

In Touch with Prairie Living

November 2019

By Michael M. Miller

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



GERMANS FROM RUSSIA

GRHC

HERITAGE COLLECTION

Thanksgiving regards to you and your family. We can be grateful that our ancestors immigrated to the Dakota prairies, Canada, USA, and South America from the former German villages in Russia. Having visited these former Bessarabian and Black Sea German villages near Odessa, Ukraine, I have seen the difficult lives the people experience today. In preparing this column, I am reminded of writing my first column in November 1996. This is the 276th monthly column in 23 years (1996-2019). My appreciation for the continued interest from readers.

September 19-20, I was with NDSU fifth-year architecture students and Heather Fischer, instructor, to visit German-Russian sites in Emmons and McIntosh counties. The NDSU class was Professional Seminar: Historic American Building Survey. The students did extensive measurements and drawings of the exterior and interior of the Schwab sod house and the buildings at the Welk Homestead, both near Strasburg, as well as, photography, interviews and droning.

In Strasburg, we toured Sts. Peter & Paul Catholic Church; in Hague, we visited St. Mary's Catholic Church and Cemetery; in Zeeland, we visited St. John the Baptist Catholic Cemetery, City Hall, and the Zeeland Park Arch. In Ashley, we toured the McIntosh County Courthouse and the Homesteaders Jewish Cemetery; in Lehr, the Lehr Tabernacle.

The GRHC's largest outreach event is the Pride of Dakota Holiday Showcase. We will have a booth at the Fargo Showcase at Scheels Arena, 5225 31st Avenue South, November 22-24. The Bismarck Showcase will be at the Events Center, 315 South 5th Street, December 6-8. The times for both events are Friday, 4-9pm; Saturday, 9am-5 pm; Sunday, 11am-4pm.

Featured at the booth will be the new DVD and companion publication, *Women Behind the Plow*, produced by Prairie Public, Germans from Russia

Heritage Collection and the Tri-County Tourism Alliance. Other items available will be *Still* by Rebecca and Kenneth Bender, published by NDSU Press about the Ashley, ND, Jewish Homesteaders Cemetery.

Our new book, *Emilie: The Girl from Bessarabia*, translated from German to English by James T. Gessele, Minneapolis, native of Mercer, ND, will also be available. Angela Romeiss, author of the book, writes, "Life beget stories that no author, artist or poet can more grippingly, colorfully and romantically devise. This is such a story. The story of my grandmother."

"Growing up along the Black Sea Coast is Emilie, a child of German settlers – cared for and protected but under deprived conditions. Upon her father's death, the family is brought back to the ancestral village by former neighbors. This village is in Bessarabia, a barren steppe landscape that ranges across today's Moldova and Ukraine to the Danube Delta. It was there until World War II that German settlements existed.

Upon homecoming, the mother had to release her children to adoption, and eleven-year-old Emilie was placed in the childless household of a carpenter and his wife. World War I erupts shortly before Emilie's wedding and her fiancé is conscripted into military service. After years of hope and trepidation in which those staying behind struggle for survival, he returns home unscathed. The young couple, along with a few other like-minded venturesome souls, decide to resettle to another region of the country. Here they establish a new village.

Their budding prosperity is abruptly destroyed by the onset of World War II. What may have seemed far off in the future suddenly becomes a bitter reality. The Bessarabian Germans are compelled to return home to the Reich. After years of detention of various camps, they are allotted a farmstead in Poland for settlement

purposes. But even here they are denied a new home, for embittered partisans defend their land against intruders. There begins an odyssey then through Germany in which Emilie – throughout turmoil of war, hunger and destitution – frantically attempts to rescue her children. Will the family be so fortunate?"

Carol Just writes, "Ever since I learned decades ago that my German great and great-great-grandparents left South Russia (now Ukraine, Moldova and part of Romania) to homestead in Dakota Territory, I have been hunting for details about the fate of the Germans that stayed behind. Angela Rommeiss' novel based on the life of her grandmother, Emilie, takes the reader through the decades before and after two world wars. Through it all, Emilie, is strong and resilient as she shepherds her family forward in spite of the powerlessness that comes from war and forced migration. *Emilie: The Girl from Bessarabia* is a valuable contribution to Germans from Russia literature."

Alex and Dr. Nancy Herzog, co-editors of the "Emilie" book, comment, "We were truly impressed and taken in by the amazing life story. This book doesn't shy away from cases of people getting caught up by the evils of war, from not-so-great-aspects of Black Sea culture, but it also describes a truly heroic person's life that included tragic and wonderful aspects of family life of the Bessarabian Germans. We are happy to recommend this well-told story, a glimpse into an always real, sometimes happy, and often tragic life with courage and gusto."

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 58108-6050 (Tel: 701-231-8416); Email: michael.miller@ndsu.edu; www.ndsu.edu/grhc.

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