

In Touch with Prairie Living

April 2024

By Michael M. Miller

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



GERMANS FROM RUSSIA
GRHC
HERITAGE COLLECTION

Nancy Martin and Connie Ulasewicz co-authored the article, “Ach, Gott, yes, I wish I was back in Russia: Heimat in the Dress of North Dakota’s Black Sea Germans.” It was published in the *Journal of the Costume Society of America*, Volume 46, 2020. Martin did extensive German-Russian textile and clothing research at the McIntosh County Museum, Ashley, ND, the State Historical Society of North Dakota, Bismarck, and the Emily P. Reynolds Historic Costume Collection, NDSU, Fargo.

The authors cited two important sources for clothing descriptions of the German-Russians who emigrated to the Dakotas in the 1880s. These sources were the classic book of Nina Farley Wishek, “Along the Trails of Yesterday: A Memoir of McIntosh County” and “A Bit of Europe in Dakota,” an article written by W.S. Harwood, for *Harper’s Weekly Magazine* in 1896.

In their article, Nancy Martin and Connie Ulasewicz write, “Nina Wishek, who lived among the German-Russians in McIntosh County, North Dakota, in the late 1800s, questioned pioneer Christian Becker. ‘Do you regret leaving Russia, or are you content here in America?’ ‘Ach, Gott, yes, I was I wish was back in Russia.’ He told of all the comforts they enjoyed and said that most of them wished they were back.”

Once in America, the Germans from Russia were filled with longing when they looked back at their settlements in Russia. Nina Farley Wishek explained, “But Mr. Becker’s statement may result from the nostalgic memory of those glamorous days of youth, for certainly the few Russian Germans who have returned to their homeland have always come back within a year to America. It is only natural for the foreigner to feel a warm and staunch affection for his Fatherland.”

The *Harper’s Weekly* article described the influx of German-Russians in to Eureka, Dakota Territory, the last stop on the Northern Pacific Railroad. This article included color photographs illustrating the material culture of the Germans from Russia, including the sod house, farm implements, and ethnic clothing. The featured garments were worn by the Black Sea Germans either in Russia or early upon their arrival to the United States.

The German term Peltz translates, to pelt, fur, or overcoat. W. S. Harwood in the *Harper’s Weekly* article, “A Bit of Europe in Dakota,” details the Peltz coat. “Beginning at the top, they wore high round black caps of real beautiful astrakhan fur (Karakul sheep from Central Asia). They wore long astrakhan coats. They had a sort of wrap around style and no buttons. Long, brightly colored scarves, kept them pulled in at the waistline. In these heavy Peltz as the coats were called, a man could endure the most intense cold. No such garment was ever made in this country; all were brought from Russia.”

Martin and Ulasewicz write, “Cross-stitched aprons were so important for the women in the German-Russian community. German women born in Russia and Germany historically wore aprons that were similar in fashion, construction and design. The German women carried the traditional apron style from their German ancestral villages through Russia all the way to America.” Nina Wishek, in her book, noted, “On Sunday with their best dress they always were an apron – their best and nicest apron – even for church. These Sunday aprons were often made of dark or black fine wool material with a cross stitch pattern in bright colors, or of fine cotton or silk with a ruffle and lace.”

Dr. Ann Braaten, Curator of the Emily P. Reynolds Costume Collection at NDSU investigated the significance of one category of apparel that of women’s shawls, called Placht and Tuechle, the article was titled, “Shawls of the Germans from Russia.” Martin and Ulasewicz write, “Through interviews with surviving German-Russians, Braaten found that the memories of the shawls, worn and handed down from mother to daughter, were interwoven with the experiences of their short time in Russia.”

“Braaten recognized that the shawls served as a ‘shibboleth,’ a recognizable symbol that unites a group of people. For the German-Russians, possession of Placht and Tuechle were symbols that identified the wearer as a member of the Black Sea German-Russian community. Ultimately, despite assimilation into American society, the shawls today remain a cherished symbol.” Many of these shawls have been

donated to the GRHC and housed in the Reynolds Collection.

The *Harper’s Weekly Magazine* article shared that the Germans who immigrated to America soon began to make changes in their dress. “It took not so very long a time for the men to drop some part of their Old-World style of garb, their sharp-visored caps, their great top-boots, and their leather jackets.”

According to Joseph Height, “Women’s skirts and men’s trousers worn in Germany before emigration to Russia had been constructed of serge, heavy-duty fabric, or wool fiber. The variation indicates that the German immigrants adjusted their textiles in response to the more extreme climate that they encountered in Russia.”

In the author’s conclusion, Martin and Ulasewicz state, “These garments illustrate the material choices made along the paths of their double diaspora and confirm their culture – working farmers of stern Germanic origins and great pride in their ability to eke out a living wherever they were planted. A German is like a willow tree – stick it in the ground and it will survive.”

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 or email michael.miller@ndsu.edu.

April column for North Dakota and South Dakota weekly newspapers.