

In Touch with Prairie Living

September 1997

By Michael M. Miller

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



GERMANS FROM RUSSIA

GRHC

HERITAGE COLLECTION

The Germans from Russia Heritage Collection at the NDSU Libraries in Fargo reaches out to prairie families and former Dakotans. In various ways, it affirms the heritage of the Germans from Russia is an important part of the northern plains culture. In this month's column, we focus on the Choir of the Homeland of Stuttgart, the first Germans from Russia choir from Germany to present concerts in the Dakotas. With large audiences, the choir was well received in Jamestown, Streeter, Strasburg, Bismarck, Dickinson, and Richardton. They ended their concert tour at St. Mary's Church, Assumption Abbey, Richardton.

Choir Members Reflect on Their Life in Ukraine and Siberia, Russia

Cora Wolff Tschaekofske, Dickinson, ND, interviewed choir members during their concert tour in western North Dakota. She shares some of these difficult and tragic life stories.

Lydia Schwan Klein Born in Strassburg, South Russia

Lydia, a soloist in the choir, related the story of how the Schwan family was uprooted from their home in German village of Strassburg near Odessa, and transported to Poland in 1944. Her father was drafted into the German, never to be heard from or to return home again. Lydia told of the superior wisdom of her mother, who made an investment that kept the family socially secure and fed when she sold her husband's suit of clothes after his absence using the money to buy a cow. Then they had milk and cheese to eat and surplus milk to sell.

In 1945, Lydia and her family were deported to Siberia. Her oldest brother, who at the age of 14 was denied an education, worked to help his mother support the family. Together they worked like slaves in the Siberian forest in all situations of brutally cold

temperatures. Her oldest sister had worked in a forced-labor camp.

Their mother and grandmother held a necessary family position of teaching their "Muttersprache" (Mother-tongue) and their belief of God. Their dedication was to retain their German language and their religion, in the extreme effort to keep their family unit and a homeland.

Lydia's daughter, Marina Klein Bauer, is director of the Choir of the Homeland. Before returning to Stuttgart, they had a Schwan family reunion in Aberdeen, SD.

Clemens and Amilie Martin Spend 51 Years in Siberia

The Martins recently immigrated from Siberia to Germany. Clemens labored in the gold mines for little pay and with the resulting ailment of gold dust in his lungs. Their income now is a meager pension, plus whatever earnings Amilie obtains by being a "Puttsfrau" (cleaning lady) in Germany.

Lilia Schwelkert's Life in Siberia and Kazakhstan

Lilia was born in Neu Kronental near Odessa, Ukraine. She cannot remember ever seeing her father who as "verschlept" (seized from his home) during the Stalin regime when she was only two years old. They never saw nor heard of him again. Her mother with two little daughters were returned to Germany. In 1945, they along with 30 village families were loaded on sleds and transported Siberia where they were dumped into the cold of winter and snow. They were given three barrels of fish and some flour. All were forced by necessity to build huts of snow to survive. Lilia told of her grandmother's death in Kazakhstan, of her own marriage in Kazakhstan, the death of her husband of 22 years, and then her eventual return to Germany with her children after many years of hard labor.

Thousands Immigrate to Germany in 1990s

Since 1991, almost 1.6 million ethnic Germans have immigrated from the former Soviet Union to Germany. An average of about 10,000 each month still come to Germany. Lydia Schwan Klein expressed her thankfulness to Germany for having welcomed them to return, so they might have a homeland. Now they can once again experience a triangle of family unity and sharing with those in Germany, Ukraine, and America.

Tours to Visit Choir of the Homeland, Germany and Ukraine

The Choir of the Homeland will present a special concert on June 7 for members of the Journey to the Homeland Tours to Ukraine and to Germany in May/June, 1998. Tour members will be guests in the homes of the choir members.

For information about the Germans from Russia Heritage Collection and the 1998 tours, contact Michael M. Miller, NDSU Libraries, PO Box 5599, Fargo, ND 58105-5599 (Tel: 701-231-8416; E-mail: Michael.Miller@ndsu.edu; GRHC website: <http://library.ndsu.edu/grhc>).

September 1997 column for North Dakota and South Dakota newspapers.