

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 GRHC Archive recently received a valuable donation from Eloise Fischer Kelle, Ashley, ND. Her donation included, "My Return to Russia" by Jacob Hieb Sr., published by The Record Press, Marion, SD, in 1930. The complete publication is available at <https://hdl.handle.net/10365/33021>.

Jacob Hieb was born in Neudorf, Glueckstal District, Cherson Province, on July 10, 1858, and died on November 26, 1933. He is buried at the Greenwood Cemetery in Marion, Turner County, SD. Jacob married Christina Mettler, born June 6, 1862, in Kassel, Glueckstal District.

In the publication's Foreword, the publisher wrote, "The abdication of Nicholas II, Czar of Russia in 1917, and the Revolution that followed, left Europe's greatest country in a pitiful plight. A large number of South Dakota people hail from Russia and as soon as hunger and want reports reached here, they organized a movement to help their stricken friends and relatives over there. Mr. Jacob Hieb, pioneer merchant of Marion, South Dakota, took a leading part of this relief work.

During the year 1923, a ship load of clothing and provisions was collected from South Dakota and neighboring states and shipped to Riga, Russia (Latvia) for distribution among the needy and destitute people. Sometime thereafter, private letters reached many of the donors that their packages did not reach them. Interested friends began to look around for someone to make a trip to investigate these charges. Mr. Hieb volunteered to go, and made this trip in early 1928.

Upon his return he wrote up his experiences in serial form in the Marion Record. His written story proved so interesting that before it was finished a large number of demands came to the Record to have this narrative published in book form."

Jacob Hieb shared, "It was Christmas Day 1927, when I left my dear family. Mr. Kessler of Eureka, S.D., came with me on the trip." They took the train to Chicago and on to New York City boarding a ship for Europe. On January 28, 1928, they left Berlin, Germany, by train to Odessa. When they arrived at the Odessa train station, they met a Russian man who agreed to take

them to the village of Neudorf, Glueckstal District, with his two horses and a sleigh ride.

"It was just getting dark when we reached the village (Neudorf) and I told him to bring me to Dr. Yesser's house, my brother-in-law. When we reached the house, we found them all well except the doctor, who had died; only two of the boys and wife remaining. It was a great surprise and the news spread over the village like wildfire that Americans were there. It wasn't over thirty minutes when the house was filled with people. Mr. Kessler went right to his father's place."

On Sunday, they had dinner at the house of a friend of Jacob Hieb's in Neudorf, "Our dinner consisted of chicken, potatoes about the size of a hazel nut, rye bread with barley mixed, as white bread was not to be seen in the colony, and coffee which was made out of chicory, as sweet coffee is too expensive for them. So, I always preferred tea instead of coffee.

I heard said at the table that there were many families that were without bread and cannot see their way clear to get along until the next harvest unless the government will help them. They only had a half crop last year and the government collected all of the wheat and almost all the rye and corn that was that was left and shipped to the northern part where they are entirely out of bread and had no crop at all.

Everything looked different than it did when I was over last in 1884. The large timber where Neudorf used to draw the timber from, was all cut down. The nice row of trees which appeared so nice to me that last time I was over, were all cut off. The big dam that was used to hold so much water was ruined."

Jacob Hieb then traveled to the government town of Gregoriopol where it was Market Day. "When they heard that Americans were there, they wanted to see them as some had never seen an American. They came running over to our wagon like a herd of sheep. They circled around us and looking our clothing over as they had an idea that the Americans were different looking people than they were."

Hieb continued later, "At last, we got to the village of Klein Bergdorf. We stopped

at the home of Fredrick Kammerer we were soon welcomed by a whole lot of people there. They had a fine church and a nice schoolhouse and many of the houses were large stone houses with tiled roofs. I noticed that the big impression the late special tax that the government put on every family through the whole of Russia just two days before we arrived at the first German village, had made an awful sorrowful feeling for every family. The people were not at all prepared to meet that heavy tax and many of the poorer families in the village had to sell their last cow to pay up the taxes."

By March 24, 1928, Jacob Hieb Sr. and Mr. Kessler arrived back in New York City. "At about eleven o'clock in the forenoon our boat passed the Statue of Liberty and from our boat the great buildings in the city of New York. Upon my arrival at the hotel, I found telegram from my folks at home to do some buying so I stayed two days in New York and finished the buying.

I arrived home (to Marion, SD) but as soon as the people found out that I was back, people wanted to hear about their friends in the old country. This is the way it kept up for two months. We had visitors from all over until I was almost laid out, but I thank the Almighty that I got through so well over in the forbidden Russia as it was hard to get into Russia, and also hard to get out. But I hope that the people of the almighty Russia will have a change in their government, at least for several ways."

For more information about donating family histories and photographs, or how to financially support the GRHC, contact Jeremy Kopp, at jeremy.kopp@ndsu.edu or 701-231-6596; mail to: NDSU Libraries, Dept. 2080, PO Box 6050, Fargo, N.D. 58108-6050; or go to www.ndsu.edu/grhc; michael.miller@ndsu.edu or 701-231-8416.

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