

# In Touch with Prairie Living

July 2019

By Michael M. Miller

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



GERMANS FROM RUSSIA  
**GRHC**  
HERITAGE COLLECTION

The Welk Homestead State Historic Site of the State Historical Society of North Dakota, located near Strasburg, ND, is open Thursdays to Sundays, 10am to 5pm. More information at the Welk Homestead: [www.history.nd.gov/historicsites/welk](http://www.history.nd.gov/historicsites/welk).

The North Dakota State University Press has published an impressive new book, *Still*, by Rebecca E Bender, Eureka, S.D., and her late father, Kenneth M. Bender. Rebecca completed documentation to place the Ashley Jewish Homesteaders Cemetery on the National Register of Historic Places in 2015. The cemetery is located northwest of Ashley, McIntosh County, N.D. – [www.ashleyjewishcemetery.org](http://www.ashleyjewishcemetery.org).

Beginning in 1905, more than four hundred Russian and Romanian Jewish homesteaders settled about eighty-five farms in McIntosh County, North Dakota. After clearing rocks and boulders, growing wheat and flax, raising cattle and chickens, and selling cream from their sod houses, most were successful enough to own their own land.

*Still* is a history of five generations, a family we meet first as they flee Odessa and last as they make their way as American Jews, as Dakota farmers, as students and storekeepers, as soldiers and lawyers, and even as a teen in an international competition who stands face-to-face with Benjamin Netanyahu, Prime Minister of Israel. Rebecca Bender and Kenneth Bender answer the question recently posed to Rebecca by a newspaper reporter: Are you still Jewish?

Rebecca Bender writes in the Prologue, “As I look back to realize that history and family are important to me because they were important to my ancestors. In 1911, my great-grandparents sent letters (in Yiddish) to my grandfather on his wedding day.

These letters were sent by mail on horseback from Ashley to Minneapolis, Minnesota, traveled to Hudson, Wisconsin, via horse and buggy, were packed up and brought back to an Ashley sod house, were kept for five years, then remained in a small town in South Dakota for thirty-five years, then in North Minneapolis for twenty years, then in St. Louis Park, Minnesota, for over thirty-five years. Though I could not understand what they said, I knew that my family considered these letters to be precious. I therefore protected the letters when they came into my possession and eventually found a translator for them in 2017, over one hundred years after they were written.”

About the authors: Rebecca Bender, a former securities litigator in Minnesota, now works with children, first as a volunteer Cub Scout den leader and then t-ball coach, and more recently as a special education teacher’s aide and substitute teacher. Some things have never changed for her: enjoyment of history and hearing uplifting stories, taking pride in family and Jewish traditions, gratefulness and appreciation for life in America, where she and her son are free to practice their religion and work hard to achieve their goals. Her co-author for portions of *Still* is her late father, Kenneth Bender, who Rebecca says would be the first to tell you that he was an ordinary guy who just worked hard and always tried his best. His story, reflected in this book, belies his modest characterization. During the last two years of his life, he hand-wrote page after page of his vivid memories. Rebecca typed up his notes with the agreed-upon compensation at the end of each of their working sessions, a shared chocolate milkshake.

Comments about the book: “A compelling saga of a Jewish family’s migration from Russia to America, *Still*

is so much more than an immigration story. This narrative relates how the Bendersky family found a haven from persecution and thrived on the Great Plains through five generations (and counting). The authors have produced a story told with verve and impressive detail. Highly recommended.” Terry Shoptaugh, author of *You Have Been Kind Enough to Assist Me: Herman Stern and the Jewish Refugee Crisis*.

“This emigrant family felt they could and would be good citizens of their adopted country while observing their Jewish customs. There was nothing easy about it, but then no one expected it to be easy. Observing customs, creatively finding work options off the farm, making do, having fun, staging plays, bringing musical theatre to the prairies, learning from their neighbors, being good neighbors, sharing their religious traditions with others – all of this can be found in *Still*, a fine addition to ethnic prairie literature.” Carol Just, native of Berlin, LaMoure County, ND, co-editor of *Hollyhocks and Grasshoppers* and *Watermelons and Thistles: Growing Up German from Russia in America*.

*Still* is available at the GRHC website.

If you would like more information about the 24th Journey to the Homeland Tour to Germany and Ukraine (May 2020), becoming a Friend of the GRHC, or would like to donate family histories and photographs, contact Michael M. Miller, NDSU Libraries, Dept 2080, Fargo ND 5801-6050 (Tel: 701-231-8416); Email: [michael.miller@ndsu.edu](mailto:michael.miller@ndsu.edu) website: [www.ndsu.edu/grhc](http://www.ndsu.edu/grhc).

*July column of In Touch with Prairie Living*