

The History of the Volga Germans in Ellis and Rush Counties, Kansas

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In 1763 Catherine the Great of Russia issued the second of two manifestos designed to stimulate German colonization in the Volga region. Her purpose was to import industrious German farmers as models for her own people, whom she regarded as agriculturally inefficient and backward. The first manifesto, promulgated the previous year, had had no effect; to ensure the success of the second, the empress sent into Germany a team of agents under Captain J.G. von Kotzer to recruit colonists and also liberalized the conditions offered German immigrants. These conditions included freedom from taxes for thirty years, a loan to pay transportation to Russia, and freedom from military service. It was the third of these three stipulations that later caused trouble, for the amount of time was specified as *na vyak*, which is an ambiguous term meaning a long period of time—a hundred years, five hundred years, or forever. Captain von Kotzer and his staff were successful in inducing about eight thousand families, about twenty-five thousand Germans, to migrate to Russia under these terms between 1763 and 1767. By 1768 these people had founded 104 colonies along the banks of the Volga and Karaman rivers; they lived in Russia for over a century. At first they found the life very hard, especially as they were mostly artisans rather than farmers and had little experience with agriculture life, and they were also terrorized by the fierce, nomadic Kirghiz tribesmen; but during their second decade in Russia they became reconciled to their life. They had little contact with the native inhabitants, for whom they felt contempt, and retained their German culture and traditions—songs, recipes, proverbs, etc.—throughout their stay in Russia.

In 1871 Czar Alexander II issued an edict limiting the exemption from military service of the Germans in Russia to ten more years. This does not seem to have caused much stir among the people, and they apparently were not even aware of it until later. Then in 1874 the Russian government passed a military law, making all men between



the ages of sixteen and forty-five liable for six years of military service. Although the sources of Volga German history do not make this point, evidently what happened was that the people had considered themselves perpetually immune from military service, while the Czar's government felt that the original promise made by Catherine the Great had been fulfilled by a century of immunity. Be this as it may, the actual induction of some of their young men into the Russian army greatly alarmed the Germans in the Volga region. Their objection stemmed from several reasons; most important to those who were Catholics, which includes those who later emigrated to Ellis County, was that while serving in the Russian army, which was, of course, predominantly Orthodox, it would be impossible for them to attend Catholic religious services.

Representatives of the various communities met to discuss the problem, and it was felt that the only solution was for the Germans to leave Russia. According to the terms of the Czar's original edict of 1871, they could leave before 1881 without forfeiting their property. One of the Germans, Balthasar Brungardt, had attended a college or seminary in Saratov in 1860-64 and had, while there, heard lectures on geography by a Professor Stelling, who had been born in California. Brungardt urged the group to migrate to America. A group of delegates was sent to tour the United States; it reported that the climate and soil in Nebraska and Kansas were much like those in southern Russia. The first group of emigrants left in 1875 and went to Topeka, where they were met by an agent of the Kansas Pacific Railroad, Adam Roedelheimer, who persuaded them to settle on land belonging to the Kansas Pacific in Ellis and northern Rush counties. This first group, which numbered about 150 families, filed claims at Liebenthal, three miles south of the Ellis County border in Rush County.

Liebenthal, by the way, was the name of one of the villages in Russia from which the people had come; it was on the Karaman river and had been founded in 1859 by people from the other villages who felt the need for more land. The personnel of this first group was not wholly from Liebenthal, Russia, but included people from six other villages as well. The Volga Germans in Ellis County come from nineteen Russian villages and gave their new communities the names of the localities from which they came. Liebenthal was in the *Wiesenseite*, as it was known; that is, on the meadow side, or east bank, of the Volga. The second group of colonists was also from the *Wiesenseite*, in fact from a village on the banks of the Volga itself; they came predominantly from Katharinenstadt, Russia, which had been one of the first German villages in Russia, dating from 1765, and founded the town of Catherine in Ellis County in the month after the organization of Liebenthal. The third community, also in Ellis County, was founded

within a month after Catherine; this was Herzog, named for another community on the banks of the Karaman near its juncture with the Volga. The original Herzog antedated even Katharinenstadt, having been founded in 1764. Herzog was established half a mile north of the English settlement at Victoria. As time passed the English failed and left, while the German-Russians prospered and grew; finally the two towns grew together, and the name Victoria, established by the railroad, is given to the entire community, which is now wholly Volga German. Because it is the only one of these communities which is on the railroad, it is also the largest, with a population of about a thousand people.

These three communities were all begun in the spring of 1876. Later that summer Pfeifer was organized by immigrants who came chiefly from Pfeifer, Russia, but also from three other villages which, like Pfeifer, were in the *Bergseite*—that is, on the mountain side, or west bank, of the Volga. Pfeifer is the only community whose inhabitants came from the *Bergseite*. The largest group of Volga Germans to immigrate, consisting of 108 families, arrived in Ellis County in 1877. These settled in Munjor and Schoenchen. Munjor was named for Obermonjou, Russia, and Schoenchen for an identically named village. Both were in the *Wiesenseite* along the east bank of the Volga; Obermonjour had been founded in 1766 and Schoenchen in the following year. The immigration to the United States came to an end in 1878. Exactly ten years later a group of men, dissatisfied with life in Kansas, left to investigate conditions in Brazil, but decided to return after two years in that country.

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