

Immigrants' journey from Germany to Russia to Sheboygan

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When seven tired travelers ended their journey at the Sheboygan railroad depot in 1892, there was no fanfare. Like other immigrants before them, those three men, three women and a boy from half a world away simply got off the train and set out to find a new place they could call home. By and large, the city of Sheboygan did not notice that the first Germans from Russia had just arrived.

American German Russians are people descended from the hardy souls who left several areas of Germany to settle in Russia during the eighteenth century, and whose offspring later came to the United States. The German settlers became known as Volga Germans or Volga Deitsch, because they lived along Russia's Volga River.

From 1764 to 1767, at the same time people from all over Europe were settling British colonies in America, 23,000 Germans emigrated to a small area of Russia along the Volga River. They went at the invitation of Russia's German-born princess, Catherine the Great.

Catherine sought to modernize Russia. In order to industrialize, settle and cultivate her growing empire, the empress needed hardworking farmers and skilled artisans. These could be found in more progressive European countries, mainly in Germany. On December 2, 1762, she issued a royal manifesto calling for German immigrants.

This manifesto was a detailed document filled with lofty promises, including offers of free transportation to Russia and a settlement site, freedom to settle anywhere in the new country, freedom to practice any trade or profession, free land to future farmers, freedom from customs duties for imported property, interest-free loans for ten years, tax exemptions for up to thirty years, local self-government, freedom of religion, exemption from military service for immigrants and their descendants, and in case anyone had a change of heart, the freedom to return to one's native country.

This pie in the sky document reached the eyes and ears of many a common peasant and artisan who longed to own land and were tired of high taxes, religious persecution, and war. They rose to the cause and left Germany.

From 1764 to 1767, a total of 104 colonies were founded along the Volga River near Saratov. Immigrants to the Volga region came from the German duchies of Hessen, and the Rhineland, and from the southwestern German states of Baden, Württemberg, Alsace and the Palatinate.

A difficult journey, often taking a whole year, brought colonists to Saratov, a frontier outpost of about 10,000 inhabitants, located on the western shore of the Volga River. The newcomers were outfitted with a few supplies in Saratov, then taken to designated areas on either side of the Volga River. They expected to find houses awaiting them, as had been promised. Instead, the by-now disappointed Germans were forced to seek temporary shelter underground, in Erdhütten (earthen huts) or in dugouts called zemlyanky (semma-lenka). In some instances it took two or

three years for building materials to arrive. However, one by one the German villages on the Russian frontier were settled in those first four years. Forty-four were located on the western bank of the Volga, commonly called the Bergseite (hill side). Sixty more were on the eastern Wiesenseite (meadow side). Five villages were founded in 1764, eleven in 1765, twenty in 1766, and sixty-eight in 1767.

Though the stoic eighteenth-century pioneers settled into their new homes, within 100 years, many began leaving the settlements their ancestors had built.

Despite additional land grants in 1840, the growing German population along the Volga faced a shortage of farm land. There were crop failures in the late 1870s and droughts in 1885, 1889, 1892 and 1898. During the same period, the special privileges accorded by Catherine the Great were cast aside.

Meanwhile, there was news that in the United States, cheap land was available to anyone who would farm it - a result of the Homestead Act (1862) and completion of the first transcontinental railroad (1869). German farmers from Russia took advantage of this opportunity and settled all over the Midwest.

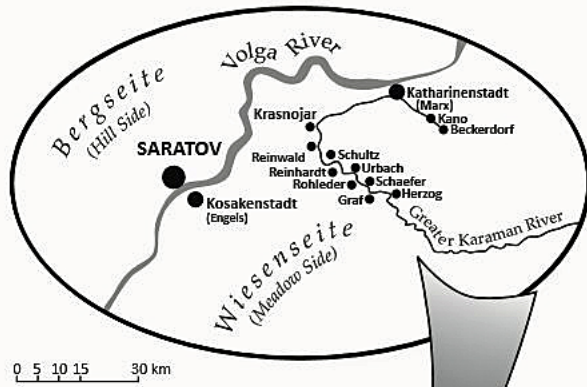
Immigration to Sheboygan did not come about until 1892, with the arrival of that small group from Reinwald, Russia. Gottlieb Maerz, with his wife, and their young son (whose names are unrecorded); two cousins, both named Henry Jurk; and the cousins' wives (also unnamed) disembarked at New York on April 7, 1892. They sought out a Lutheran pastor at the harbor, and he advised them to go to Sheboygan, Wisconsin, where there were a good many Germans.

Soon a steady stream of Landsmänner, or fellow countrymen, arrived between 1908 and 1913, and some came as late as the early 1920s. Just to make the journey, many depended on loans from relatives and friends, who preceded them. Most came from the Wiesenseite villages of Reinwald and Schäfer, but a good number of emigrants from other villages on both sides of the Volga River also settled in Sheboygan.

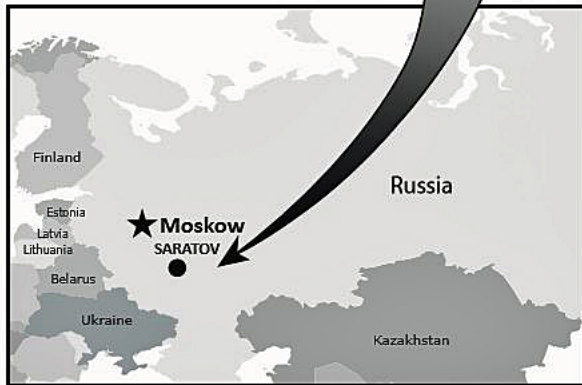
Now, one hundred twenty-four years after that arrival, members of Volga German community will celebrate and pay homage to the hundreds of Volga Germans who followed that first small group of pioneers.

Dr. Brent Mai, past Director of the Center for Volga German Studies at Concordia University in Portland, Oregon will present Celebrating 250 Years of Volga German History on September 24 and September 25, 2016. The Sheboygan County Historical Museum is hosting the two-day event. This fascinating series of seminars will include a celebration of the 250th Anniversary of the establishment of the colonies of Reinwald, Schäfer, Schulz, Krasnoyar, Grimm, Bauer, Basel, Niedermanjou and so many others. Stay tuned for more information in the Sheboygan Press. Or go to schrc.org or sheboyganmuseum.org for more information. The seminar is open to the public. There is a small fee for attendance.

This article is the first of three parts on local Volga German history. Much of the information from all three columns comes from work and research done by Emma Hermann Thieme and Frederick Zitzer, champions of VG history.



Map of German Russian settlements along the Volga River in Russia



A traditional German Russian home in Niedermanjou, Russia.



Christ Hicks, born December 14, 1894 in Niedermanjou, Russia. Emigrated to Sheboygan.



Church in Reinwald, Russia, home to many of Sheboygan's German Russian families.



Frederick and Christina Gross Richter of Sheboygan. The Richter family of Gorlitz, Saxony moved from Germany to Russia in 1766 as part of Catherine the Great's migration. They arrived in Oranienbaum, a Russian gathering place, by the ship, Mercury. The family first lived in Urbach, then settling in the colony of Schulz. Frederick, born in 1861, married Christiana Gross in Russia. Christiana died in Germany in 1922 on their way to America. Shortly thereafter Frederick came to America. He was the fifth generation to live in Schulz.