³⁸ Gloria Guzman, “Household Income: 2016: American Community Survey Briefs,” United States Census Bureau, September 2017, <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2017/acs/acsbr16-02.pdf>.

great area of need, especially heading into winter when each person needed more layers to ward off the cold. This was often a struggle and many correspondents commented on it. A niece, Anna (Weber) Engel, wrote, "We are facing another winter -without bedding or stockings and we don't have a stove in our room."³⁹ Her problems were more than just clothing, she was struggling with how to help her family survive the cold. A nephew, Arnold Pracht, wrote about his problems, "Worse still is that winter is at the door, I will soon have to go back to work and will "immodestly" freeze again! The food will also be more scarce. As of now, we are managing. We get 10 kg Bread (1 kg.=2.2 lb.) per month and at least 150 grams of grease (5.25 oz.). But when we don't get this anymore, then what?"⁴⁰ He too was concerned about his family being able to survive. If he could not go to work, he was not able to bring home the money needed to purchase provisions and clothing.

Another obstacle for the refugees was a money depreciation that occurred in the middle of 1948. The first mention from the letters was in a letter from a friend dated June 27, 1948. He wrote, "Now I must tell you that there have been a number of changes in our currency lately. Everyone in the family had to turn in 60 Reichs Mark and then each person got 40 New Reichs Mark. If one didn't have 60 Mark to turn in, he got 40 of the New Marks anyway. All the rest of the money had to be turned in and is to be exchanged at ten for a hundred."⁴¹ He went on about how this hit the refugees the hardest. Any money they had been able to save in the three years after WWII was deemed worthless overnight. There are different accounts of how much money was handed over, but the general consensus was that the refugees received less back. A niece wrote in October 1948, "you probably know about our 'money depreciation'—we can hardly

³⁹ Anna (Weber) Engel to Johannes and Christiana (Ehni) Schock, November 10, 1947, (153.2.057).

⁴⁰ Arnold Pracht to Johannes and Christiana (Ehni) Schock, August 29, 1947, (153.1.013).

⁴¹ Johannes Schock to Johannes and Christiana (Ehni) Schock, June 27, 1948, (153.1.207).

afford to write a letter because we have no money. It is sad to say, but, it is gone as fast as Dad can earn it. When one has to buy everything—that is food, as clothes are out of the question—and it is so costly, there just isn't enough for food and shoe repair.”⁴² She followed these sentences with thanks for the many packages Johannes and Christiana had sent and then asked for specific items as winter was approaching. After the currency exchange, the stores started to carry goods again, but no one could afford the prices since they had just lost their savings. In September 1948, another niece wrote, “it is very bad for us with this new currency. Where there is more than one wage earner it can be done and by the farmers who have their own things and can make money, but with us, poor and homeless -we are six persons, and my husband the only wage earner. We don't have enough money to buy out our ration cards or firewood. Everything is so expensive, we can't get anything nice.”⁴³ The inflation created by the money depreciation made people even more grateful when they received a package from family or friends.

Money was always tight for the refugees living in Germany; they almost never had enough to purchase anything of consequence. Even before the money depreciation people were struggling. Some of the family members were at their wit's end and approached this with humor instead of despair as they had already reached the bottom. A brother-in-law wrote, “I would never have believed that I could be so poor. Instead of saving our money we should have spent it drinking, then we would at least know what happened to it, not that one didn't have enough to drink, but one could always have had another schnapps.”⁴⁴ Earlier in his letter he recounted all the times items had been taken from his family as they were relocated.

⁴² Emilie Amandt to Johannes and Christiana (Ehni) Schock, October 10, 1948, (153.1.018).

⁴³ Emilie (Schock) Hildebrandt to Johannes and Christiana (Ehni) Schock, September 26, 1948, (153.1.097).

⁴⁴ Ludwig Weber to Johannes and Christiana (Ehni) Schock, June 22, 1947, (153.2.049).

The living conditions for the refugees in Germany were dismal at best. Some of the families were lucky and were placed on a farm; some were in old barracks. Those on the farms were able to plant gardens and escape the confines of the towns. Those in old barracks had the worst conditions. A niece, Erna Schock, wrote about her family's living situation. "We live in one room -we sleep and eat in it—it is kitchen and living room, and still there is room for we have nothing to put in it! We just got two beds from a concentration camp so, at least, we don't have to sleep on the floor anymore. They aren't really beds, just some boards nailed together."⁴⁵ She was living with her parents at the time. They were so desperate for anything that they were excited to receive beds from a concentration camp. During the years following WWII the refugees became accustomed to making do with what they were given.

Ultimately, it was the refugee's connections with their family and friends, sustained through letters, which enabled them to keep living through these horrible conditions. They were able to look forward to the next letter, the next package, and hopefully the end of their suffering. A sister-in-law remarked in May 1948, "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."⁴⁶ These people had pride and dignity. They were accustomed to supporting their own families and not being reliant upon anyone else. The events after WWII reduced them to either beg for help or face certain death. This appeared to be a common thread running throughout the letters. Thus, these people wholeheartedly accepted and were very grateful for the goods that were sent. They used everything they received to better their situations. While they were extremely thankful for the packages, there was an undercurrent of almost shame for having to ask for help in the first place. A sister-in-law, Magdalena (Füller) Schock wrote, "You will say I have turned into a real

⁴⁵ Erna Schock to Johannes and Christiana (Ehni) Schock, July 23, 1948, (153.1.164).

⁴⁶ Magdalena (Fueller) Schock to Johannes and Christiana (Ehni) Schock, May 17, 1948, (153.1.070).

beggar, but I leave it up to you -only if you want to, and I believe that God will reward you for everything. I wouldn't even write if we weren't so destitute, believe me! -and we would have perished already except for your compassion in sending us thread and clothing and food.”⁴⁷

Many times a line of thanks was followed by a sentence with the items the family still needed and how desperate their situation was. They noted that the request should only be fulfilled if Johannes and Christiana were able. It truly was the connection with relatives who emigrated out of Bessarabia before the world wars that saved these families.

The Germans from Russia were a group of immigrants who looked for ways to better their lot in life, even if it meant moving to a different nation. Throughout the late 1700s-early 1800s, there were many groups of Germans who made their way to new Russian territory. Once in Russia, they were able to set up their own villages and live peacefully for over a century. Towards the end of the 1800s-early 1900s some families decided to immigrate again, this time out of Europe. Those who remained continued to prosper until the chaos of WWII when they were forcefully uprooted and directed first to Poland, and then back to Germany. These were a people who based much of their identity off of their familial and village bonds. The Germans from Russia were able to maintain this sense of identity when initially moving to Russia and later through the evacuation into Poland. When the refugees were forced back to Germany, their identity started to show cracks. They were separated from family and friends, with minimal material goods left in their possession. Through contact with their relations who had immigrated to the United States and Canada, they were able to start reconnecting with family in other parts of Germany. The people who had immigrated acted almost as address books – they were the point of contact reconnecting families and providing the material goods that were difficult, if not

⁴⁷ Magdalena Füller Schock to Johannes and Christiana (Ehni) Schock, March 6, 1949, (153.1.077).

impossible to attain following WWII. This connection is what helped the refugees first survive, and eventually thrive in their ancestral homeland. The culmination of the German-Russian life experience became evident through the enduring resilience of its people. The resilience that helped to reconstruct their German-Russian identity and eventually save themselves.

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