

BESSARABIA

At the close of the Third Russian-Turkish War, the Treaty of Bucharest (28 May 1812) ceded to Russia the land bordering the Prut River in the west, the Dniester River in the east and the Black Sea and the Danube River in the south. It was named Bessarabia in recognition of an ancient people, known as the Besses, probably of Tartar origin who had roamed the region for centuries. The land covered 44,422 square meters or 17,151 square miles, approximately one fourth the size of the State of Washington. Northern Bessarabia, present day Moldavia was a high plain at 1,200 feet above sea level, and in appearance similar to the Dakotas in the USA. Southern Bessarabia, present day western Ukraine, where the German settlements were established consists of rolling hills some 600 feet above sea level. The climate is continental with hot summers and cold winters. The topsoil, a black, sandy loam, is quite fertile and with adequate rainfall ideal for wheat, barley, oats, rye, corn, soy beans, grapes and fruits. Prior to the arrival of the Germans, the rural population was comprised principally of Moldavians and Gypsies along with some Romanians and Bulgarians, while Jews, Romanians and Russians were the major occupants of the cities.

On November 29, 1813, Alexander I, Czar of Russia, grandson of the famous Catherine II, issued a manifesto directed principally to farmers and circulated throughout Western Europe and Poland to entice settlers into the virgin lands of Bessarabia. Among those were Germans who earlier had been attracted to the Polish regions acquired by Prussia during the Partitions of Poland (1772-1795). They were peoples of various backgrounds and dialects including natives of Mecklenburg and Pomerania (who spoke *Plattdeutsch* Low-German), East Prussia and Brandenburg, along with Saxony and Silesia (*Schlesien*). Ancestors of the latter had come a century or more earlier to that region from as far west as Flanders in Belgium, the French Alsace, the Rhineland and Hesse. Some were actually remnants from the Crusades as is the case of those from the Siebenbuerger or Transylvanian areas who had settled there during the Thirteenth to Fifteenth centuries. Speaking their native dialects, collectively they served as successful pioneers in the newly-created West Prussia until Napoleon, on-route to his planned invasion of Russia in 1812, defeated the Prussian Army in 1806/7 and established the Duchy of Warsaw. Suddenly finding themselves regarded as undesirable foreigners by the indigenous Poles, as well as under severe pressure by the Roman Catholic Church, the Protestant Germans received Alexander's Manifesto as a veritable Godsend. Germans also emigrated from other Prussian-Polish territories to Bessarabia. Termed colonists they were to receive a number of special privileges without being required to become Russian citizens.

The other prominent area of immigration to Bessarabia was from the Kingdom of Wuerttemberg in south Germany and its neighboring duchies and principalities. Because the mother of Alexander I (Princess Sophia Dorothea) was the sister of King Friedrich I of Wuerttemberg, Alexander appealed to his uncle for farmers to come to South Russia as pioneers to develop and make arable the virgin lands, thereby serving as examples to the indigenous peoples of the region. King Friedrich I was agreeable to this request, providing his subjects would first submit proof that they were free of any indebtedness and other obligations to the satisfaction of their local burgermeisters. The provisions of the Alexander I Manifesto were as follows:

- The Russian Government will accept colonists from the Duchy of Warsaw, the Kingdom of Wuerttemberg and elsewhere with protection guaranteed and the full assurance of all rights and privileges afforded ordinary Russian citizens.

- It is required that all colonists will occupy themselves with the development of farmlands, orchards, and vineyards and engage in silkworm culture.
- There *will* be ten years of freedom from taxation and property obligations with the exception of rental fees payable to landlords for leased lands.
- Every indigent family will receive 270 rubles for a period of ten years, while other families *will* be granted support according to their individual needs.
- Every family will receive a land grant of 60 dessiatines (162 acres) as its permanent and private property. (1 dessiatine = 2.7 acres).
- Families without means will also receive a daily stipend of five kopeks per family member until the first harvest has been realized.
- The colonists as well as their descendants will be free from military conscription forever, with the exception of providing quarters for essential military maneuvers during wartime.
- Upon completion of the ten free years, loans from the Crown may be repaid over the succeeding ten years.
- Freedom of religion is guaranteed along with the permission to establish schools and procurement of teachers and pastors.

An additional requirement was the unwritten commitment that every property must be under control and care of an able-bodied male. In the event of his premature death, his wife and children would become wards of the community unless she promptly married another able-bodied man and could thereby retain property ownership. Similarly, men who lost their wives would also be looking for an available woman to take care of their minor children. Such marriages would on occasion take place within one month after death of the spouse.

On either side of the diminutive Kogilnik River, which flows from upper Bessarabia into the Black Sea, twenty five designated Mother Colonies were established by this assortment of Germans in the following order: 1814, Tarutino, Borodino, Krasna; 1815, Kloestitz, Kulm, Leipzig, Wittenberg (Malojaroslawetz I); 1816, Alt Elft (Fere Champenoise I), Arzis (Arcis), Brienne, Beresina, Paris; 1817, Teplitz; 1821, Katzbach; 1822, Sarata, Schabo Colonie; 1823, Alt Posttal (Malojaroslawetz II), Neu Elft (Fere Champenoise II); 1825, Neu Arzis; 1830, Gnadental; 1833, Friedenstal; 1834, Dennewitz, Lichtental; 1839, Plotzk; 1842, Hoffnungstal. With the addition of daughter colonies created after 1860, which covered most of the southeastern portion of Bessarabia towards the Dniestr River, the number increased to a total of 210 villages by 1940, the year of forced evacuation. The original land grant of 60 dessiatines (162 acres), with the purchase of additional lands, had grown to an average ownership of 1,710 acres. By 1940 the land owned and occupied by Germans had increased to some 325,000 dessiatines, approximately 355,000 hectares or 877,000 acres. Because of the differing dialects, numerous happenings, some humorous, some unfortunate took place. In fact the Germans from South and West Germany could not understand much of the language spoken by their Bessarabian neighbors from the Northern regions and Poland. Those from the north were dubbed *Kaschubes* or *Kachups* while the Wuerttembergers and those from the south were called *Schwaben* (*Swabian*). Although, each group held steadfastly

to its familiar tongue, the use of the standard "High" German in the church and in business gradually established the Swabian dialect as the standard.

In general the Bessarabians were a people of deep religious convictions with a desire for worship services, which in the beginning took place out of doors or in homes. Within ten years following the initial settlements well-constructed prayer houses (chapels) were erected where the more gifted men conducted prayer and religious services. The first impressive church edifice erected in Tarutino, the Parish Center, was dedicated in 1865. This was followed in 1868 by the one in Kulm. The chapel in Leipzig was so well designed that it continued to serve the congregation until 1890 when it was struck by lightning, which inflicted irreparable damage so worship services were held in the schoolhouse until 1908 when the handsome new sanctuary that could seat 1,000 was dedicated. Since one pastor served a number of churches, the one serving the Tarutino Parish was scheduled to preach in Tarutino 14 to 18 times annually and 14 times each in Kulm, Leipzig, Wittenberg and Alt Posttal. The smaller out-lying villages such as Blumental, Kurudschika, Mintschuna and Peterstal were visited 3 times annually. At other times, the sexton or schoolmaster would read the Sunday sermons and officiate at the baptisms and funerals, which would be certified by the pastor at his next visit. Couples would normally travel from their home villages to Tarutino for the marriage ceremony on a given Thursday. Pastors of the Tarutino Parish included: Friedrich Wilhelm Schnabel, 1815-1820; Johann Friedrich Ferdinand Wagner, 1823-1828; Gotthilf Albrecht Tritschler, 1829-1830; Johann Samuel Helwich, 1831-1839; Georg Christoph Huebner, 1840-1845; Franz Wilhelm Pingoud, 1846-1882; Friedrich D. Schlarb, 1883-1908; Daniel Haase, 1908-1926. Kulm became a separate parish in 1939 with Pastor Wilhelm Mayer. Leipzig became a separate parish in 1926 with Jakob Rivinius as Pastor, followed by Erwin Meyer in 1939. Leipzig as also a Parish Center for the communities of Blumental, Jekaterinowka, Kolatschowka, Kurudschika, Mintschuna, Peterstal, Romanovka, and Tschimischia.

Education in the Bessarabian German colonies was relatively simple, with attendance limited to the months when children were not needed for fieldwork. For some it resulted in no more than two months of schooling in an entire year. At the beginning, a community member who personally may have had only a limited education was selected as schoolmaster. It was his responsibility to control as many as 250 pupils in one large room; they were seated on roughly hewn benches with the Bible, the Lutheran Catechism, and the Hymnal as textbooks, and a slate on which to write. To facilitate dealing with such numbers, the older children (ages 12-15) attended classes in the forenoon while those aged 7-11 attended in the afternoon. Normally, the more gifted youth were called upon to assist the teacher. The daily program customarily began with singing followed by reading the New Testament lesson, biblical stories, memorization of the Catechism, writing and simple arithmetic. Since spelling was not emphasized, other than what was learned from reading the Bible, it usually resulted with words being spelled phonetically. Graduation, coinciding with Confirmation, took place Palm Sunday before Easter or another designated day with the Parish Pastor presiding. At this festive religious event everyone came to church dressed in his or her very best. Confirmands sang for the congregation, recited verses and responded to questions taken from the Catechism along with being graded on their reading and writing skills and knowledge of the Holy Scriptures.

Formal education in the German language continued in Lutheran parochial schools until 1891 when Czar Alexander III imposed the Russian language into the classroom. While this action created considerable controversy, it did not succeed in totally suppressing the prevailing use of German in the communities. It did succeed, however, in reducing the class sizes to no more

than 60 pupils for one teacher, thereby increasing the numbers of teachers, one of whom would be Russian, with all of them required to have some type of secondary education. This resulted in a longer school year whereby the youth were taught Russian grammar along with their native German.

A Separatist movement was initiated by the evangelistically minded Roman Catholic Priest, Ignaz Lindl, who had split from the Catholic Church in Landau of the Beresan region. Lindl, whose followers became known as the Landau Baptists, continued his work at Sarata in Bessarabia in 1822. Being an eloquent and articulate speaker, he influenced many to leave the conservative Evangelical Lutheran system and to renounce its traditions, including education as being the work of the Devil. This had a profound negative impact on the educational system of the Bessarabian communities as well as within individual families which took a long time to heal.

Other incidents affecting the Bessarabian citizenry were the activities of unscrupulous land promoters during the years 1842 to 1848, which prompted many who were indigent or at least of lesser means to immigrate to Albania, according to some records, while others say Serbia; there they would supposedly find excellent land awaiting them. This turned out to be false. Those who had the means returned to Bessarabia where, however, they had lost their standing as colonists and the associated privileges, leaving them essentially pauperized. The records of 1860-1870 detail the extent of travels undertaken by one family whose children were born in Dalmatia and their eventual return to Bessarabia. Many who could not return found instead an early grave in foreign soil.

Diseases, of which Cholera was the most fearsome, took severe tolls of the Bessarabian population. During the months of June and July 1831, 107 fell to this dreaded malady in three villages - Kulm, Leipzig and Tarutino - with similar statistics for the other communities. With some families totally wiped out, many properties were left unattended. When the local manpower became insufficient, new settlers from German colonies on the other side of the Dniestr River were added to nearly every existing village. For example, 27 families were added to the population of Beresina, and 15 to Leipzig, to name but two.

The region was also subject to an occasional earthquake as well as periodic flooding by the Kogilnik River. Otherwise, the German colonies flourished as examples in agriculture, animal husbandry and their superior order and cleanliness. Behind the tree lined streets were white washed masonry walls and neatly kept home sites which contained not only living quarters, but granaries, housing for the animals, fruit trees and gardens. In the center of every village stood the elegant church with bell tower, flanked by the schoolhouse with the administration buildings (kanslei) nearby. Certain villages claimed the distinction of supporting secondary schools and of being trade centers for the parish or district. To the eyes of the casual traveler, this was indeed a prosperous region.

At the close of WWI and following the October Revolution in Russia, the Bessarabians became concerned about their future. With the occupation of the Capitol, Kishinev, and the city of Akkerman by Romanian troops in March 1918, unification with Romania became a possibility. At a conference in Kishinev, a decree was enacted to request unification with Romania, which became a reality on March 7, 1919. Even though subject to Communist Rule, the Bessarabian inhabitants did not suffer the collectivization endured by their brethren in the USSR. People readily adjusted to Romanian rule and life continued much as it had been during the previous century under the Russian Czars. However, when Stalin came into power he began to exert pressure on the Romanian government to return Bessarabia to

the USSR. Eventually, Hitler stepped in to assist Stalin's cause with the condition that the German-speaking element be given a choice: become Soviet citizens, or be evacuated. This tragic evacuation took place on June 28, 1940 with the invasion of the Russian army into Bessarabia.

After a century spent pioneering and developing a virgin territory so it was a most attractive and productive region, the Bessarabian Germans had to leave the fruit of their labors, with only a vague promise of reimbursement. Abandoning everything, property, livestock, etc. they were resettled in the depopulated Warthe River region of Poland from where Hitler had conscripted much of his labor forces for his munitions plants. Permitted to take only what they could carry, they went by ship or joined long caravans by land for resettlement in Poland. The German population of Bessarabia in 1827 totaled about 9,355; at the time of relocation in 1940 some 93,329 refugees were documented. Quite interestingly, even some Jewish neighbors bemoaned the fact that they were not included in this evacuation!

Finding themselves on uninhabited Polish farmsteads that had been uncultivated for a number of years and overgrown with weeds, they were obliged to revive the land and renovate the home sites to make them habitable. Having done so, they were barely beginning to be comfortable in their new surroundings when, in front of the Russian invasion of 1945, they were again compelled to leave everything and flee for safety westward. Some did not make it, being overtaken by the invading forces and were sent to slave labor camps in Asiatic Russia or Siberia. Others who did make it to what they thought was freedom were stunned at being turned over to the Soviets by the Allied Powers in the so-called "Operation Keelhaul". Fortunately, many did arrive in West Germany where they have since become comfortably situated. The remainder is scattered all over the world today.

Emigrations from Bessarabia over the span of years, 1874-1939, can be accounted for as follows: to the United States and Canada, 11,326; to South America, 1,898; Siberia, 2,402; North Caucasus, 1,446; Romania, 1,342; Germany, 354; and elsewhere, 402, for a total of 19,152 emigrants. Not counting the Cholera and other epidemics that plagued the region, along with a normal death rate, the foregoing figures added to the 1940 evacuation of 93,329 reflects a ten-fold population increase from the time of initial settlement to the area's demise. Bessarabia as such, no longer exists. After its re-annexation to the Soviet Union in 1940, Stalin divided the region into what is now the country of Moldova in the north, with the southern portion being added to Ukraine, another of the CIS countries.

Spearheaded by a concerned and energetic leadership of those now living in Germany, the Bessarabian Germans throughout the world have, upon visiting their native homeland since the restructuring of the Soviet Union, recognized the privation that exists among the peoples who are now occupying their erstwhile homes; they have gone to great lengths to aid these inhabitants with food, clothing and other needs. One very special undertaking has been the refurbishing and reconstruction of the at one time imposing church buildings, which had suffered extreme devastation under the communist system. As one benefactor reportedly stated, "Even though we have no intention of returning to Bessarabia to live, we want to restore these non-denominational places of worship as an act of veneration for our forebears and for the benefit of anyone who may desire to use them." Thus it is, "once a Bessarabian, always a Bessarabian."