

In Touch with Prairie Living

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By Michael M. Miller

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



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I want to extend a Happy Easter in German “Frohe Ostern” to you and your families. We are blessed that our ancestors decided to emigrate from Russia to the United States, Canada, Argentina and Brazil so they could celebrate this important religious holiday.

As I write the April column, I prepare for the 21st Journey to the Homeland tour to Odessa, Ukraine and Berlin and Stuttgart, Germany, May 17-27, 2017. As we plan this trip, I have fond memories of our first Journey to the Homeland Tour in May 1996 – 21 years ago.

May 2017 tour members will visit these Black Sea German villages: Landau and Speier (Beresan District); Kassel, Hoffnungstal (Glueckstal District); Johannestal, Kandel, Mannheim, Selz, Strassburg (Kutschurgan District); Franzfeld, Grossliebental, Josefstal, Peterstal (Liebental District). For the Bessarabian German villages they will visit: Alt Elft, Leipzig, Neu Elft, Paris, Tarutino.

This year’s tour members are from Arizona, California, Colorado, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, North Dakota and Washington as well as Alberta and Ontario, Canada.

Cindy (Deck) Pulskamp, Hillsboro, ND, writes: “My father talked about how great it would have been to be able to have made the trip to Odessa. Part of this trip is a tribute to my father, as he is no longer with us. I am privileged to make this trip in his honor. Many times in my career in agriculture, I often wonder what it took my ancestors to make farming a way of life. I reflect on what it will feel like to possibly stand on the same ground my great-great-grandparents risked their life, and that of their family’s future, to make a better life for themselves [in America]. Even

writing this makes me emotional!” Cindy will travel with her sister, Rose Deck, to visit their ancestral villages of Kandel (Kutschurgan District), Josefstal and Peterstal (Liebental District).

Jerry Voeller, Coon Rapids, MN, shares: “My grandparents were born in the Catholic Kutschurgan villages (today near Odessa, Ukraine). I feel a strong connection with both generations born there as well as the previous generations born in Alsace (France). This will be a unique opportunity to visit the sites where all these previous generations were born, lived, and some emigrated. This is a wonderful opportunity to see something of what they saw.”

James and Cheryl Weigel, Calgary, AB, comment: “We liked the homeland tour in May 2013, and thoroughly enjoyed ourselves to the extent that we wanted to return again in May 2017. I sometimes experienced a feeling that I was returning home when we toured the surrounding villages of our ancestors. My sister, Mary Ann (Weigel) Flug, Medicine Hat, AB, will join us and I want to witness her reaction when she sees Odessa and the surrounding villages, and gets to meet some of the friendly people in those villages.”

Father Al Bitz, University of Mary, Bismarck, native of Napoleon, ND, comments: “I had a long desire to get to my ancestral homeland, Kandel (Kutschurgan District). I heard my grandparents talk of the beautiful farmland and orchards that they left behind. I heard of their movement from Germany to the Odessa region. I have deeply appreciated the stories of Bishop Alexander Frison who is a cousin of my Grandmother Magdalena (Frison) Bitz. He was martyred in 1937. His niece who served as his helper was also

martyred after some years in the Gulag of Magadan (Asia). I want to walk the homeland of all these people.”

Helen (Zerr) and Lorne Knowlton, Olds, Alberta, write: “Ancestry has always been a great hobby, but when I saw this trip, it was a must experience of a lifetime. Both my paternal and maternal ancestors originate from Germany and Russia so to experience this journey and wander through Odessa, the Black Sea villages and farmland to see where my grandparents were born in Franzfeld and the Alsace area of France, then to visit the resting place where Bishop Anton Zerr is buried in Selz, is almost dreamlike. This will be a remarkable trip made especially for Zerr, Leibel, Weber and Wandler families in Saskatchewan.”

While in Stuttgart, Germany, we will visit the Bessarabiendeutschen Heimatmuseum (Society of Germans from Bessarabia Museum). We will be greeted by Deacon Guenther Vossler, head of the Society, who visited North Dakota in July 2012 visiting his relatives at Alfred and Gackle, ND.

We will take a one-day tour to Alsace, France, along the Rhine River. Many of the German families departed between 1804-1808 during the time of the Napoleonic War to immigrate to South Russia, today near Odessa, Ukraine.

If you would like more information about the 22nd Journey to the Homeland Tour to Germany and Ukraine (May, 2018); or would like donate to the GRHC (family histories and photographs), contact Michael M. Miller, NDSU Libraries, PO Box 6050, Dept. 2080, Fargo, ND 58108-6050. (Tel: 701-231-8416); Email: Michael.Miller@ndsu.edu; website: www.ndsu.edu/grhc.

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