

Germanness in North Bessarabia

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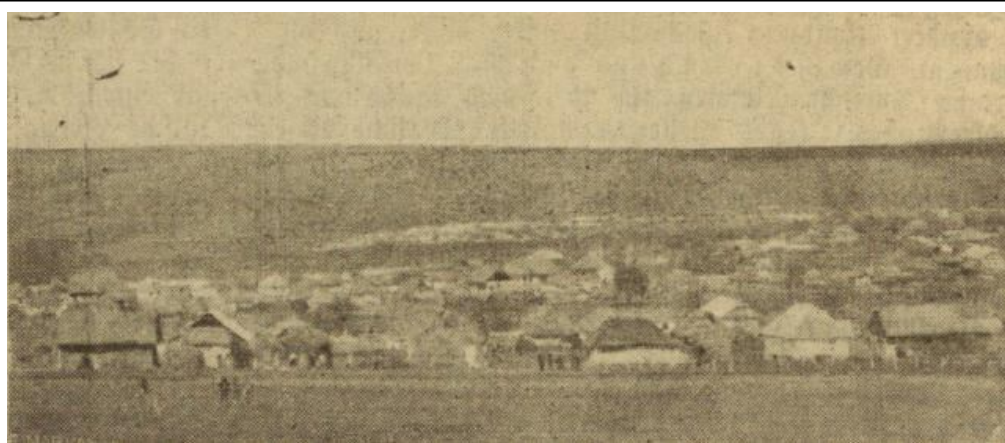
Germanness in North Bessarabia Historical Sketch by Hans Nimmerruh

It was only in recent years that we started to talk and write about the Germanness in the north of our homeland; until then, our northern Bessarabian ethnic brethren were left to their own fate, totally abandoned by the rest of the German world and, I would say, also forgotten.

At this point, three small dialectic isolated places come up for consideration: the communities of Rischkani, Neu-Strimba, and Scholtoi. All three communities are located in the Belzy District. The area is very hilly and crossed by the small stream Reul. The ground is almost pure black earth and rich in swamps. In terms of climate, the area is very unhealthy as fever is a permanent guest here. Neu-Strimba is the largest of the mentioned settlements and also the center of local Germanness with approximately 600 inhabitants (souls). It is located 17 kilometers [1 km=0.6214 miles] north of the chief district city of Belzy, on the right bank of the river Rent. Rischkant, the second settlement, formerly Rischkanowka, is about 15 kilometers further northwest, which has the same name. This settlement is actually to be regarded as the northernmost German community in Bessarabia; it has about 250 residents. The settlement of Scholtoi is located southwest of Neu-Strimba and is approximately 5 kilometers from the market town of Faleshti, a small Jewish town. The number of inhabitants of this community is 260 souls. All three communities belong to the Kischinev parish and are served by the pastor of that place. Before the war, there were two more settlements: Naslavtscha and Neu-Scholtoi. Naslavtscha was in the far north, in the Soroka District. The area is very picturesque. You can justifiably call it our Bessarabian Switzerland. It offers us everything on the small scale that is wonderful in the Middle Alps. Here, the blue, wide Dnjester River makes its way through the high picturesque mountains and washes around the area from three sides. Beautiful are the high, steep mountains, and decorated with dark forest; beautiful are the deep gorges with flowing waters; also the mountain streams and waterfalls are beautiful. Splendid views present themselves here to the eye. There was a time when happy, lively life displayed itself here; German words, German songs rang out, and the echo of the mountains repeated them. The hard-

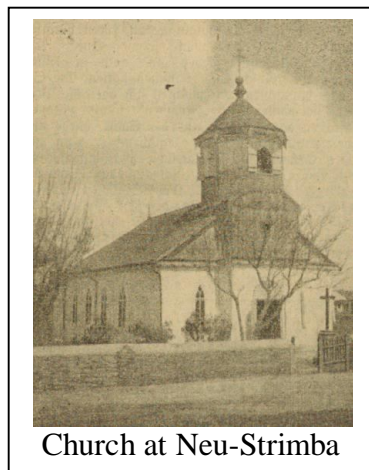
working community had built a handsome church, and this German corner of paradise has drawn to itself many people not entirely unknown to the world: Dr. Grüner, the painter and academician Popov, and others. But the lack of land and the disruptions of World War I forced the German settlers to leave this magnificent area. Only the small silent cemetery on the upper bank of the blue Dnjester still testifies to the disappeared German community. Neu-Scholtoi was close to Alt-Scholtoi (over the mountains) and disbanded as a result of the war (1915). The settlers of the community were tenant farmers, and as they were exiled to Siberia at the beginning of the world war, by the Russian authorities, as Austrian subjects, the lord of the manor simply let the small village be torn away. One still speaks of a community of Guijas, located south of Scholtoi, which led a very short existence as a result of less favorable lease conditions.

A real difficult fate took shape in the story of this unprotected and defenseless small group of Germans in northern Bessarabia. A small group of Germans of the Evangelical Lutheran denomination emigrated from southern Germany (Württemberg) to the vast Russian empire in the year 1812, which had assured the German colonists of a land of cultural support and privileges, to seek their fortune. They came first to the then Russian Poland, but the conditions and restless life that prevailed at that time in this province did not appeal to them and they traveled further to the south to join the great mass of German settlers in the Ukraine. Arriving in Kischinev, they obtained land through the then Colonist Committee, each family receiving 60 *dessjatin*, [1 *dess.* = 2.7 acres; 1.09 hectares] located near Tiraspol in the Kherson *Gouvernement*. During the time that they were in Kischinev, they met up with a Jew, a certain Rafalowitsch, who was a major tenant and at the same time also the managing director for the nobleman Krupensky. Krupensky was Governor of Bessarabia at that time and had large estates in the north (in the districts of Chotin and Soroka). He persuaded the Germans not to go to Tiraspol, but to move to the north of Bessarabia, where he promised them as much land as they desired. The negotiations were conducted by Rafalowitsch who had a sugar factory in the north and also a lot of land to rent out. This cunning Jew diverted the focus of the two settlers. On the part of the Germans, a certain Wilhelm Gross, who was the oldest man of the leader of the small group, led the negotiations. A fixed contract was now concluded between the mentioned nobleman and the Germans. According to this contract, every German, out of the goodness of the nobleman, could lease land at the cheapest prices, as much only as he was able to cultivate; in 100 years, what was



Panoramic View of Neu-Strimba

leased should then become the property of the Germans. The dirt-cheap rental price and other privileges lured the Germans to the north. Here, around 1820, they founded the colony of Naslawtscha, close to the Russian village which still bears the same name. The founders of the first colony in northern Bessarabian were: Gross, Rauch, Müller, Zeiler, Lange, Schmidt and Presser. The original contract with the nobleman was made with the leader Wilhelm Gross, who was also the first mayor of Naslawtscha. However, as the Germans got established in Naslawtscha and as things started to look up [*auf einen grünen Zweig gekommen waren*], Rasalowitsch began to initiate his work. Among the many promises of assurances whereby he first coaxed Mayor Wilhelm Gross in the original contract, he now messed with him. Then he started by vastly raising the rental prices. The Germans went with a complaint to the court, but, because they did not have a contract, they won nothing and increasingly became a plaything (*Spielball*) in the hands of the despotic landowner and the many exploiters. They had to suffer much and, for a long time, even experiencing to some extent serfdom with all its gloomy dark side; several older folks are still living today who took part in the so-called "*Pauschtschina*" Probst Faltn from Kishinev took the helpless people and obtained "*Nadjelland*" for them, specifically 4 *dessjatin* per farm. Due to a shortage of land, some of these people soon moved to the District of Belzy and founded the settlement of Neu-Strimba, separated from the Moldovan village of Grinauzy by a narrow street and about 8 kilometers from the large Moldovan settlement of Strimba. That happened in 1865. As founders of this community, the following families are to be considered: the Schmitt brothers (in Naslawtscha—Schmidt), Maier, Gross, Ritter, Lang, Nunweiler, Wagner, Steigmann, Müller and Zeiler. The Schmitt brothers and Nunweiler didn't come here from Naslawtscha. Nunweiler lived in the town of Belzy and the Schmitt brothers worked for the landlord. As it is said, these brothers were raw, rough and quarrelsome people, which hampered the blossoming of the young community in many ways. As the "*Nadjele*" was distributed here, it came to 9½ *dessjatin* per family. As German settlers, they could have easily had 60 *dessjatin* per family, but they did not want to have anything to do with so much land; also, at the time, at a dirt-cheap price, they could get as much lease land from landowner Sturdza, whose property they bordered. They also let themselves be registered as "subjects of the Tzar" (*Zarane*) and took the small farm acreages (*Bauernnadjele*). The Naslawtscha Germans were also registered as colonists, but, in time, lost their "*Nadjele*" (60



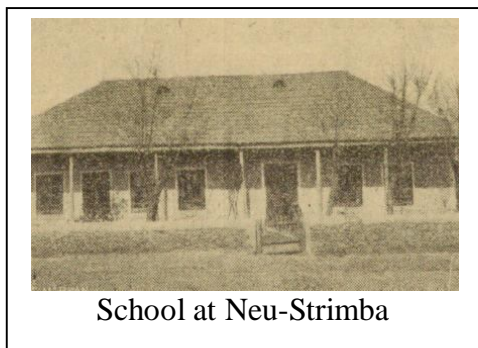
Church at Neu-Strimba

dessjatin each) near Tiraspol. It should also be mentioned about Naslawtscha that the community long remained without the service of a pastor and the sexton of the community (Ritter) performed the marriage ceremonies until Probst Fallin discovered the community in the upper north and joined them to the Kischinev Parish. The couples wedded by Sexton Ritter had to all once again appear before the Probst and be married a second time. As with the community of Naslawtscha, so Neu-Strimba also built a small church and maintained a sexton teacher (Busch, Ahl, Bartsche, Zürn, Bort, Hargesheimer), who focused very little on cultural things and dealt mainly with farming matters (church land and rented land!). As there were heavy drinkers among them (Bort) so the people gradually began to degenerate morally and

economically. Pastoral service, only once in a year, was not enough. The settlers were involved in drunkenness and quarrelsomeness. Their favorite occupation was wagon transport (hauling sacks); that is, they hauled the grain of the landlord to the railway stations; along the way, there

were so many Jewish taverns. Old Johann Schmidt from Neu-Strimba (previously from Naslawtscha) can tell some hair-raising stories about that time. “One kept punching away until blood squirted,” he said, “however, when Russians got involved, the Germans united to the man and then we went after the Russians. In any case, as we beat them up, we focus all of our anger on them.” And yet, they allowed themselves to be easily influenced by the environment and assimilation (blending, stabilization) would have taken place gradually, if the following circumstance had not occurred.

Around the middle of the last century, Germans, Evangelical Lutheran emigrants from Bukovina and Galicia, founded the villages of Alt-Scholtoi (1852), and later Neu-Scholtoi. In 1860, they established Rischkani (Rischkanowka) on the property of the nobleman Rischkanu. Numbered among the founders of Scholtoi are the families of Lai (actually Layy), Barron, Korfmann, Sehl, Gross, Presser and Rauch. The last three families also came from Naslawtscha. The fresh immigrants came into close contact with the first settlers, and because they were efficient and somewhat trained people, they brought a new spirit into the local German life. Also, many of these newcomers settling in Neu-Strimba were, for example, Bollen, Becker, Specht, Werth and others [known by no other name than “Austrians”]. These were also to be given acres (Nadjele), and even in larger proportions, as soon as they had completed the Russian transaction (Untertanschaft). Things were taking shape (*im Rollen*) and had the best of prospects, except that the Schmitt brothers got mixed up in the matter because they did not want to allow anything for the “strangers” and so they worked with all their might in opposition and, as a result, nothing came of it. And that is how things worked out at that time, Germans against Germans! Now there were 5 German communities in northern Bessarabia: Naslawtscha (colonists), Neu-Strimba



School at Neu-Strimba

(Tzarists), Alt-Scholtoi, Neu-Scholtoi and Rischkanowka. (Some Austrian subjects, some townsmen [*Bürger*], some *Meschtschane* [a third class between farmer and townsman]). These Germans were in close contact with the German communities in Upper Podolia (Kamenka, Krasnodaly). They had little or no idea about the Germans in southern Bessarabia. It was only in the later years that a few went down to the markets in Tarutino and Arzis to buy good horses. And as they came back home they told fabulous sounding

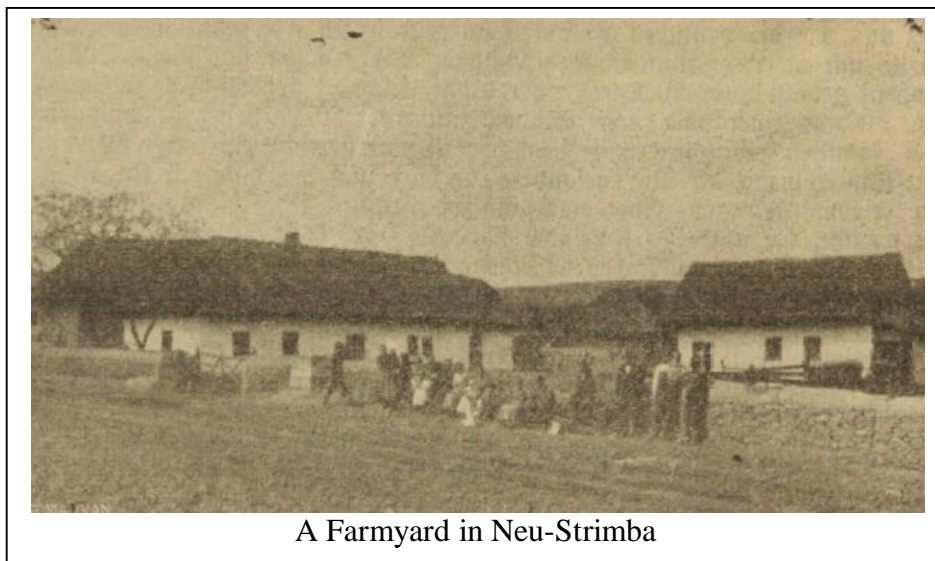
stories about the land of milk and honey (*Schlaroffenland*) down there, about the strong big brick houses and the stout giant people who lived only on bacon, sausage and ham.

So much of the past of the north Bessarabian Germans lets itself be misrepresented.

As for the villages themselves, they do not appear to be by far as splendid as the German colonies in the south. One recognizes them as German villages only by their planned layout. The houses are small, built of clay (*Lehm/Batzen*) and covered with straw or reeds (more rarely). In such houses, consisting of one or two rooms with a kitchen, two families often live together. A terrible poverty prevails in these communities. In the winter, when want especially presses forward, many a child is carried to the cemetery. But the families here have many children; there are only a few who have under 7-8 children.

The Germans in northern Bessarabia are altogether farmers (peasants/*Kleinbauern*). Craftsmen among them is a rarity. All the industry and trade is in the hands of the Jews, who, in this respect, do not allow any Germans to thrive. Most of the Germans here were tenants, only in Naslawtscha and Neu-Strimba did one have the *Nadjele* which, distributed among the many children, gradually led to just 1-2 *dessjatin* for a family. With the new Agrarian Act, each farm received 6 hectors of land. However, what was missing for them was agricultural machinery and equipment; also a lack of horse power. Cattle breeding was also imperfectly pursued, due to a lack of pasture; the same held true with pig breeding. Sheep breeding was as good as non-existent. The economic condition of the German farmers, before the war, was much better than the neighboring Moldovans and Russians, now it is inferior to them.

The dialect of that Germans can be described as “not pure *Schwäbisch*.”. One can manage to converse in this dialect in the family and in the community, but there are also small differences. In Neu-Strimba one says: home (*hem* vs. *heim*); no (*ne, nett* vs. *nein, nicht*); one, two (*ens, zwe* vs. *eins, zwei*); where were you yesterday (*wo warscht gechter* vs. *wo warst gestern*); and in Scholtoi one says: “*ham, no, ans, zwö, Omer* (bucket) vs. *Eimer*.. Most also speak good Russian and Moldavian. Their national costume has completely disappeared over time. Each person dresses up as he can. On average, the garb is similar to that of the city lower-class worker. Their traditions, customs and festivals are somewhat influenced by those of the Russians and the Moldovans. But when one comes in closer contact with them, you can see that there is still a healthy German core inside them and that they have not yet completely lost their German nature. It is not only through their own fault that they have languished so; it is especially their sad, full of suffering story, attributed to the complete isolation from other German areas and the shocking situation of their churches and schools. Still one holds frantically onto the beloved mother tongue, onto the traditions of the ancestors and the remnants of the German system, but if this deteriorating folk splinter is not firmly grasped under the arms, we will soon have the speaking of the last German word and the singing of the last German song.



A Farmyard in Neu-Strimba

The situation in the schools of the German communities of northern Bessarabia is especially sad. The old, decaying school and church buildings are much too small for their purpose and also can not be repaired. Only Neu-Strimba built, with the help of donations from various German

regions (*Gauen*), a new school in 1922-23 and carried out a thorough overhaul in 1924-25 of its small ornate church. But the school is missing its soul, a German teacher. Since 01 March, 1925, the teacher and sexton position in this place is vacant. A teacher has also been unavailable for a long time in Rischkani and Scholtoi. Yes, in Rischkano, old Ferd. Hargesheimer is still officiating as sexton, who, however, has reached a high patriarch age. But tested sexton-teachers cannot be assigned here because the people lack the means.

World War I intervened in the life of these little people with an unmerciful hand. With it came a suffering laden time for the settlers. Because they lived close to the Western front, and many still Austrian subjects, they were all driven off to Siberia, and that happened in the cruelest way possible. When the order by the authorities came to leave, one had to leave everything and embark on the journey mostly by wagons. In this way the residents of almost all villages were expelled, only Neu-Strimba (Tsarist) remained untouched. Long bands of poor outcasts moved across the whole of Russia. This suffering laden trip took three to four months. They were met everywhere with contempt, ridicule and hatred. Not a morsel of bread, no night's lodging in the cold winter was granted them, and so the whole way added even more torture and suffering. The weak children and older folks (*Griese*), who were unable to cope with the riggers of the journey, the hunger and the cold, perished in large numbers. There were instances where one found German women, separated from a band of children, stiff and dead in the snow. But even that was endured. And when the Revolution broke out and the displaced persons were allowed to again return to their homes, they found there only empty or even completely destroyed homes (*Heimatnester*). (Neu-Scholtoi was totally leveled to the ground). No one came to their aid; they were completely on their own. Some of them have neither horse nor cow even up to today. The one who has a horse earns something during the winter by hauling things with a wagon. Many parents were forced, out of necessity, to offer their adult daughters to the Jews as maids. A sad fact is that these German girls are often treated badly and even abused.

The situation for the adults, and even more for the youth, is particularly difficult and unpleasant during the winter. Reasonable employment is lacking for everyone. The so-called "*Maistunden*" (*Schwätzstunden* = time for talking) take place in the evenings, where three or four families come together. Time is spent in chewing sunflower seeds, discussing and critiquing the latest bit of news in the community. But the young people are mostly out on the street in the evening.

That is an overall picture of the Germanness in northern Bessarabian—lots of shadows, much suffering and distress. If this article helps to direct the attention of the leading circles of our people on the northern Bessarabian community, it would have achieved its purpose. There are German people also living here in the north, which accounts for only a small, weak link in the great, sacred circle of our ethnicity which, nevertheless, cannot be allowed to get lost.

[End of Translation]