

In Touch with Prairie Living

May 2020

By Michael M. Miller

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



GERMANS FROM RUSSIA
GRHC
HERITAGE COLLECTION

The 50th Germans from Russia Heritage Society Convention scheduled for July 2020, in Bismarck has been rescheduled to July 2021.

The North Star Chapter of Minnesota Germans from Russia has published two excellent anthologies, “Watermelons and Thistles: Growing up German from Russia in America” and “Hollyhocks and Grasshoppers: Growing up German from Russia in America”.

The editors for “Watermelons and Thistles” write, “These stories are brought from the past and laid out on this book’s pages potluck-style. There’s no first or last in line. Each one is a dessert, or a full meal (meat and potatoes; wurst and dumplings), or a glass of water or a shot of schnapps in itself. Eat, drink the words, and enjoy.”

From the back cover, “Where is home when you’ve traveled halfway around the world? Where is home when memories are all you have? Where is home when you find a new path? The Germans from Russia have been redefining the idea of home for over 200 years. They made home where they found themselves – among family, church, community, school, and friends, whether they stayed in their small communities or ventured to cities across the globe.”

Chapter members explore these themes and more in their second anthology of essays reflecting on being children of three homelands in two centuries. Their respect for the past and hopes for the future are ever-constant, and these glimpses into the spaces they call home will recall memories we all hold dear.

Among the 36 stories in “Watermelon and Thistles” are these titles: Prairie Memories; Are You German?; Draft Notice; Found! My Forty-Year Search for my Great-Great-Grandmother; Grandmas Make Good Friends; A Farm School Education; Radio: Bringing the World to the Prairie; Wash Day on the Farm; The Prairie

Blacksmith; One-Room Schoolhouse; The Art of Thumping Watermelon; What We Choose to Remember.

Chuck Haga, former writer for the Minneapolis StarTribune, writes in his review, “As the son of a Norwegian immigrant father (and full Norwegian on my mother’s side, too), I absolutely loved reading these memories of fellow Dakotans whose ethnic German people came to the prairie from the steppes of Russia. They may have preferred halupsie or kuchen to lutefisk and lefse, but the stories of farm chores and barn dances, church and one-room school, wash days and farm auctions, fighting prairie fires and thistle, all ring true as honest and warmly, wonderfully human. The frustrations of genealogy and the exhilaration of discovery, and the pride and the sadness that comes with knowing, are here and will be recognized and felt by people of all ethnic backgrounds who have searched for a better understanding of those who came before them.”

“Hollyhocks and Grasshoppers” shares 35 essays and poems with vintage photographs. Bernelda Becker, a Eureka, S.D. native, writes about: World Day at the Country School; Butchering Day; The Bogeyman Behind the Closet; From Russia, Mit Liebe; Grandmother’s Lasting Influence; and The Eureka Bazaar. James Gessele, Mercer, N.D. native, writes about: Juneberries; Kuchen: What’s In It for Me; and Mercer’s First Television Set. Cynthia Miller, Beulah, ND native shares about Fleischkuechla at the Dairy Queen.

Christmas services in a country church... going to town on Saturday night... the utter deliciousness of homemade ethnic food. These are only some of the memories shared in “Hollyhocks and Grasshoppers”. The author’s experiences span decades and cross state boundaries, evoking feelings that all descendants of immigrants share. The voices of the past shine through in these pages, good times

and hard times, family and friends, new things colliding in old ways. The warmth and steadfastness of these pioneers remains the same, viewed through the eyes of the people who experienced it.

Debra Marquardt, author of “The Horizontal World: Growing Up in the Middle of Nowhere” writes, “All things German-Russian are contained here – rock picking and kuchen-making and root cellars and country school and fleischkuechla and braucher and back-breaking work in the fields and meadowlarks and butchering and church-going and hochzeits and wedding schnapps. To grow up German-Russian was to be taught by one’s elders to aim yourself forward, into the future, into hard work, America, and assimilation. The authors whose work is contained in “Hollyhocks and Grasshoppers” have willfully disobeyed that forward command for this short time. They have looked back with intensity and real mastery to conjure up that lost world that lives quietly within those of us who grew up German-Russian. Their backward gaze is joyful and full of longing. Each sentence, each line here rings with honesty and empathy, understanding, and most of all, love.”

To secure a copy of “Watermelons and Thistles” or “Hollyhocks and Grasshoppers” visit our online store: www.ndsu.edu/grhc/order.

If you would like more information about the 24th Journey to the Homeland Tour to Germany and Ukraine (May 2021), or would like donate 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.

May column for North and South Dakota Newspapers.