Researching a Century of Lives
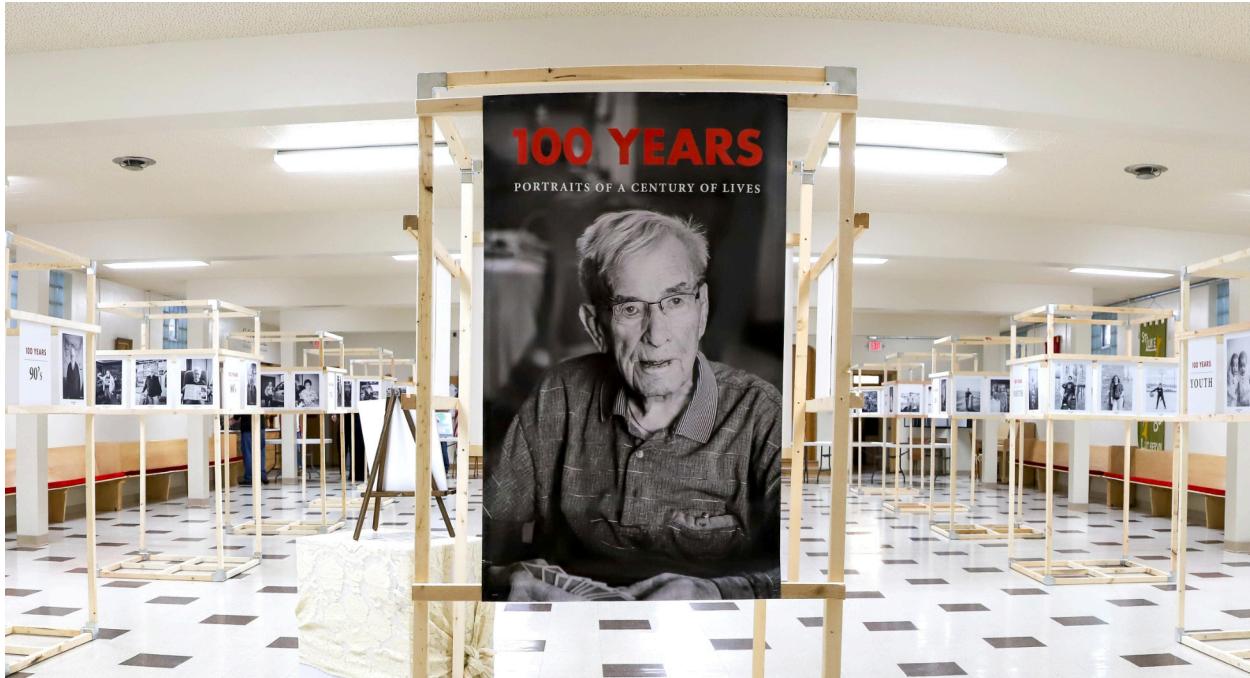
View of the *100 Years – Portraits of a Century of Lives exhibit*. Gideon Boschee (1917-2025) was the oldest subject at 105 years when his portrait was taken. His ancestors came from the colonies of Kassel and Glückstal in South Russia (Ukraine and Moldova today).

Portrait photographer: Stacy Just. Event photographer: Cole Craven Photography.

This year I had the pleasure of doing the genealogy research for a portrait exhibit that was a part of the 100th Sauerkraut Day celebration in the little town of [Wishek, North Dakota](#).

The *100 Years – Portraits of a Century of Lives* exhibit was first shown in 2023 at Wishek's quasquicentennial celebration. The exhibit was conceived and produced by Wishek native and accidental New Yorker, Sandy Fiechtner. After she had seen a black and white portrait exhibit on a rainy day in Berlin in March 2020, she knew wanted to do something similar to honor her hometown in North Dakota.

One hundred residents were chosen to be subjects, aged zero to 105. All walks of life were represented from the town's population of approximately 922. The portraits made up a snapshot in time of everyday people, contributors to the community from the past, present, and hopefully future. They were not chosen because of their pioneer ties to Wishek. In fact, no thought about genealogy was given to the choice of subjects at all…until this year.

For the 100th anniversary of Sauerkraut Day in October 2025, Fiechtner wanted to show the exhibit again and include some genealogy and geography that focused on the German population. She had in mind a map showing where the subjects' families came from. The goal was to thread the needle on connections to the subjects' immigrant past, especially to those with Black Sea German ancestry, those who left the Russian Empire

around the turn of the 20th century. Michael Miller, Director Emeritus of the [Germans from Russia Heritage Collection (GRHC)](#) at North Dakota State University, connected us. I loved the idea and knew I could help. It has turned out to be one of my favorite collaborations.

Twins Cassie and Chloe Horner (daughters of James Horner and Kelsey Meidinger) were the youngest subjects. They share the ancestral colonies of Kassel and Glückstal with Gideon Boschee, the oldest subject. Portrait photographer: Staci Just

The area around Wishek was homesteaded by Germans from Russia beginning in 1885 before the Soo Line Railroad arrived and platted the town in 1898. On November 29th of that same year, the new town's post office opened. Wishek and the area around it was a part of what one newspaper called "the Russian-German settlement" when reporting about a wedding that took place there in 1894. The 100 Years exhibit took place this year in the basement of St. Luke Lutheran Church, founded in 1905 by 20 of those early Wishek families. From its very start, Wishek has always been proud of its German by way of Russia heritage.

Of those subjects for whom the research was completed in time for the exhibit, ancestral locations were uncovered in 20 modern countries on three continents: Europe, North America, and Africa. Included are some locations from the original British colonies of North America (now the U.S. but back then the British Empire). The majority of the subjects' ancestral homelands are in present-day Ukraine and Moldova, in the former provinces of Bessarabia, Kherson, Ekaterinoslav, and Taurida, collectively known as the Black Sea region or South Russia in the former Russian Empire.

Presented at the exhibit was a lightly modified map courtesy of the Germans from Russia Heritage Collection. It showed color-coded German enclaves with the Mother colonies of the Odessa and Bessarabia areas. A similar color-coded chart showed each of the subjects' ties to each of the enclaves. The majority were from German colonies in the Glückstal enclave, and the majority of those had ties to the colony of Kassel. Finally, binders were available at the exhibit that included pages for each subject describing their ancestral origins, a list of all of their ancestral locations, and the earliest known year their ancestors immigrated to the United States.

Michael M. Miller, Director Emeritus of the Germans from Russia Heritage Collection, gave opening remarks at the exhibit about the Black Sea Germans and the war in Ukraine.

Exhibit attendees view the map of German villages in Ukraine. Map courtesy of the Germans from Russia Heritage Collection at North Dakota State University Libraries in Fargo.

Row 1: Sandy Fiechtner, exhibit producer; Diane (Meidinger) Glas.

Row 2: Wanda (Herr) Strandquist with the portrait of her late mother, Frances (Kogler) Herr (1928-2024); Albert Sayler; Kaden Bies with his uncle and portrait subject Brandon Bies.

Row 3: Yvonne Englehart; Krew Just, son of Paul Just and Staci McPherson; Vernell (Schlenker) Lehr with her husband Jerry Lehr.

Row 4: Ruby Ackerman with the portrait of her late mother, Luella (Ulmer) Ackerman (1923-2025); Lee Aipperspach and Michael M. Miller; Maude (Meidinger) Fiechtner.

Portrait photographers of the *100 Years*: Doris Bettenhausen, Shelly Glaesman, Staci Just, Twila Nies.

Event photographer: Cole Craven Photography, Bismarck, ND.

Cleo Boschee, a subject of the exhibit, stands by his portrait. Boschee sat down with a group of school children attending the exhibit and asked them, "Who knows where Ukraine is?" It's never too early to start teaching the next generation where their roots lie. Portrait photographer: Twila Neis

What happens next with the exhibit is to be determined sometime next year.

The remainder of of this article goes into the research, analysis, and more detailed findings. These were what was distilled into what was shown on the map, chart, and binders at the exhibit. If you are a genealogy nerd, or just casually interested, read on.

One Hundred Family Trees in Four Months

My thoughts going into the research: Damn, this is a lot of family trees and not a lot of time. But, hey, I was game.

I recognized some of the subjects' surnames, and I am distantly related to several of them. Both sides of my family homesteaded southwest of Wishek. I had a good idea where other surnames originated in Russia, and some surnames were not Germans from Russia. I would do as much as I could in the time that was available, focusing on the Germans. This way the results could be analyzed and the signage made for the

exhibit in time for Sauerkraut Day. It was a very tight schedule with other commitments I had through the summer.

All I needed to do was the research. The best approach, I decided, was to do a simple, direct-line pedigree for each person. Starting with the oldest person and working toward the younger subjects. I would have to research back as far as necessary to find the names of the first immigrant ancestors, where they were born or resided before immigrating, and the year they arrived in the United States.

This involved following the paper trail backwards finding the parents, the grandparents, the great-grandparents, the great-great-grandparents, the great-great-great-grandparents, etc. The number of direct ancestors theoretically grows exponentially with each generation. This is provided there isn't pedigree collapse. This occurs, for example, through cousin marriages with common ancestors and results in fewer ancestors. Another way is through endogamy, intermarriage within a small population for generations, such as within the isolated German groups in Russia who only married other Germans of the same faith: Catholic, Lutheran, Mennonite.

<div align="center">

2 parents

4 grandparents

8 great-grandparents

16 great-great-grandparents

32 great-great-great-grandparents

64 great-great-great-great-grandparents

128 great-great-great-great-grandparents

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And so forth.

For Germans from Russia, this is less daunting than it looks. With the exception of an early group led by Ludwig Bettie that immigrated from the Beresan colonies to Kelleys Island in Lake Erie near Sandusky, Ohio in the late 1840s, Black Sea Germans did not began immigrating to North America until 1872, only 153 years ago.

The Data Collected

Assignment: Here's the name of a person, their age, and where they lived two years ago. Tell me where their immigrant ancestors came from and when they arrived in the U.S.

Genealogist: Ooooh, fun!

Based on the provided information above, I collected the following for each subject:

1. Parents' names, birth & death dates, birth places if outside the U.S.

2. Grandparents' names, birth & death dates, birth places if outside the U.S.

3. Great-grandparents' names, birth & death dates, birth places if outside the U.S.

And so forth.

I continued going back generation by generation for every family line until I found the immigrant ancestors for as many lines as possible and their year of immigration.

All the places were recorded with their historical names and their current names along with their GPS coordinates. I used my own map ([Germans from Russia Settlement Locations map](#), such a handy tool!) for locations of the German colonies and Google Maps for every other place. And then I mapped all of the places to see what patterns emerged. I arranged the surname data in various ways to see if any other patterns emerged.

Initially, I collected German origins, but I abandoned that trail as it was taking a lot of time to verify. Many subjects had German origins but not all of them.

Also initially, I consolidated all the surnames for each place in South Russia. But it became apparent that, while it was interesting to genealogists, this was way too much information for an exhibit. It was likely that subjects would not even recognize some of the surnames that were in their tree. I tend to do this, collect more information than is needed. I never know everything I might need going into a projects, and I don't like having to do the same work twice.

The Paper Trail

The paper trail, if you're unfamiliar with the term, consists of all the official documents about our lives that are created throughout our lives and of those who came before us, taking us back generations. Some of these documents are created about us without our input. Others we create ourselves. We follow the paper trail from birth to death. Even if we live unassuming lives and never post on social media, depending on the country in which you live, there is a wealth of public information created about us that is freely obtained.

[Ancestry.com](#) (free at many public libraries) has between 6,000 to 7,000 thousand databases of historical records, including records from around the world. Despite my love-hate relationship with Ancestry, it is still by far the largest and easiest to use collection of databases of genealogically relevant material.

Our own Germans from Russia community in North America has been documenting and preserving our ancestral history through translations and indexes of all kinds of records, the most important from Russia: church records of birth/baptisms, marriages, and deaths/burials (BMDs for short); tax records (known as "revision lists" in Russia, often referred to as censuses), names lists, lists of colonists living outside their colonies

(who lived where and when); passports and transport lists (arrivals in Russia, with whom, when, and where they arrived, what they carried with them, etc. Websites such as [Black Sea German Research (BSGR)](#) and [Odessa3](#) have this information available for free. Libraries, historical societies, and research association such as the [Germans from Russia Heritage Collection (GRHC)](#) at North Dakota State University Libraries in Fargo, the [Germans from Russia Heritage Society (GRHS)](#) in Bismarck, and the [Glückstal Colonies Research Association (GCRA)](#) have volumes of research materials and family histories that are vital to researchers of the Black Sea region.

I decided to do the research from scratch myself using primary documents and translations of those documents rather than using pedigrees people had posted online somewhere. Online family trees are 100% well-intentioned but often not well-sourced. I am guilty of this myself. I would have to verify the trees, which meant reproducing the research. I did not use AI for the same reason; reproducing the research to verify it would take too much time. AI also requires the subjects to be very, very dead for a long time—the deader the better—in order to get the most accurate results, which would still have to be verified.

The older subjects (most of whom were still very much alive) were the easiest to research. Using their name and birth year and Wishek as the place they lived, the subjects showed up on the 1950 census and earlier censuses, either with a spouse or with parents. Their parents each took me back another generation, to another census, to another set of parents (multiplying exponentially with each generation) and so forth. All along, I was looking at the place/country of birth in the censuses, and as soon I saw one that was not in the U.S., then the records I looked for changed.

The census field that noted year of arrival or number of years in the U.S. gave me a target year (not always correct) when looking at ship manifests for passenger records. Did this person travel with a spouse, or with parents, or alone? What was the last residence recorded on the passenger list? Even if an exact place was not indicated, at least the immigration year was verified. Sometimes the hardest part was finding and confirming the last place of residence or birth place.

"Odessa," "Russia," "South Russia," "Cherson," "Bessarabia," "Krim"were all noted as last residences. Sometimes there were specific villages noted with some very creative spellings. Whoever recorded the information at the ports wrote down what they thought they heard the immigrant say. Some of them were vague on purpose. Passenger manifests that originated in ports in Europe are generally more useful as the German language was understood, but there were not many available for the subjects of this project. Also some of the manifests were from the early 1870s and before (for non-GRs), which are perfunctory at best with little to no genealogically relevant information.

Other records I used to find and confirm ancestral villages:

1. Naturalization records. Here we had the German immigrant reporting the information himself (or herself) in person about themselves and their immediate family, including the birthplaces of all the children in the family who would inherit their citizenship from the male declaring the intent. Anyone (male or female) who made a homestead claim had to file their first papers (intent to become a U.S. citizen), and

before they proved up had to have their second papers or their naturalization certificate.

2. Military draft records for WWI and WWII. In these records, the male immigrant or naturalized citizen reported the information himself in person. The Old Man's Draft in 1941 (men aged 18-64) sometimes had a more specific place of birth, sometimes with the new name of the country of birth (Romania for Bessarabia, for example).

3. Death certificates. The place of birth is generally reported by a family member as the informant. Sometimes the informant is unreliable, but more often these were very specific even if the person's birth place was vague in all previous records. This felt very German to me, making sure that the last record of a person's life was accurate.

4. Obituaries. The obituaries that appeared in German-language newspapers at the turn of and the early 20th century were very useful, even though they were in German in the old Fraktur typeface. The [American Historical Society of Germans from Russia (AHSGR)](#) donated a large collection of these obituaries to the Family History Library many years ago, and they appear in searches both [FamilySearch (free)](#) and Ancestry. That collection is static and no longer being updated. GRHS also has an active [obituary collection/project](#) focused on Black Sea Germans.

5. Baptism records from Russia. On occasion, this was the only place I could find a specific place of birth/baptism. BSGR was the primary place I looked for translations of these records. There is a constant stream of translated church records from villages in Black Sea region being added to the website by volunteers from all over the the world. A few years ago, all of the films containing the Glückstal colonies parish records were reviewed, updated with additions and corrections, and were made available for [free on BSGR](#). These translations were very relevant to this particular project.

For those subjects born in the 1950s and later, U.S. Census records are not available but some birth and marriage records are. Newspaper articles in online newspaper archives such as [Newspapers.com](#) are useful for announcements of life events. An engagement or wedding announcement (think 1950s-1980s) that includes the names of the bride and groom's parents, who may have been born before 1950, were stepping stones backwards toward those older censuses.

Also still very useful today are obituaries. They have become more detailed in the United States in recent years. The obsession with genealogy in this country has prompted family members to list out generations of relations and people by name in obituaries, and sometimes where their ancestors immigrated from. What used to be short and sweet printed in a newspaper as the final punctuation at the end of a life is now extended and hosted on funeral home websites and duplicated on sites like [Find a Grave](#).

Findings of Interest with a Little History

One subject was a recent immigrant.

A few of the subjects' parents were their immigrant ancestors.

Not all of the subjects were German. This was not an expectation or a surprise.

Not all of those subjects who were German had descended from Germans in the Black Sea region. Again, not a surprise. There were lots of Germans from Germany who had immigrated to the U.S. in the mid-1800s and earlier. At least some of them moved west to purchase land and to claim homesteads when land became available through the Homestead Act, the same incentive that Germans from Russia came for.

Most of the subjects who were descended from Black Sea Germans were connected to the colonies in the Glückstal enclave. And of those, most were connected to the colony of Kassel. This was not a surprise. Publications by the GCRA, which for many years was under the leadership of Wishek-native Dr. Homer Rudolf, include many articles written by Rudolf and others about the ties between Kassel and Wishek.

One subject's ancestors came from the colony of Alt-Danzig, one of the oldest German colonies in South Russia founded in 1787 by Germans from West Prussia (mostly Poland with a bit of Germany today). The early German colonization of areas in what would become South Russia came under the still-open invitation of Catherine the Great from 1763. The vast majority, however, came under the 1804 invitation of Tsar Alexander I.

None the subjects had ties to Volga Germans or to Russian Mennonites in the Black Sea area. Going into this, I didn't think there would be, but I was hoping to be surprised. I was not surprised.

One subject's ancestors came from a colony I was unfamiliar with, Israelofki, or Israilewka as I found it to be called on maps. It was a Jewish colony that had German model farmers from the mid-1800s onward. Looking for it inspired further research and eventually a post about the history of the Jewish Agricultural Colonies.

Multi-generational families immigrated to the U.S., including some first born in South Russia (1820s). It was a surprise to me that the great and great-great-grandparents of the older subjects immigrated to the U.S., too. Sometimes they came with the younger couples and sometimes later. Germans from Russia engaged what was termed in the 1930s by scholars as "chain migration." It is a very well documented part of our history, although, presently, the term carries negative, anti-immigrant connotations in the U.S.

The earliest arrival of a subject's ancestors to the U.S. was to the area around Yankton, Dakota Territory (South Dakota) in 1872. This was the very beginning of the the chain migration I wrote about above. Upon hearing of the situation in Russia after the revocation of the German colonists' status in 1871, Ludwig Bettie of the Sandusky, Ohio settlement went back to Russia to convince his German friends and relatives that the U.S. was a viable place to immigrate to. After the arrival of first group of Black Sea Germans in 1872, scouts were sent out to areas to find land, which they did in Dakota Territory, and sent word back to Russia what they found.

One subject's ancestor's first-hand story was printed in the newspaper Dakota Freie Presse in 1911. The editor, F. W. Sallet, ran a series of these first-hand stories titled "Contributions Toward a History of the German-Russian Settlements in North America." GRHS as published translations of all of these stories that ran in several issues of their journal Heritage Review. Digitized copies of the newspaper published in

Aberdeen, South Dakota are available on Newspapers.com for the years 1909-1916, which contain the original articles.

One subject's ancestors appear in well-know photographs taken in November 1940 by the Farm Security Administration and are a part of the collections at the Library of Congress.

A few had immigrant ancestors that traced back to the original 13 colonies of the British Empire in North America: the provinces of Maryland, North Carolina, and Virginia, today the modern states are Kentucky, Maryland, North Carolina, and West Virginia.

There was a story (unverified but fun) that one subject's ancestor was a Tory (a British loyalist) who fled to Canada after choosing the wrong side in the Revolutionary War. That ancestor's descendant reportedly immigrated to the U.S. years later and purchased land in North Dakota.

The immigrant ancestors of the subjects came from places in 20 modern countries to the United States.
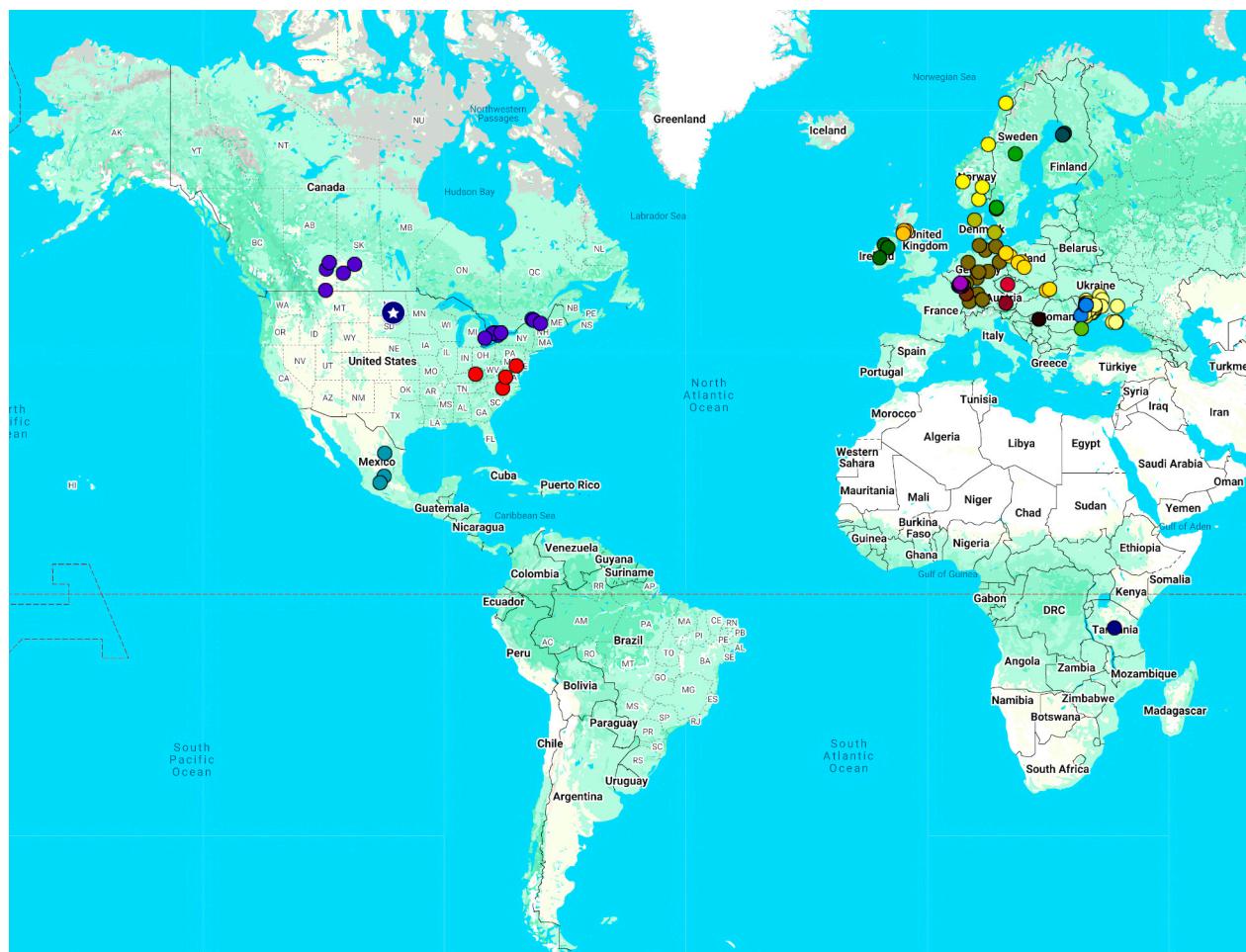
The world to Wishek.

Germany (16 locations), Canada (13 locations), Luxembourg (8 locations), Poland (7 locations), Norway (5 locations), Sweden (4 locations), U.S. (former British Colonies, 4 locations), Ireland (3 locations), Mexico (3 locations), Scotland (3 locations), Denmark (2 locations), Finland (2 locations), Austria (1 location), Czech Republic (1 location), France (1 location), Serbia (1 location), Tanzania (1 location).
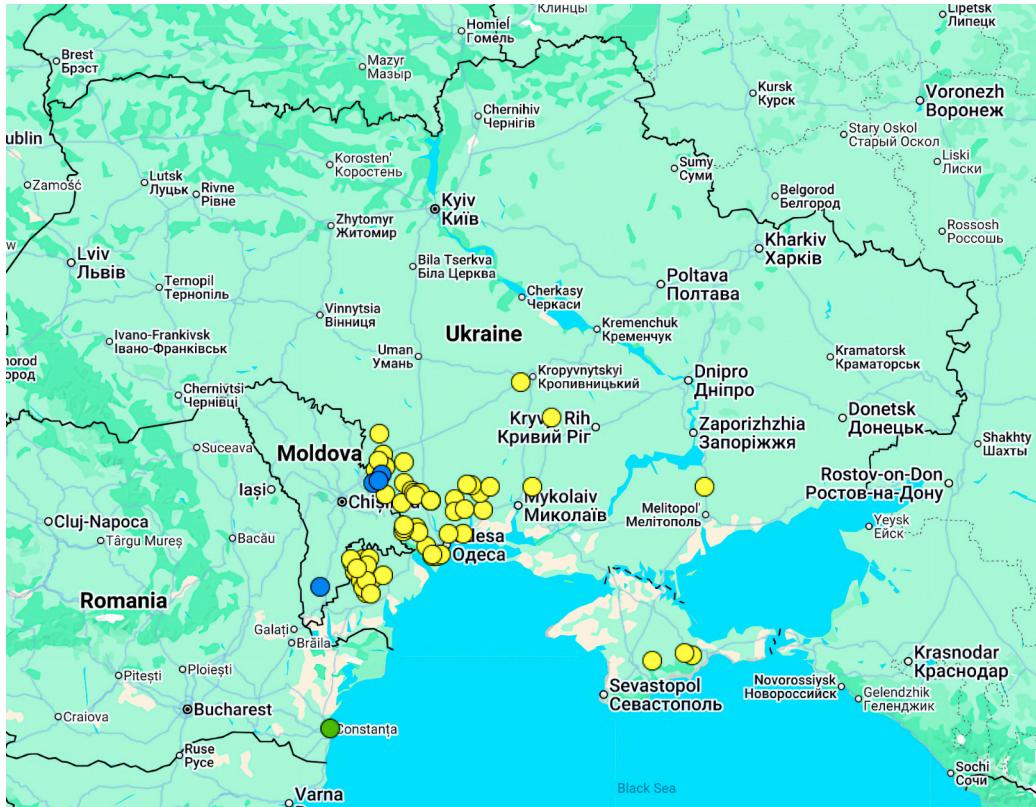
Black Sea Germans to Wishek.

Ukraine (59 locations): Alexanderfeld (Liebental enclave), Alexanderhilf (Liebental enclave), Alt-Danzig (Kherson), Alt-Elft (Bessarabia), Alt-Posttal (Bessarabia), Annental (Liebental enclave), Beresina (Bessarabia), Borodino (Bessarabia), Dennewitz (Bessarabia), Elsass (Kutschurgan enclave), Fontal (Glückstal enclave), Freudental (Liebental enclave), Friedenstal (Bessarabia), Friedenstal (Glückstal enclave), Grossliebental (Liebental enclave), Güldendorf (Liebental enclave), Heilbrunn (Crimea), Helenental (Liebental enclave), Hoffnungsburg (Beresan enclave), Hoffnungsfeld (Glückstal enclave), Hoffnungstal (Bessarabia), Hoffnungstal (Glückstal enclave), Israelofki (Jewish Agricultural Colonies), Johannestal (Beresan enclave), Johannesfeld (Liebental enclave), Kandel (Kutschurgan enclave), Karlsruhe (Beresan enclave), Kassel (Glückstal enclave), Katzbach (Bessarabia), Klein Neudorf (Glückstal enclave), Klein-Hoffnungstal (Glückstal enclave), Kleinliebental (Liebental enclave), Klöstitz (Bessarabia), Koscharka (Glückstal enclave), Kostheim (Prischib enclave), Kulm (Bessarabia), Leipzig (Bessarabia), Lichtental (Bessarabia), Mannheim (Kutschurgan enclave), Marienberg (Glückstal enclave), Neu-Berlin (Glückstal enclave), Neu-Danzig (Kherson), Neu-Elft (Bessarabia), Neu-Glückstal (Glückstal enclave), Neu-Kandel (Kutschurgan enclave), Neuburg (Liebental enclave), Neusatz (Beresan enclave), Paris (Bessarabia), Pawlowsky (Kherson), Plotzk (Bessarabia), Rohrbach (Beresan enclave),

Rosental (Crimea), Selz (Kutschurgan enclave), Sofiental (Glückstal enclave), Strassburg (Kutschurgan enclave), Tarutino (Bessarabia), Wilhelmstal (Beresan enclave), Worms (Beresan enclave), Zürichtal (Crimea).

Moldova (4 locations): Albota (Bessarabia), Bergdorf (Glückstal enclave), Glückstal (Glückstal enclave), Neudorf (Glückstal enclave).

Romania (1 location): Constanța (Dobrudscha)

Summary

This was some (not all) of the research behind the genealogy and geography addition to the 100 Years portrait exhibit. It was a fun project. Summarizing all of these details (my way, way, way too many details) into words and images appropriate for the exhibit was the task of the producer of this show, Sandy Fiechtner. The big picture Sandy was in New York. The detail Sandy was in Arizona. And the extended version of 100 Years – A Century of Lives somehow all came together in Wishek for three days in October for the 100th Sauerkraut Day celebration.

Here's to keeping our ancestors and our connections to Ukraine and other countries alive in everyday conversation. It's never too early to learn...or too late to remember.. .where your cradle stood.

By Sandy Schilling Payne
21 December 2025
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