

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 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 as an important part of the northern plains culture. The September column is written by Carol Just Halverson, St. Louis Park, MN, and LaMoure, ND native.

Three Western Meadowlarks welcomed me as I crossed the North Dakota border. It was going to be a good trip to the Wishek Centennial! This leg of the journey would bring me full circle. In May, I walked the streets of my ancestral German villages in South Russia, today called Ukraine and Moldova. Now I was on my way in July to the most heavily populated German-Russian county in the Midwest, to a party marking 100 years since a village called Wishek was built by German farmers from Russia, who immigrated to uncultivated acreage in Dakota Territory.

While not my birthplace, I've visited Wishek, ND, many times. Going there always feels like a trip home. It's a place where many people look like they're related to me. If it's a lucky day, the freshly-made German sausage at Stan's Super Valu isn't sold out, Maggie's Cafe might have a piece of custard kuchen left, and by listening very closely, I might hear a few phrases of the old German dialect spoken among the townspeople.

How will Wishek seem different after my Ukraine and Moldovan experience, I wondered? After all, a few days into that journey I felt something I wasn't prepared for...a sense of homecoming. As if, it too, were my home. Matters not that it has been more than a century since my great-grandparents left South Russia. The Germans remaining there speak the same dialect, and share the same food and folk traditions of my North Dakota relatives. As I observed them, I was struck by other shared behaviors. I

believe my North Dakota father and my Moldovan host, Theodor, would have been immediate friends, so similar is their communication style. Theodor's wife, Maria, so like the grandmother of my childhood, served freshly-baked bread with home-canned dill pickles. I was convinced I was home!

It was a sobering journey to walk the streets and visit the homes and churches of my ancestors. Many buildings still stand but are in ruins or disrepair. The Germans who built the once beautiful villages were forcibly moved from their homes, and those unable to emigrate to freedom have spent most of the last 50 years performing hard labor in the outer regions of the former Soviet Union. It is only in recent years that ethnic Germans have found their way back to the old German villages. Their stories of survival and testimonies of great courage gave new insight to my heritage. I now have a better understanding of the amazing fortitude and inner strength my ancestors possessed during the early pioneer years in South Russia and later Dakota Territory.

Traveling to Wishek across the North Dakota prairie, I remembered how my American companions and I were struck by the Ukrainian and Moldovan landscape and it's unbelievable similarity to North Dakota and South Dakota. As Wishek native son, Homer Rudolf put it, "except for road signs in Russian, we could be in North Dakota. No wonder our ancestors adjusted so well in the new land."

Now it was time for that "new land" to put on a party. And such a party it was! License plates, representing nearly every state, brought thousands ready for a grand reunion. We were welcomed to a "birthday town" dressed in its Sunday best, eager to make it a memorable 4th of July weekend. A wagon train, parades, plays, speeches, dances, historical exhibits, choir and dance performances, balloon rides, farm machinery displays, a beautiful

centennial mural on main street, old time threshing bee, and carnival: all provided something for everyone.

As I expected, the Ukraine and Moldovan experience colored everything I did and saw at this Centennial celebration, but I wasn't alone. "As I looked upon the crowds of people at the Centennial celebration, I saw a mental image of the crowded immigrant ships" said Ron Vossler, another Wishek native son who has twice visited his ancestral villages in Ukraine and Moldova. Vossler added, "Somehow I carry a little of Russia with me now, because I see everyone here in a broader historical perspective. No matter how Americanized we've become, I know that all our people came from the same time and place."

As for me, I enjoyed every moment of the party. Visiting old friends and making new ones, I ate my fill of sausage and kuchen, and danced a few polkas, too. Never far from my mind, however, was the lingering image of my great-grandparents saying farewell to their life on the Steppes of Russia and coming to Dakota Territory.

My visit this spring to Ukraine and Moldova was a long awaited journey. I've met the children of the ones who stayed behind in Russia, and their stories haunt me. With that experience shaping my thoughts, I celebrate with Wishek and every prairie town in America: for if the immigrants who plowed the vast prairie and built their rural towns had stayed in Russia, we would find ourselves wrapped in a completely different history.

For further information about the collection's resources, the fifth Journey to the Homeland Tour to Ukraine and Germany for May 18-31, 1999, and German-Russian heritage, 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>)

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