

LETTER FROM KATZBACH, BESSARABIA - 1816

Copy of a letter from Arnold Winger, Teacher, Katzbach, Bessarabia
Katzbach, Tarutino Post Office, Cetatea-Alba District, Bessarabia, Romania

In 1816, the village of Katzbach was founded on the endless and treeless Steppe of South Bessarabia, some 100 km from Akkermann [today known as Cetatea-Alba] by the banks of the *Aliaga* stream [*Bach*]. But it was not until 1821 that it was designated by that name. It was in remembrance of the *Bluecher* victory over the French on the Katzbach. It was the people in a neighboring village who maintained that the name Katzbach came from the fact that our ancestors found some dead cats [*Katzen*] when they arrived at the Aliaga stream. But all the folks from Katzbach are in agreement to reject that to be a lie. A majority of the settlers came from Poland, although most originated from the Kingdom of Wuerttemberg. So we list:

Philipp Beierback [born 1784] from Horkheim, Wuertt.
Christoph Beutler, Rothfels, Wuertt.
Georg Finkbeiner, Heselbach, Wuertt.
Adam Grosshans, Gruenbach, Wuertt.
Gottlieb Guebler, Grafenhausen, Wuertt.
Georg Kromer, Schlierback, Wuertt.
Martin Mueller, Hallwangen, Wuertt.
? Schlenker, Schwennigen, Wuertt.
? Wittibschlaeger, Kellenwester, Wuertt.
Andreas Rauser, Schittingen, Ober Nagold, Wuertt.
Daniel Velter, Eschelbronn, Wuertt.

For many, it isn't generally stated where they came from. Nevertheless, one can see that the greater portion of settlers were Swabian. There were some families who came from northern Germany, or *Kaschuben* as we called them. Yet, without exception, all lost their *Platt* dialect and today all speak only *Schwaebisch*. As a sample of the dialect, I give a sentence in the Katzbach dialect: *I ben a aechter Schwob. Miar schwetzat ont'er anander emmer schwaebisch. Mr sen ond bleibat rechte Deitsche. Ons gfallts en Katzbach ganz guat, wemer no emmer guate Ernta hen.*

Many settlers left again [especially in 1841/42] to try their luck somewhere else. Even of those living today, there are those who have been to the Crimea, Caucasus, yes, even to Siberia. However, they have not found rest anywhere.

The land of the community [4251 hectares] was very acceptable in those early days so that the people had large harvests in the good years with little effort. However, there were also the bad harvests. Still, no one had to starve right away as folks helped each other, out of necessity, as best as possible. One could buy as much land as one wanted. A whole farm [60 hectares] could be sold for a few liters of brandy.

At the founding of the village, a school and prayer house was built in 1825. But it was not adequate in design so in 1835 a second larger schoolhouse had to be built. Sometime during this

time, our old government office was also built, which, in 1923, had to make way for our new ornate office. Our present school was built in 1855/56. Once a prayer house, today it is divided into four class rooms. Today, we have a church building which was constructed in 1893 for about 10,000 rubles. The church has a beautiful Waler organ.

Certainly, a person needs strengthening for the body, not only for the spirit, for that reason a tavern was put up in 1842. Every evening, thirsty brothers gathered and reveled. The time was taken up with singing, drinking, talking and betting. It was shut down at the beginning of the war. With the possibility of once again opening, the community protested, maintaining that the tavern only brings harms.

During this same time, the *dry* men gathered in various houses [by turns]. They, next to their wives, went *posy*, or *they went into the light*. At the center of a fairly spacious living room, on a tripod, stood a container of oil in which there was a wick burning on top, or there was a tallow light. Around it sat the respectable wives with their spinning wheels, diligently moving foot, hand and mostly also tongues. Along the length of the walls sat, or reclined on their sheepskins, the men smoking pipes and also *spinning*, but usually spinning *Latein* [*hunter's latein*] or speaking about the everyday problems.

Our ancestors were helpful and honest. If someone was finished mowing the field, or finished with any other job, but the neighbor or a friend was not, it was obvious that one would help them out. Especially during the war years of 1854/55 and 1877/78. If something should be found in the field, and often it was only a small matter, one brought it to the village office without a second thought. Each official position was also conscientiously fill, be it in the service of the community, be it guardian of the orphaned children.

Our ancestors also kept true to the church. The pastor always stood in high regard. The people always attended worship services diligently. In spite of their piety, our ancestors were nevertheless superstitious. They believed in all kinds of spirits. When I was still a little boy and our old neighbor came to visit us and spoke about his ghost stories, my nights were not filled with restful sleep because I was so frightened.

Every colonist was able to read and write. The teacher was seldom a professionally educated man. Most of the time it was some craftsman or semi-professional. It goes without saying that the students in the school got a sound thrashing. Lots of learning focused on religion, some reading and writing, and very little math. Today, the older generation still take pride in the many Bible verses and songs which they learned. Our Katzbach folks have no tendency for high education. They were, and still are today, of the opinion that anyone who only studies is not willing to work and become rich. The exception are the clergy. One doesn't apply such worldly thinking to them.

In those good old days, the village mayor had lots of power. One can find in the old records how the mayor punished some false step of a person (be it insubordination or gossip or something else) with so and so many strokes of the cane. The punishments were usually carried out in the presence of the students; naturally, applied to promote proper behavior. The Germans did not have do military service until into the 1870s. Everything in school was done in German so that

the people would be satisfied. Nevertheless, there was an irresistible urge for the far off places. We can find Katzbach folks scattered in America, Brazil, Argentina, Siberia and Serbia.

But as the *perpetual* exemption from military service came to an end in the 70s, the schools were russified, so also the village government. Again many seized the walking stick to find a better life in America or in the Dobrudscha [which was under Turkish control].

Soon into 1877, the Turkish War broke out. Those remaining on the home front had to suffer a lot through troop quartering and delivering of supplies. Then the war brought with it cholera and other infectious diseases.

The inhabitants suffered less during the Japanese War of 1904/05. However, more family heads were in the war. Some were captured. Eight were *pickled* [euphemism for *killed* ?] in the war.

During the World War, some 200 men took an active part, of which 18 had to give up their lives. We have a few disabled veterans. Many men also possess Russian decorations, because they faithful as the Germans are, for coming quickly to the assistance of Russia.

Concerning the style of clothing, we are way behind other villages. As simple as the people are about the food, so are they also in matters of clothing. One often finds that the men attend the community assembly with an unlined white sheepskin jacket, not particularly neat but the kind used by some Volga Russians, but often not fitting for the occasion.

Concerning work, our people are unsurpassed. In the summer, they work from 3 AM until 9-10PM, without stopping. At times it continues like that for weeks on end. But Sundays is usually the time for sleeping. The machinery is still quite primitive. Our farmer approaches the tractor, seed machine, etc. with fair amount of suspicion. We lack educated and specialist farmers who would take the lead by good example.

Our Bessarabian German folks can not disappear [*verloren gehen*] so quickly.

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Microfilm Roll #624 Serial #842 Record Group #1035 DAI #1758 Frames 5420999-5421002
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2004; Spelling correction made August, 2011