

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 October column is written by June M. Kraft of the NDSU Extension Service for Burleigh County, Bismarck, ND.

Come with me on a journey which began with a 4-H club meeting in Bismarck and ended on the steps of an orphanage in Odessa, Ukraine.

The Dynamite Kids 4-H Club is called to order with 12 members repeating the 4-H Pledge: "I pledge my head to clearer thinking; my heart to greater loyalty; my hands to larger service, and my health to better living for my club, my community, my country and my world." The 4-H Pledge has added meaning for a Burleigh County 4-H Club. "Hands to larger service" is exactly what the club believed when they prepared care packages for the Lighthouse Orphanage in Odessa, Ukraine.

Eagerly members filled care packages with combs, nail clippers, socks, tooth brushes, hair ties and gum. Letters thoughtfully written by club members were carefully tucked inside each package. These letters included a Russian translation. Undaunted, these 7 to 15-year-olds reached out in service to needy friends in Ukraine. The members also decided to lend a helping hand by sending a monetary gift.

4-H thoughts were focused on helping those in need who live on the other side of the globe. 4-H hands were going out to children who do not have the simple items we take for granted. 4-H hands were completing a project that focused on caring for other people: people they have never met and probably never will. Dynamite Kids 4-H Club helped children their own age in Ukraine, not because they must, but because they want to share, as they have pledged hands to larger service.

Later thousands of miles away, a bus carefully pulled alongside the curb. Anxious visitors peered out the bus windows to gain their first glimpse of the Lighthouse Orphanage in Odessa. The street was deserted, except for one solitary figure with arms draped around the black wrought iron rails that identify entrances below street level. Was he waiting for the Americans, or did this sandy-haired boy, age 8, live in the limestone building behind him? Silently he watched as we strangers disappeared through a gate to an inner courtyard. From here we saw the stone houses with corrugated tin roofs that lined the street. Two elderly gentlemen seated on a bench under a huge tree watched three children at play. The children curiously eyed the foreign visitors.

Stepping further into the courtyard, one drew closer to two rows of tables, placed side by side, 35 feet long and 6 feet wide. Forty boys, ages 6 to 18, seated on benches are just finishing a meal of stir-fried rice and bread. Excited whispers are heard from the tables as a tall, sturdy man dressed in black came forward to welcome the group. With a voice full of compassion and caring, Deacon Alexander spoke in Russian. Overjoyed with our generosity, he conveyed their appreciation for the gifts brought from North Dakota. Boxes and suitcases, grocery bags and backpacks overflowed with blankets, medical supplies, school and personal hygiene supplies. All gifts were opened and displayed in the courtyard. Handmade quilts from ladies in my hometown of Tuttle, ND brought smiles to these young faces who embraced the brightly colored quilts.

Guest tours of the Lighthouse facilities were next on the agenda. To my amazement, current remodeling looked like major renovations. Workmen were busy removing walls and enlarging rooms. There was only one room of serene solace: the chapel. Although sparsely furnished, one table next to an altar held a cross, four candles and

a red leather-covered Bible. A picture of the head of Christ hung on the wall.

Then the realization that the nurse's office held few medical supplies. Medical equipment and medications easily stored on one shelf. The care packages and letters from the Dynamite Kids 4-H Club were given following the tour. Several boys clustered closer to Director Ivanov as the 4-H project of sharing gifts was explained. Ivanov's eyes danced with excitement as she read a Russian-text letter. Because orphanage boys are required to have academic studies every day, these letters are used to help them learn English. Perhaps they will write to their new friends in Bismarck. Hugs were exchanged before time before leaving the orphanage. As I took one last glance over my shoulder, I thought "hands to larger service, for my world."

In May, 1999 when the next tour group returns to Odessa, they will take additional quilts made by the women at English Lutheran Church at Tuttle for the children at the Lighthouse Orphanage.

For further information about the collection's resources, the Journey to the Homeland Tour for May 18-31, 1999, the Prairie Public TV documentary for 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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