

# Our Top Associations in Bessarabia

*Bessarabischer Heimatkalender—1959*

W. Rumpelstin, Buchdruckerei und Zeitungsverlag K.G.

[Book Printing and Newspaper Publishing Limited]

Burgdorf, Hannover/Germany

Pages 58-62

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May, 2025

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Note: Information within [brackets] are comments by the translator.

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## Some Things about Our Top Associations in Bessarabia

by Samuel Heier

Much could be said about this topic, more than space is normally made available in a *Kalender*. Therefore, the individual questions cannot be dealt with thoroughly, but only briefly or, as the Americans say, in a nutshell.

Our leading associations are about our Church, People's Council and Business Association. The writer of these lines believes to be aware of the first two organizations, since he was a member of the board of both from the founding of these associations (1920) until shortly before the Resettlement

As far as the Business Association is concerned, it is left to the responsible persons to write about it. The last four to five years before the Resettlement are only touched on very lightly, since during this time all important decisions, especially the elections, including the church elections, were under pressure from above. And now I would like to make a personal remark: It has been bothering me for years that none of our many writers, who have already written a lot for the old homeland, has yet shown interest in our Top Associations. Even in the *Kalender* it was never mentioned that there was such a thing with us. I waited a long time, but nothing came, and so I, who am not a writer, find myself compelled with a heavy heart to take up the pen myself. And now to the topic.

How is it that so little or almost nothing is known about Bessarabia in the big world, and that even in Germany we were at first thought to be Arabs and were surprised that we still remained Germans and even spoke **Swabian**?

The explanation for this is simple: Bessarabia was never a state, but always only an administrative district, alternately one of the three states: Romania, Turkey, Russia. If news about Bessarabia actually made the world sit up and take notice, it was only when it had to again change the nation it belonged to.

In Russia, Bessarabia was a province (*Gouvernement*), as there were about eighty of them—besides a few other districts (*Okrugi*). It was also only an administrative unit for Romania. It is therefore no wonder that the world hardly takes notice of our old homeland.

The Germans were mostly settled in the south of Bessarabia, namely in the corner whose borders were formed by the Dnjestr [River] on the east, the Black Sea and the Danube branch Kilia on the south. In terms of numbers, we were a small minority with about three percent of the total population. For this reason alone, we could hardly exert any influence on the whole. The Romanians and Slavs, who together made up the vast majority of the population, were decisive for the overall cultural and economic level in Bessarabia. Only on our immediate surroundings could we have a greater influence. It was not for nothing that we were seen as bearers of culture—we were far superior to our non-German neighbors in every respect.

Apart from the economic successes in Bessarabia, we are still particularly proud of the fact that we have been able to preserve ourselves in German, together with our customs and practices. If we ask ourselves to what favorable circumstances are we indebted for this, then it will mainly be the following:

1. The healthy genetic material that we have received from Germany.
2. The fact that we were allowed to live as colonists in closed German villages, which was guaranteed by law.

These two circumstances have created the preconditions for successful resistance against dangers from outside. For many decades, therefore, our people did not see themselves threatened by any side in its ecclesiastical and ethnic concerns. We were allowed to do what we desired and wanted. Not only we Germans in Bessarabia, but all Black Sea Germans, in the Crimea and on the Volga, got along well in those quiet times without ethnic organizations. There were various societies, but no Top Associations — they were not known at all.

It was only when the Russians began to Russify in all seriousness, and even more so when, in 1918, after the annexation of Bessarabia to Romania, the Romanians had pushed forward the Romanization of all minorities even more ruthlessly, did the German minority in Romania see the necessity of a union of all Germans.

The Transylvanian Saxons, the Banat Swabians and the Bukovina folks used to belong to Austria-Hungary, while we were Russian subjects and the Dobrudscha folks already belonged to Romania for many years. The founding of the ethnic Top Associations took place quickly and smoothly in all areas. In a short time, each country had its People's Council (*Volktrat*). Our People's Council was given the name "German People's Council for Bessarabia".

In addition to the purely ethnic tasks, the People's Council also had to take a stand on the politics of the country, especially in the parliamentary elections, great importance was attached to being represented by as many German deputies as possible in the Chamber and Senate. While the people of Transylvania and the Banat together could count on ten to fifteen deputies, Bessarabia and Bukovina usually had to be satisfied with one each. The Germans in Dobrukscha and the Old Kingdom were, if I am not mistaken, never represented in Parliament.

Parliamentary elections have usually been tough battles, especially when we have not entered into an electoral cartel with the ruling party. Be that as it may, the German representatives in Parliament formed a Parliamentary Party (*Fraktion*) there. The first Parliamentary Party chairman was Rudolf Brandsch from Transylvania, but only until the next elections. Afterwards and until the Resettlement, Dr. Hans Otto Roth was chairman of the Parliamentary Party without interruption.

Dr. Hans Otto Roth was for many years a recognized and highly esteemed international and political leader, not only of the Saxons, but of all Germans in Romania. His abilities were also fully recognized by the Church, which was due to the fact that he held the office of State Church Curator (*Landeskirchenkurators*) for many years. A few years ago, one could read in newspapers that Rudolf Brandsch and Dr. Roth had starved to death in a Romanian prison. So these two people, who were about equally gifted, but quite different in character, had met the same fate. What Senior Pastor D. Haase was for us Bessarabians for many years, Dr. Hans Otto Roth was for all Romanian Germans, namely a guide in national and ecclesiastical matters.

In Bessarabia, the People's Council was founded in May of 1920 and then its first board of directors was elected, which consisted of the first and second chairmen and the secretary. When the chairman asked the assembly to propose candidates for the chairman of the People's Council, it was very quiet in the hall at first, until old Andreas Widmer slowly rose from his seat and with his powerful voice called on the assembly to unanimously elect the then little known teacher Christian Kalmbach by standing up to vote, on the grounds that Kalmbach had worked out the program for the construction of the ethnic organization and moreover also showed great interest for the ethnic causes, which was true. Those present all rose from their seats as one man. This was the first chairman of the People's Council. It was a masterpiece from the old Andreas Andrejewitsch [1773-1806]. The election of the other two board members did not go so smoothly: several candidates were proposed, and so there were many speeches in favor and against. In the end, the following were elected: S. Heier as second chairman and Christian Erdmann as secretary of the People's Council. S. Heier was a lawyer without a practice. Christian Erdmann was the District Clerk in Arzis for many years. He was more suitable for the People's Council than almost anyone else, as he was particularly well versed in the relevant laws and was very conscientious. In all this, Erdmann was a reserved and extremely modest man.

As an Advisory Organization, the board of directors was supported by the following for very urgent matters:

1. The Executive Committee, in which all districts were represented; and
2. The Emergency Committee, which includes only the members residing in Tarutino.

Local councils had been formed in the individual villages. In order to decide on fundamental questions and to receive the activity and cash report, the General Assembly was convened once a year.

The People's Council had its seat in Tarutino from its foundation until the Resettlement. The Evangelical Lutheran Regional Consistory, the Business Association, the Boys' Grammar School and Girls' Lyceum were also located there. So Tarutino, although not locally located in the center of our municipalities, became the center of our entire ethnic life, with the only exception that the Business Association moved its headquarters to Arzis a few years before the Resettlement.

After its consolidation, the board of directors was faced with major and difficult tasks. It was mainly about the land question and the church schools.

On the Land Question, the first issue was to take a position on cases of hardship in the implementation of the Romanian Agrarian Law and, secondly, to repeal the Russian government's Liquidation Law of 2 February and 15 December, 1915. On the basis of the Romanian Land Reform for Bessarabia, the quantity of land exceeding a hundred hectares [247 acres] was to be allocated to all landowners for a ridiculously small compensation (about one year's rent). After the Law had come into force, of course, nothing more could be done against the Law itself. However, during the implementation in the "*Casa Noastra*" various cases of hardship were treated. There were many cases in particular where a large farmer with adult and married sons had ceded parts of his property to them, but had omitted to give them a notary attested deed of transfer. In such cases, *Casa Noastra* would have considered the whole estate to belong to one owner and expropriated it except for a hundred hectares. That was hard and also unfair. Since even the People's Council could not help in such cases, the lawyers were turned to in order to achieve their goal by legal means, but it was certainly only individual cases that led to success in this way. In this hard struggle for land ownership, I remember two cases, both of which are characteristic of the stubbornness with which the struggle was waged.

In the first case, it was a single property. This was the one of the landlord H. Schlenker. He owned five hundred *Defjatinen* [1,350 acres / 545 hectares] of land and had eight grown-up sons. The whole estate belonged (according to the documents of the *Casa Noastra*) to the father Heinrich Schlenker. All except one hundred hectares was therefore to be expropriated. This began the struggle with the support of the lawyers. Schlenker was almost constantly on the train between Beresina and Kischineff. The matter did not want to come to an end. Schlenker had been advised to show his eight adult sons to *Casa Noastra*. He did. The gentlemen of the *Casa Noastra* seemed to have been visibly impressed by these healthy, strong men. But, unfortunately, that was not successful either.

In the second case, it was an estate of about two thousand hectares [5,400 acres], which belonged to a company of about twelve owners. According to the Romanian Agricultural Law, estates that belonged to several people and were over a hundred hectares in size were even expropriated completely. This was also completely expropriated and divided among small farmers to six hectares [16.2 acres]. The old owners did not want to surrender themselves to this, and a court case ensued, which dragged on for almost twenty years. It was not until the autumn of 1940,

when Bessarabia belonged to the Russians again, that the trial was won in Bucharest in the last stage of proceedings. A small part of our villages was designed for lease land—these were also threatened with the danger that the leased land would be expropriated from the owner and the farmers would then have to be satisfied with six hectares per family at best. In these cases, the People's Council could stand up for the municipalities, as *Casa Noastra* was more likely to be talked to when it came to municipalities. But it did not happen without sacrifices there either.

A lot of land was expropriated from our landowners. The splendid estates have disappeared, only the memory of them remains.

As for the Liquidation Law, it had already been repealed by a Royal Decree. This might perhaps have been satisfied if a complaint for the execution of the Royal Decree had not appeared. On the basis of this complaint, all municipalities were to be restored to their former rights by judicial means. The majority of the assembly of the People's Council had voted in favor of this solution. The representation of the municipalities before the courts was entrusted to the Romanian lawyers Dausch and Negolseu for a fee of 20 lei per hectare, payable in three installments. The money was paid into the lawyers' account in the People's Council. Since there were well over a hundred individual trials, the matter dragged on for years. Only the first installment was received in full by the lawyers, while the municipalities paid only about half of the second installment and the third did not take place at all.

So far, the conversation has always been of the People's Council and not also of the Consistory. This is because the board of directors in both organizations from 1924 to 1936 always consisted of the same people, so it was not always easy to determine in what capacity they acted.

When Tarutino Pastor D. Haase was elected Senior Pastor in 1920, his star was in rapid rise. One after the other, all the highest posts that we had to give to him fell to him. He was elected president of the People's Council already at the second election of the executive committee and then again and again until 1936.

Soon after his election as President of the People's Council, Senior Pastor Haase was also elected as a member of Parliament.

Actually, this post would have belonged to the long-time Duma Deputy Andreas Widmer, but he was a sick man at that time and could no longer be considered as a candidate. Already in the previous Parliamentary election, his opponent, Peter Mutschler, had received one vote more than him and was thus elected. This was a hard blow for Andrei Andrejewitsch, all the more so because P. Mutschler played a certain role in economic matters only in the lowlands, but was otherwise little known. Andreas Widmer now had no choice but to accept a post of President of the *Zemstvo* proposed by the Romanian National Liberal Party.

That was his last high office. He died in 1931 of a serious heart condition, after having been in the service of the general public for about sixty years.

According to Peter Mutschler, after the end of each election, Senior Pastor Haase was repeatedly elected as a candidate for Parliament by the People's Assembly of the People's Council. No

other candidate could stand up against him. After Bessarabia was occupied by the Romanians in 1918, our Evangelical Church saw itself isolated from all co-religionists in Russia. We were therefore forced to seek affiliation with the Transylvania State Church in Romania.

The merger met with great resistance from us. The main argument against the merger was that the Saxons called their church Augsburg (A.B.) [Augsburg Confession] and not Lutheran, as we do, and that they did not want to recognize this A.B. church as a Lutheran church. A difficult fight broke out between those who were in favor of the union and the opponents. The leader of the opponents was dentist Dr. Flemmer from Kischineff, who was elected by the synod as the first President of the District Consistory after the merger. Tempers calmed down only when our special wishes had been summarized in eleven points and the Provincial Consistory in Hermannstadt [Sibiu, Romania] had approved them.

After that, our Evangelical Lutheran Church remained with the secular President and the Senior Pastor, who was also left with the right to ordain pastors (on behalf of the bishop). The Executive Committee of the Regional Consistory, President and Senior Pastor were also members of the State Consistory and the State Consistory Assembly. Thankfully, the relations between us and the Augsburg Confession [A.B.] Church were good from the beginning until the Resettlement; there has also never arisen any misunderstanding regarding Evangelical Lutheran and A.B. As by the People's Assembly of the People's Council, the same board was elected by the Synod again and again. For Senior Pastor Haase, the Church Schools were the important question during the whole time from the founding of the two Top Associations until shortly before the Resettlement, on which the existence or non-existence of our ethnic group as Germans depended. That is why he never gave up the fight for these schools, although the prospects of success became less and less. Countless trips were made to Bucharest to present our concerns to the highest school authorities. The Minister for Minorities, Tatarescu, spoke good German and was always friendly, he never completely took away our hope, but we never received a clear promise. In Bucharest, Dr. Hans Otto Roth also stood by us, especially when we went to the Minister of the Peoples Enlightenment, Angeluscu, who did not speak German and was known as a stubborn opponent of minorities. But even Dr. Roth, who was also appreciated by the Romanians, could not help us in this matter. In Kischineff, we tried it through Pastor E. Gutkewitsch, who spoke good French, but was even more a welcome advocate with all authorities thanks to his amiable nature and confident appearance. But even he could not prevail in this matter. Pastor Gutkewitsch was able to help many Germans in personal matters, and he had time for everyone who came to him for intercession with the authorities. When Pastor Haase moved into Parliament after Peter Mutscher {sic}, the trips were stopped, because now he had the opportunity to negotiate at any time, as a member of Parliament, with the Ministers himself. He was able to assert himself well at the meetings of the People's Council and the Synod and had the majority behind him.

But the battle for the church schools could no longer be won, because they had already been nationalized before Senior Pastor Haase and his closest associates had begun the battle. Our teachers know best where this led, namely to the ban on the German language in our schools. And where would that have led to over time? If a person thinks about this and also has in mind the difficult economic situation of all our national and ecclesiastical institutions, then a person says to himself that it was high time that we were allowed to return to our original homeland.

In this context, it is also worth mentioning briefly something about the large loan for the support of our entire ethnic group in 1928. That was a bold undertaking after a bad harvest. The suggestion for this came from Senior Pastor Haase, who had also taken over its realization. For this purpose he went to Germany, where he alone could hope to receive such a large amount. There he soon had to learn that the difficulties were getting worse and worse. After several months of unsuccessful work, we looked for a way out to finish the matter one way or another.

This is how we came across Dr. Hans Otto Roth, of whom we knew that he was chairman of the board of directors of a larger Hermannstadt bank and therefore must also have good relations with Reich German banks. At that time, Dr. Roth was spending his vacation at the Hohe Rinne near Hermannstadt. There I found him along with some Saxon deputies and carried my request to him. After a short consultation with his colleagues, Dr. Roth informed me that he was willing to travel to Germany at our expense to support the senior pastor in his project. Now the matter took a rapid course. After just a few days, we had the news that the bond had been concluded. The secret of the long delay was that such a large loan could not be carried out without the mediation of a larger bank.

Since we did not have our own larger bank, everything went only through the Bank of Hermannstadt. The large loan (1.5 million marks = 60 million lei) was paid smoothly in Akkerman to all our communities. Our municipalities were very satisfied with the loan, because they received the money for half of the usual interest rate in our country, including the interest for the Bank of Hermannstadt. What was also very important, however, is the fact that the repayment of the funds was carried out to the full satisfaction of the Bank of Hermannstadt and that the handling of the matter also made a good impression in Germany. The German state had taken the risk of a possible loss.

In conclusion, I would not like to omit to remember the members of the Emergency Committee, who for many years were always at the disposal of the board free of charge, whenever they were called. They were the two brothers Daniel and August Erdmann, who were in the service of the closer and wider community from their earliest youth until old age and had their full confidence.

Immanuel Fiechtner, one of our brightest minds and perhaps the best speaker: first teacher in Tarutino, then founder of the Girls' School (later Lyceum), first chairman of the Trade Association and director of the Deutsche Bank for Trade and Industry. Gotthilf Untererseher. He was reported in detail in the *Mitteilungsblatt* on the occasion of his seventy-fifth birthday

Wilhelm Steinke, a rich manufacturer. He gave us some good advice and very often helped us out of trouble when there was a lack of money

These and many others have supported our leading associations with their advice and practical help, and they deserve to be remembered with gratitude and recognition.

While the secretary of the People's Council was a member of the Executive Committee, the secretaries of the Consistory were not. Until the merger of our church with the Augsburg Confession Church, August Erdmann was secretary of the Consistory. After the union, teacher

Albert Bippus held this position for several years. His successor until the resettlement was teacher Artur Kräenbring. The secretaries have worked with great success and to the full satisfaction of their authorities.

[Translation Ends]