

In Touch with Prairie Living

April 2020

By Michael M. Miller

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



GERMANS FROM RUSSIA

GRHC

HERITAGE COLLECTION

Due to COVID-19 guidance from university, local, state, and national officials, the decision was made to cancel the Journey to the Homeland Tour for May 2020. We are making plans for the 24th Homeland Tour in May 2021.

With this April column, I want to share with you an article from the Bismarck Tribune, 27 December 1997. Karen Herzog, a former writer for the Bismarck Tribune who has German-Russian heritage, wrote this informative story entitled, "Four Generations".

Herzog writes, "The German language persists the longest in places like Logan and McIntosh counties," said Arnold Marzolf, retired professor of German at North Dakota State University. "Those first immigrant settlers were at least 90 percent Germans from Russia." But even there, radio and television, war and work, and finally paved highways, eroded the number of German speakers. "Few are trying to hang on to the language now," Marzolf said. But many of those same little baby boomers, now in mid-life, are pausing to turn and discover where they came from, who their ancestors were.

The family of Clarence and Marilyn Bauman of Bismarck is typical in many ways of the pattern of assimilation. Both Clarence, born in 1923, and Marilyn born in 1932, are ethnic Germans from Russia. Three of their parents were born in South Russia, in the village of Hoffnungstal, and came to America as small children. Both have mothers in their 90s, still living in Java, S.D. Both grew up as part of a huge area of German-Russian concentration, "The Great Sauerkraut Pyramid," that extends north into McIntosh County and all the way up to Rugby and the Canadian border. Clarence had his 97th birthday in February. Clarence continues to be active with the Dakota Pioneer Chapter in Bismarck, Germans from Russia Heritage Society (GRHS). Clarence was former president of GRHS from 1988-1991.

Their parents spoke German most of

the time, nearly all their lives. "German was our first language," said Marilyn. Like many children of immigrants, she and her brother didn't speak English until they went to a one-room country school. "It was very difficult for us. We'd fall back on our ways," she said. Marilyn can still vividly recall the swatting and smackings that came from her first-grade teacher if she lapsed into German. "After our generation left the nest, the German-speaking in us more or less left, too. We didn't forget it, but we didn't use it," Clarence said. But they still have fun speaking German with friends, getting together to laugh and remember the old phrases, the old stories, the German jokes that deflate at any attempt to translate them.

"The German work ethic lives on pretty well in the family," Marilyn said. "We worked hard all our lives, grew up learning how to work. Milking cows, working hard in the field and barn and house." Marilyn still holds on to the foods that the family loves – homemade sausage, homemade chicken and vegetable soups, kuchen, pfefferneuse and gingerbread.

The bonds of religious denomination have loosened also in their children's generations. Once nearly unheard of among the German-Russians to marry outside the Lutheran or Catholic churches, the Bauman children have spouses who are Wesleyan, Catholic, and Lutheran.

The Bauman family is typical in many ways, and unique in one. Their son, Clyde, has performed for more than 20 years as "Mylo Hatzenbuhler," the comedic German-Russian Everyman, instantly recognizable to those who grew up amid the mangled accents and German syntax of the Sauerkraut Pyramid. "Our distinctiveness makes us a source of humor from time to time," Clyde said. He sees the ethnic fading in the crowds who gather for his performances. Those 50 or older retain the accent; "in my age group, very seldom."

"We fully well realize that ours is probably the last generation that will be holding on to the customs of our forebears," Clarence said, "and for that reason we feel that it's important at least for us to preserve whatever we can of that heritage." Marilyn adds, "Just so that people someday know who we were."

"Ethnic German persists, but underground, in shared values," said the Rev. William Sherman, professor of sociology at North Dakota State University. Values like:

Foods. "A taste for the food of grandmothers," said Prof. Arnold Marzolf. When his grandchildren came along, he remembers, they would sneak away to grandma's. "They wanted, loved, that food that we were tired of, such as knoeplfa soup."

Work. "The Germans from Russia had a reputation as a thrifty, hard-working people," said Michael Miller. "That characteristic has been passed down so strongly that it continues today in these northern prairies."

Politics. "Politically conservative, heavily Republican and often aloof from politics," said Miller. "That suspicion of the political process was sensitized by their experiences with the government in Russia."

Religion. "The foundation, wellspring and heart of the people, say most researchers. Religion has stayed strong through the years," said Miller, "And Dakota Germans remain supportive of their parishes, dwindling as they are."

If you would like information about the 24th Journey to the Homeland Tour to Germany and Ukraine (May 2021), or to donate a family history or photographs, contact Michael Miller, NDSU Libraries, Dept 2020, PO Box 6050, Fargo, ND 58108-6050 (Tel: 701-231-8416); E-mail: Michael.miller@ndsu.edu or go to www.ndsu.edu/grhc.

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