

In Touch with Prairie Living

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By Michael M. Miller

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



GERMANS FROM RUSSIA
GRHC
HERITAGE COLLECTION

The dedication of the Dr. Joseph S. Height Collection was celebrated during the 50th Anniversary Convention of the Germans from Russia Heritage Society on July 21, 2021. Margaret Height, daughter of Dr. Height, donated his personal library. Margaret shared, "It was his library, personal papers, and research materials, and it's what he did his whole life." Margaret is a member of the GRHS Board of Directors. The GRHS annually awards the Dr. Joseph S. Height Literary Award to four outstanding essays, articles, or translations published in the Heritage Review.

I share Dr. Height's presentation from September 23, 1972, at the 2nd convention of the North Dakota Historical Society of Germans from Russia. "I'm no stranger to North Dakota, I've been through this state several times in the last 20 or 25 years. In fact, it's the best road from Indiana to my native Saskatchewan. I also feel somewhat native of North Dakota because my father, my grandfather, my uncles, pioneered, for some time in North Dakota, for about five years. Then, they moved to Saskatchewan where they found greener pastures, but blacker earth. So, I feel right at home here. Your family names are familiar to me. I have friends and even relatives in North Dakota, along the Devils Lake and Rugby area.

Dr. Karl Stumpp, in his book, "The German-Russians," pointed out different qualities he thought described the Germans from Russia. He said industrious, hard-working. They were modest and unassuming in their general bearing and yet proud of their achievements. They were people with a deeply religious soul. This characterized the Russian Germans whether from the Volga or from the Black Sea, a deeply religious people. They were also a progressive people, recognized by Czar Alexander I, when he visited the colonies in the early pioneer period, around 1816 and 1817.

The spirit of enterprise, a bold intrepidity, was demonstrated already in the Exodus when they left Europe, their homeland. It was demonstrated on that long and fateful trek from Germany, from the banks of the Rhine to the shores of the Black Sea. It was greater than that, to the shores of the Volga. Sometimes, I think we have no clear conception of what such a journey

meant. The evidence shows that this journey required three to four months.

The same spirit of enterprise was exhibited in the early pioneer years. Imagine arriving from a vast steppe and not a home or a place to live. The Russians hadn't prepared anything for them. They put them up in these wattle huts. People had to literally dig in or die. Dugouts made in the earth. Covered more with more earth for a roof for the shelter.

To start, cultivating must start, with wooden plows of the most wretched variety. Now these people had hope, that had endurance and perseverance. In a few years, they had established themselves in better homes. By 1822, they had invented a better plow, an iron plow. It didn't take long to finally get the colonist house, of stone, in many places.

Another quality which I find predominant and very significant in our in our German-Russian people, basically they were a conservative people. This is indicated by the fact that they preserved their dialect and language almost pure, with the exception of some Russian words they added, for over 150 years. Basically, they kept their mother language. Those traditions they brought from Germany; those customs were also faithfully retained. Whether it was the way they made sausage, the way they sang their folk songs, the way they danced, or celebrated their feast days or festivals. This was tradition, this was a ritual.

The other thing that amazes me is the wealth of tradition. The colonists came from Germany. They were poor. They got loans for getting established. But they were rich in one thing. Not only rich in the spirit, they had an interior wealth of tradition and custom which helped them over the difficulties which they faced, the hardships they endured.

Another quality is that our people were very sociable people. They had to be, practically. After all, they were limited in their abilities, sort of isolation from the Russian people. They formed kind of a compact, unified community. Their sociability, carried on after 150 years, is seen in the fact that they delighted to be in company. It's sort of a Russian-German proverb, 'If you don't have company, you

go to company.'

Practically every grandmother had at least 20 to 50 rhymes to cure practically everything. It did not give you any harm, a lot of it did not do much good for some of the ailments.

Our people were a peace-loving people. In fact, that is one of the reasons they left Germany, because there were wars and revolutions. They came to Russia because they were promised peace. There was a Bessarabian saying, 'Not with the sword, conquer with the plow, children of peace, heroes of work.'

I feel a moral obligation to our ancestors, to our people who are still living, that the history of our people dare not be extinguished, but must be preserved."

Dr. Joseph S. Height (1909-1979) was a native of Tramping Lake, SK, Canada, and attended St. John's College in Edmonton, AB, majoring in foreign languages. After graduation, he spent three years in Germany studying German and Philosophy and received his B.A. and M.A. degrees from the University of British Columbia. His Ph.D. in German was from the University of California, Berkeley. Dr. Height, an author, historian, and genealogist, was a professor of German and Linguistics, teaching at the University of California, Northwestern University, Wabash College, and lastly at Franklin College. The books Dr. Height authored are well-known to the German-Russian community including: "Paradise on the Steppe" (1973), "Homesteaders on the Steppe" (1975), "Folksongs of Our Forefathers" (1978), and "Memories of the Black Sea Germans" (1979). Dr. Height's translations included the following: "The German-Russians" (Stumpp, 1964), "Emigration from Germany to Russia in the Years 1763 to 1862" (Stumpp, 1973), and "Pioneer History of the Stang Kinship" (Stang, 1979).

For more information about the 24th Journey to the Homeland Tour to Germany and Ukraine, donating family histories and photographs, or how to financially support the GRHC, contact Michael M. Miller, NDSU Libraries, Dept. 2080, PO Box 6050, Fargo, ND 58108-6050, (Tel: 701-231-8416); michael.miller@ndsu.edu; or go to library.ndsu.edu/grhc.