

In Touch with Prairie Living

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By Michael M. Miller

Germans from Russia Heritage Collection
North Dakota State University Libraries, Fargo



GERMANS FROM RUSSIA

GRHC

HERITAGE COLLECTION

The heritage of the Germans from Russia is an important part of our northern plains culture. The Germans from Russia Heritage Collection at the NDSU Libraries in Fargo reaches out to prairie families and former Dakotans. In this month's column, we focus on our visit in May by some of the Journey to the Homeland tour members to their ancestral German villages near Odessa, Ukraine.

Cora Wolff Tschaekofske, Dickinson, and Her Sister Viola Wolff Bertsch, Bowman, Formerly of Mercer County, Visit Moldova

"Coming in to the Odessa Airport was a nostalgic experience -- the world that we were flying over looked like a huge, well laid out, green garden. Stepping off the airplane into this beautiful world that our father and his family left many years ago brought tears to our eyes. What an emotional experience it was to realize why our father often longed to return to this beautiful land which had been his home.

"We toured the villages of our ancestors. We viewed expansive fields lush crops. We were overwhelmed. We visualized small fields farmed without modern machinery, which our parents now used in North Dakota farming.

"To reminisce in village of Glueckstal, where our maternal grandparents dwelled, near the Lutheran Church where we believe they were married, was an unforgettable experience.

"How could we ever forget those people who repeatedly told us of being uprooted from their homes, not only one but several times -- in wrenching deportation of leaving all their worldly goods, of enduring extreme cold temperatures without adequate clothing, and lack of food, as they labored like oxen for many years in Siberia. Yet time and circumstance has allowed us to gather during this recent May evening. They sang with us memorized hymns

of their faith, singing from memory every word despite no church worship for many decades. They continually praised the Old God who never forgot them.

"We shared precious fruits of these villagers' labors -- home canned liver sausage, apricot jam, crisp dill pickles, and we washed it all down with homemade grape wine much better than the best champagne we have ever tasted."

Mayo Flegel of LeSeur, MN, Formerly of Kulm, Visits Bessarabia

"For many years, it was beyond my wildest dreams to visit the homes of my ancestors. The touching encounters in the villages of Kulm and Tarutino were particularly emotional for me. At Tarutino, we inquired with a German speaking woman who remembered one of my relatives, known to have left in 1940. In Kulm, I toured inside the school and church where both my grandfather and great-grandfather had attended. I also visited the Kulm cemetery where my ancestors were buried. Though exact grave sites are known only to God, I was awed to just be there. This was truly one of the highlights of my life."

Mary Lou Leintz Bueling of Wahpeton, a Mandan Native, Walks the Streets Where Grandpa and Grandma Fergel Walked in Selz

"This is the expectant day that I had been waiting for such a long time; yet, in no way was I prepared for the sentiment that swept over me in Selz, as I walked the streets Grandpa and Grandma Fergel walked, and viewed the once beautiful Church of the Assumption in which they were married. The church is still magnificent, even in its state of ruin. We imagined the spacious beauty as Antonina Welk Ivanova explained where the altar had stood. However, when she burst into 'Ave Maria,' we no longer needed to imagine how the majestic architecture

acoustically filled with beautiful music. The front steps, which Paul Noel helped build and where in later years he collapsed and died, are now gone. Only a mound of earth remains as testimony of such steps of grandeur for community gathering.

"A grassy hillside with some rectangular sink holes surrender the only proof of what was once the German cemetery in Selz -- not a tombstone remains. A short distance away the Dneister River flows.

"Words cannot express how fortunate we are that our ancestors emigrated from these lands when they did. This beautiful homeland with its warm, friendly people, also provides uncertain political hardships and suffering."

Choir of the Homeland Tours North Dakota

The choir from Stuttgart, Germany, performs in Jamestown (July 18), Streeter (July 20), Strasburg (July 22), Bismarck (July 23-24), Dickinson (July 26), and Richardton (July 27). Many choir members were born in the German villages of southern Ukraine and later deported to Siberia. They have immigrated to Germany in recent years, yet have kept important aspects of their ethnic heritage intact.

We invite readers to share memories of their German-Russian heritage. Customs, history and folklore appear at the Germans from Russia Heritage Collection World Wide Web homepage at <http://library.ndsu.edu/grhc>. Information about the NDSU Libraries' sponsored Journey to the Homeland Tour for May 26-June 8, 1998, and the e-mail messages from tour members of May, 1997, appear at the GRHC website. For additional information, contact Michael M. Miller, NDSU Libraries, PO Box 5599, Fargo, ND 58105-5599 (Tel: 701-231-8416; E-mail: Michael.Miller@ndsu.edu).

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