

Foreign Homeland / Fremde Heimat by Justin Ehresman

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View of Neudorf

“Back Home” is a phrase many Germans from Russia know well. In my case, it means South Dakota, even though I am the second generation born in Washington State. To my great-grandparents “back home” or “Heimat” meant the steppes of then southern Russia, in what is now Ukraine, Moldova, and especially the break-away republic of Transnistria. After more than 20 years of research, I was finally able to make the trip to this region that all four of my great-grandparents called their Heimat.

Odessa, Ukraine

I now live in Berlin, Germany, so the trip to Odessa wasn't as dramatic as for those now living in the USA. Traveling with a native German, we spent four full days in Odessa staying at the Haus der Kirche, a guest house of the German Lutheran Church. We were warmly greeted and given lots of useful information, and immediately felt welcomed into the German community in Odessa. We attended the church services on Sunday, which were mostly in Russian, however. After the services, the pastor and several members of the congregation gave us tips on how to travel to Transnistria. Everyone had heard of the Glückstal villages. It was interesting talking in German to old-timer Herr Jungmeister, who hails from the Baltic German colonies originally.

There had been an exhibition on Bessarabian Germans in the Culture Center attached to the church. We just missed it, but were able to have a

look at many posters that were still hanging up on the ground floor.

Tiraspol, Transnistria

We left Odessa nervous, having heard many a horror story of border crossings into the rogue Transnistria. The trip went well and we managed to cross the border with minimal delays. The entire ride by marshrutka (mini-bus) took three hours to Tiraspol.

Tiraspol is the capital of Transnistria and may be of interest to those of us whose ancestors served in the Russian army in this region, as they were often stationed in Tiraspol and Bendery which is just 11 kilometers away. Bendery still has an imposing military presence.

Surely, much has changed since our families left the area. Transnistria has an extremely Russian feel to it, celebrating Vladimir Lenin, many aspects of socialism and communism with splashes of capitalism thrown in for good fun. Transnistria is not nearly as dangerous or frightening as many online reports would lead one to believe. Walking around the cities of Tiraspol and Bendery, we did not come across any signs of the German heritage of this region. Even in the regional museum located in central Tiraspol, there is nothing about the German colonists who once populated this area. The closest thing to anything German, is the portrait of Catherine the Great as you walk in the front door of the museum over a model of the original plan of the city.

Glückstal & Odessa, Transnistria

The next day, we hired a driver and interpreter to take us to Glückstal, aka Glinnaya/Glinnoye. We followed the Dniestr River north from Tiraspol to Grigoripol, the next largest town to the Glückstal colonies with about 11,000 inhabitants. We arrived in Glückstal and parked while we tried to figure out a plan of how to contact the village mayor. Within less than one minute, a local approached us and offered help. Another two minutes and we found ourselves in the village administration building. The building itself

seemed to have been built after WWII and even smelled like Soviet times. Upon the mention of Michael Miller, she smiled and asked where I was from. I explained my family was from the Dakotas and before that from the Glückstal Colonies. The mayor, Ms. Lydia Ivanova, made a phone call and informed us we would be able to stay the night at a local babushka's home.



Sitting in the mayor of Glückstal's office

The next stop was Neudorf itself. As we drove the nine kilometers from Glückstal to Neudorf, I looked out at the fields and the trees that lined the way and imagined my family working the land, toiling in the sun, harvesting the fruits and vegetables, day in and day out for 80 years. What would they have thought if they knew their descendants would be living in far away lands and their homeland would become the poorest region of the poorest country of Europe?



Entering Neudorf/Karmanovo

The old sign marking the entrance to Neudorf still stands, though the paint has completely faded and flaked off, making it impossible to see anything but rust. The new sign is simple and reads only

KARMANOVO. Standing on the edge of town, we saw fields with grazing cows and of course the Katzenbuckel (Cat's Hump) hill to the right of the main road. The hill itself is covered in trees which must have allowed for hunting opportunities and some building material and maybe a good place for youngsters to get into mischief.

Driving into the village along Hauptstrasse, the main street, it is apparent that most people here live very modest lives. A small minority of the homes had a car parked outside, perhaps just 5 percent, and we didn't see any cars that had been made since the Iron Curtain fell in 1990.

We walked around the church which now appears to be used as a Russian Orthodox church. As Carolyn Schott warned me years ago, the gates were locked and nobody seemed interested in helping us get in. There are no remnants of the cemetery that once stood near the church at all.



The church in Neudorf

The Ehresmann house marked on my map from the 1940s is now an empty lot, unfortunately.



Justin showing where the Ehresmann house once stood

Walking down Hauptstrasse, we spotted a derelict building, more archeological ruins than anything. According to the old map, it must have been the house Wilhelm Hieb. The layout is typical of Neudorf, a long, narrow house with the short side flanking the street. There was also a cellar with an over-ground door and an outbuilding opposite the front of the home. Since the building is falling apart, the construction materials are easily seen: sod bricks that made up the original construction with a few wooden beams over doorways and windows and along the ceiling. Then there was a layer of limestone over the sod bricks, and finally stucco which had been whitened many times. A piece of limestone and sod broke away when I touched the wall. I bent down and, after examining it, decided to take a little piece of Neudorf to my current home, Berlin.



Colonist home in Neudorf

While examining the ruins, we were also being watched by several locals. Two men approached us and, through our interpreter, communicated that they knew Neudorf had been settled by Germans and that the Germans are their friends.

To celebrate this, one of the men pulled out a bottle of vodka and we all toasted to German-Transnistrian friendship! Each shot was followed by homemade cake and fresh apples. We tried to get some information about the buildings and history of the village. Unfortunately, by this time the men were a little more than tipsy and it proved difficult to understand all their musings. They were able to explain the way to the famed gravestone barn, however. With much convincing on the part of our interpreter, we were able to tear ourselves away from the welcoming committee and the second bottle of vodka that they insisted had to be drunk, this time in honor of the Orthodox Easter.



The Neudorf welcoming committee

We walked down the Kreuzgasse and crossed the Wassergrube, which is a manmade canal, now with little water and 15-foot high reeds. We came upon two very long barns with some goats and dogs wandering around the yard. We stood outside discussing whether one of them could be the gravestone barn when a man came out to offer us some help. I drew a picture of gravestones and a building with arrows to indicate that the gravestones had been used to construct the building. He immediately understood what we meant and opened a gate and led us down a path. We slipped under two fences and there it was.

One end of the long barn had dozens of gravestones clearly visible. After WWII, the newly resettled Ukrainians, Moldovans and Russians used the gravestones from the cemetery as building material. The majority of them ended up

in this barn it seems. Most of the stones were placed flat in the wall, making it impossible to read the inscriptions at all and only the decorative sides of the gravestones give any indication of what their original purpose had been. Several stones were, however, used in a way that leaves the inscription visible even though they are not very legible. It was quite a sad moment realizing that the markers of my ancestors were here in such a difficult to reach location. We thanked the man who insisted on drinking vodka with us. Instead we gave him some money to buy some vodka for himself and we presented him with a box of chocolate biscuits. He smiled from ear to ear and told us we were always welcome to come again.



The gravestone barn in Neudorf

We then decided to photograph as many of the homes along Hauptstrasse and the parallel street, Hiebegäßle, as possible. There are a few more homes that have fallen to ruin. I entered one of the homes and sketched the layout of the home. It appeared to have an entrance and four rooms altogether. Most of the homes along these streets are original German-built homes. Some

have had additions built, but the basic yard layout is clearly seen.

A curious elderly woman stopped us and we tried to communicate who we were and what we were doing. This was a difficult task as we had told our interpreter and driver to take a lunch break while we took photos. I think she understood what we were looking for and she began to point out houses she was sure were from the German settlers. She asked us many things we didn't understand and with my smattering of Russian, I explained my family had come from the village. She spoke like a waterfall, laughed, and even slapped me in the face once! She dragged us over to one of her neighbor's home and began shouting "Nyena! Nyena!" as she rattled the gate. Nyena, it seems, was not at home. Nevertheless, we thanked her for her time and gave her a box of chocolate biscuits to which she replied: "What is this? Chocolate?" and looked almost offended. She proceeded to wrap it in her apron though and gave me a good slap on the arm before sending us on our way.

We finished photographing Hiebegäßle up to the Kreuzgasse where the park is now located. As we walked back to the church, we noticed a couple of school girls walking down the street. We stopped them and one could speak a little English. We asked about the school for future contact and got the address and English teacher's name. Just as we were taking our leave, our friend from earlier approached us with big smiles and insisted that we stay with him and his wife for the night, or at least eat dinner and drink vodka at their home. This time it was very difficult to diplomatically refuse the invitation. Nonetheless, I will not forget the good intentions and the warm welcome we received from everyone we met in Neudorf.

We returned to Glückstal and the village administration office where the mayor was waiting for us. She took us over to the home of Sasha and Hala, who only speak Ukrainian but thanks to Google Translate (they have Internet!), we were able to communicate very well with each other. The mayor then arranged for us to meet the school director who opened up the local

museum in the school's basement and showed us many artifacts and let us examine them and take photos. We also saw the gifts that previous American Germans from Russia had left for the museum.

Next, we went to the church where a young man was waiting to let us in. Since religion was repressed in Soviet times, the church had been converted into a kind of dance club and meeting venue. The original ceiling that was topped by a dome had been covered up and religious artifacts, of course, were completely gone.



The church in Glückstal

We then walked around the village on our own and took a few more photos of cellars and walls in addition to German-built homes. We crossed the valley for which Glückstal is named (Glück=happy, tal=valley) and up the hill. All the while, images ran through my head of family members from Neudorf making the nine-mile trip to Glückstal to see the doctor at the *Spital*, or attend weddings of family members or just visit friends on Sunday after church.

Chisinau, Moldova

Our next stop was Chisinau in Moldova. As far as Black Sea German research is concerned, there is not much that we found that related directly. The museum of archeology and history is a good museum with several maps of Bessarabia from various times which do include the German colonies. The most interesting part was the exhibits which displayed typical everyday life in the 1800s and 1900s for the region. I had fun imagining my family using the household

appliances and trading with other ethnic groups. Otherwise, in Moldova itself, there is not much left of Bessarabian German history.

Kiev, Ukraine

We next travelled to Kiev, which is a bit out of the way for GR research, however. The National Museum of Ukrainian History gave us a general overview of the history of Ukraine, but did not make any reference to particular ethnic groups, especially not German colonists. The Famine Monument, however, did give information about the famines from 1921-1923 and again from 1931-1933. Many German colonists suffered through or even died during these manmade famines. The museum itself doesn't have any information in English, but you can take part in an English tour and there is an exhibition book in English which gives a lot of information about these tragedies.



The Famine Monument in Kiev

Freudental, Neuburg, Peterstal, Ukraine

After a few days in Kiev, we returned to Odessa to visit the village of Freudental, where members of my grandmother's Bitz family lived. The Bitz family home is, unfortunately, no longer there,

but many German colonists' homes are. We saw the church from outside and there is a memorial in Russian commemorating the founding of the German colony Freudental.



Founding plaque in Freudental

The next day, I ventured alone by marshrutka (minibus) to the village of Neuburg where my great-great-great-grandmother, Elizabeth Schäfer, was born and grew up. The village is about 45 minutes from Odessa and lies on the same road as Josephtal, Mariental, and Peterstal. The old church is still standing, albeit in derelict condition. It is located between the main marshrutka stop and the new church. The priest from the Russian church explained in Russian that the church was used as a school for a while before being turned into a club and now hasn't been used for many years. He went on to explain that a family in the village owns the land and building and they have the keys, but I didn't pursue trying to track them down.



The church in Neuburg

In Peterstal, the priest of the new Lutheran church speaks fluent English and knew a little about the history of the churches and cemeteries of Peterstal. The old German Lutheran church is now an Orthodox church. I was able to find it, in spite of the fact that the roads have changed quite a bit in Peterstal. As for the cemeteries, the Alter Friedhof now has apartment buildings on it and the Neuer Friedhof doesn't have any apparent German graves. There are, however, a few that are completely overgrown and the plaques have been removed. These graves could be from the colonists.



The church in Peterstal

On the way back to Odessa, passing through all the German villages, which are markedly different from the Ukrainian villages, I imagined those days when my great-grandparents played in these yards, worked in these fields, prayed in these churches, and lived in these homes. Traveling around the old Heimat is exciting, a little saddening, and definitely inspiring. This is no longer our home, but in a strange way I still feel an affinity to this region. This is my foreign Heimat.