

In Touch with Prairie Living

By Michael M. Miller

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



GERMANS FROM RUSSIA

GRHC

HERITAGE COLLECTION

As I write this April column, I have fond and vivid memories of the time I spent in Argentina and Brazil this February. The purpose of our journey was for Bob Dambach, director of television, Prairie Public Broadcasting, and I to investigate and explore plans for a new television documentary on the story of the Germans from Russia in South America. We were deeply impressed and appreciative of the warm hospitality and many kindnesses we received there. We did not expect to have the many radio, newspaper and television interviews which developed into a good deal of media coverage.

The trip was an amazing, remarkable and a rewarding experience to visit settlements of Germans from Russia, meet potential interviewees and identify locations for filming. Future plans will be to return to Argentina and Brazil in 2013 for the final filming with two Prairie Public videographers, Bob Dambach and myself. We found the travel distances to be extensive especially in southern Brazil, a large country comparable to the size of the USA. February is summer with large fields of grain especially corn, soybeans and sunflowers.

We met Volga German families in the state of Entre Rios, Argentina about four hours north of Buenos Aires and near Coronel Suarez to the south. In the Porto Grossa/Curitiba area of Southern Brazil we visited Witmarsum, a Mennonite community of 1,800, well known for their cheese and milk products. With the Mennonites, as well as many other people I encountered,

I was able to communicate in the German language. Many of the German Russians of Argentina and Brazil can still speak German as their second language.

In Mondai, state of Santa Catarina, southern Brazil, we met with families who immigrated in 1930 from the villages of Krasna and Teplitz, Bessarabia. Many of these people speak a German dialect familiar to me in North Dakota. This area of Brazil looks similar to the Black Forest area of southern Germany. There will be excellent interviews for videotaping about leaving the villages in Bessarabia, the trek to Germany, the immigration and settlement in Brazil.

In Santo Angelo and Santa Maria, state of Rio Grande du Sul, Southern Brazil, we met with families of Volhynian German ancestry. At the Santa Maria city offices, officials hosted an informative meeting that featured a lively question and answer session. Roberto Rancho, who works for Pioneer Seed and speaks excellent English, shared a copy of his Just family history, with relatives in Saskatchewan. Many of these Volhynian Germans have relatives in Canada and the USA. Roberto agreed to assist us in 2013 as a translator for Portuguese/English.

At Coronel Suarez, Argentina, I visited in German with Dr. Elio Krank of Colonia Baron, state of La Pampa, who shared photographs and information about the settlement of Black Sea Germans of the Beresan District. We did not visit the La

Pampa area which we will include for filming in 2013 for Black Sea German and Mennonite German families.

I shall never forget the visit at St. Joseph, near to Coronel Suarez, visiting a bakery founded in 1916 by Volga Germans which is still used today with the original oven and baking equipment. The Holzmann family purchased the bakery in 1950. This will be an important location for filming while they are making bread.

In Curitiba, Brazil, I was pleased to interview Brother Estavo Mueller at a Catholic university, who has written many books about the Volga German immigration and settlement of Volga Germans in Brazil. Many of these families found life too difficult for farming in Brazil so they left and moved to the state of Entre Rios in Argentina where there was more prairie land and fewer trees.

I want to express my deepest appreciation to the many people we met in Argentina and Brazil who shared their warmth and generosity.

For further information about the Friends of the GRHC, the 19th Journey to the Homeland Tour to Odessa, Ukraine and Stuttgart, Germany (May 16-26, 2013), and donations to the GRHC (such as family histories), contact Michael M. Miller, The Libraries, NDSU Dept. #2080, PO Box 6050, Fargo, ND 58108-6050 (Telephone: 701-231-8416; Email: Michael.Miller@ndsu.edu; the GRHC website: www.ndsu.edu/grhc).

April 2012 column for North Dakota and South Dakota newspapers.