

In Touch with Prairie Living

January 2020

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



GERMANS FROM RUSSIA

GRHC

HERITAGE COLLECTION

I am pleased to have Torie Jones, GRHC Graduate Assistant, prepare this month's column. Torie is a native of Fessenden, ND, and began working as an undergraduate intern at the GRHC in July, 2015. During her internship, she spent two and a half years processing and digitizing the Johannes and Christina (Ehni) Schock Letter and Photograph Collection. Torie graduated from NDSU with a triple major in Horticulture, Public History, and History in December 2018 and began pursuing her Masters Degree in Public History in August 2019.

When I started at the GRHC, I did not know much about the Germans from Russia. I grew up eating knoephla soup and kuchen, but did not know the origins of these foods, I just knew they were good! Through my experiences at the GRHC, I have come to know and value not just the foods, but the historical and cultural impact of this unique group of people.

Johannes and Christiana (Ehni) Schock immigrated to Turtle Lake, North Dakota, from Borodino, Bessarabia, in 1910. They left behind large families on both the Ehni and Schock sides. After WWII, they received nearly 400 letters and many photographs from family and friends living as refugees in Germany, primarily from 1946-1951.

These letters shed light on the plight of Bessarabian Germans from Russia and detail their experiences both during and after the war, focusing primarily on post-war conditions. Two of Johannes and Christiana's children, Emma and Reinhold, compiled the existing letters. Emma completed all the translations and Reinhold annotated the photographs. Reinhold's son, Martin, donated the collection to the GRHC in October 2014.

Working with the Johannes and Christina (Ehni) Schock Letter and Photograph Collection required a lot of research and background work so I could understand their context and the lives of the authors. During my work with this collection, there were many

stories that made an impact and have stuck with me. Some of the following excerpts are among them.

"Dear Uncle and Aunt, and children. Since I have, fortunately, gotten your address from my parents, I would like to turn to you. I don't have the addresses yet for Uncle Gottfried and Uncle Emanuel. I am unknown to you all—I am the oldest son of your brother Friedrich. Today is New Years—one year passes and another comes and we keep sitting here homeless. This unbearable ordeal has left us exhausted." Benjamin Schock wrote this on January 1, 1948, to Johannes and Christiana (Ehni) Schock. He was living in Wredenhangen, Germany, within the Soviet occupied zone of Germany.

Many of the correspondents were essentially homeless and surviving through ration cards which provided only small portions of meat, fat, and bread. Some families were lucky to have an abundance of potatoes. Israel Ehni wrote, "Sister Katharina says I am so very thin—but from what can one get strong?—potatoes? We have often said we should have the gophers here like we had in Bessarabia, they would all be eaten—but we don't have anything like that here and no meat either."

Johannes, Christiana, other family members, and friends in Turtle Lake, North Dakota, sent many packages overseas containing clothing and food items. Sister-in-law, Helena Weißhaar, wrote, "Our plight appears to worsen, but thank God, we got some help from you this week. The children were especially overjoyed! — 10 lbs. of flour, 3 lbs. lard, a piece of soap and three pairs of shoes, which was the biggest joy in our situation!" These packages were received with relief and great gratitude in Germany and are often credited for keeping the refugees fed and clothed.

The total number of packages sent by the Schocks is unknown, but Martha (Renke) Füller wrote on April 15, 1948,

"My dear ones, you write that you have sent 70 packages! I haven't seen anything except what I myself received, the three packages for which I am still so very grateful. Martha (Adolf's sister) once said they got a package with food items. Sister-in-law Ida (also Adolf's sister) is especially tight-lipped, and brother-in-law Johannes said that they had gotten two packages—with food and clothes. No one has ever shown me anything. That's the way it is today—such mistrust among family!" There were many letters sent after this time, so the total number of packages could easily be in the hundreds.

This collection is valuable for future research and sheds a light on a part of German-Russian history often forgotten. The collection has been processed and is available online at www.digitalhorizonsonline.org. The letters are full text searchable and can be filtered by subject and family.

The GRHC is also excited to announce a new Oral History Project focused on the Journey to the Homeland Tour. Torie Jones, GRHC Graduate Assistant, will join our 2020 tour and conduct interviews with participants while they experience their ancestral history. She will also reach out to former tour members to record their tour memories. If you have been on a tour in the past and would like to learn more about the project, please contact Torie at torie.d.jones@ndsu.edu.

For more information about the 25th Anniversary Journey to the Homeland Tour to Germany and Ukraine (May 2021), 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 58108-6050 (Tel: 701-231-8416); Email: michael.miller@ndsu.edu; or go to www.ndsu.edu/grhc.

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