

Rohrbach, Beresan, Odessa

Data from a former Rohrbach village website prepared by: Jim Griess and Erwin Ulmer (village coordinators for Rohrbach at AHSGR) and Michael Frank (web development)

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Rohrbach
(Ukrainian: Novosvitlivka)
Beresan District, Odessa/ Black Sea Region

General Information

Founded: 1808

First Settlers: 1809

Location and background

Rohrbach is located 90 versts or approximately 61 miles northeast of the city of Odessa (a port city on the Black Sea and now part of Ukraine) or 130 versts or 86 miles northwest of Kherson which served as the center of District Government for the Beresan German Russian Colonies. The Beresan District lies between the Bug River and the Tiligul River and is bordered on the south by the north shore of the Black Sea. Its closest neighbor is the village of Worms, located six versts or four miles from Rohrbach.

Rohrbach, located four miles southeast of Worms, was founded in 1809 as was Worms. The original group of settlers totaled 26 families, and given its close proximity to Worms, the colonists from both villages may have traveled together to the Black Sea area.

In 1810, an additional 69 families arrived. As in Worms, construction of houses was not completed until 1810. According to Dr Karl Stumpp, of the 100 plus families that settled in Rohrbach, 33 came from Baden, 4 from Württemberg, 12 from the Pfalz, 7 from Prussian Poland and 44 from Alsace. Other sources lump the colonists from the Pfalz and Alsace together since both were French territory.

Additional families continued to arrive in 1813: 22 from Prussian Poland and 4 from Württemberg. Between 1817 and 1819, 16 additional families from Baden and six additional families from other colonies settled in Rohrbach. By 1838 the population of Rohrbach totaled 683 individuals, comprising 148 families.

According to the 1848 Schoolmaster's Report for Rohrbach, written by Schoolmaster Fritschle, two colonists who had originated in Rohrbach, Germany, gave the Russian village of Rohrbach its name. They were Peter Schmidt and Peter Nuss.

History

Most of the German colonists of this region came to the Russian Empire to seek economic and religious freedom and to escape the devastation that was raging in Western Europe as the result of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. Most of the western German states bordering on the Rhine River were overrun by French occupation forces, and German youth were being conscripted into the French

Army. Taxation to support Napoleon's exploits was extreme. As political boundaries shifted as the result of military invasions, these oppressed people were eager to leave Western Europe. They were offered free land, freedom of religion, and exemption from military service in the Black Sea region. This region had been acquired by the Russian Empire from the Ottoman Turkish Empire through a series of wars. There were numerous German villages all along the north shore of the Black Sea.

Pfalz Villagers Bound for Rohrbach

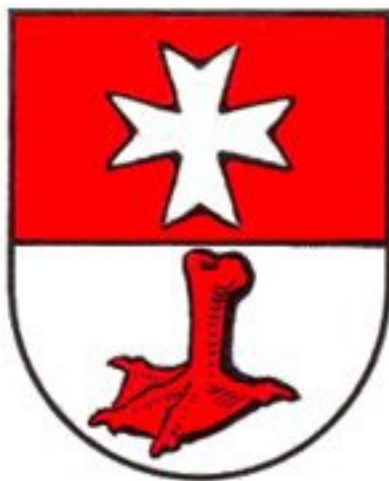
The Schoolmaster's Report lists a number of people coming from Alsace and none from the Pfalz, but the census of 1816 indicates that a number of individuals came from the Pfalz. This confusion is the result of France having annexed the Pfalz west of the Rhine River prior to 1809; it was considered French territory. Then, too, the villages from which these immigrants came are within 30 to 40 miles of the current Alsace French border.



The Protestant Church in Hochstadt, Germany - 1739, the original home of the Ehlys.

Names of Colonists included Heinrich Ackermann, Ludwig Bachmann, Philipp Bohler (Boehler), Johann Bonekemper, Nikolaus Ehli (later spelled Ehly), Abraham Gemar, Heinrich Hoffmann, Dietrich Huber, Valentin Hust, Frederick Klein, Johann Klundt, Johann Krieger, Andreas Rauscher, Andreas Reichert, Georg Riedinger,² Georg Schneider, Jakob Schneider, Frederick Schwartz, Georg Trautmann, Dietrich Weikum, Daniel Peter Wiest, and Jakob and Karl Zimpelmann, (also spelled Zimbelmann). Two of the original Colonists were from Edenkoben and eight were from Rohrbach in the Pfalz.

Nicolas Ehli, one of the emigrants from the Pfalz, was from the village of Niederhochstadt (now Hochstadt) which is located about four miles northeast of Landau and about four miles southeast of Edenkoben in the Pfalz.



Coat of Arms of Hochstadt.

Jim Griess had the opportunity to visit Niederhochstadt during the summer of 2007, but it was located with some difficulty. The only town that could be found on the map was the village of Hochstadt. He discovered that sometime after 1809 the two villages of Hochstadt and Niederhochstadt were merged. The name of Niederhochstadt has now disappeared from German maps. Only Hochstadt remains. The village serves as a good example of German villages in that part of the Rhine Valley. The Protestant church was built in 1738.

Just two years before he immigrated to the Russian Empire, Nicholas Ehli married a young woman named Maria (surname unknown) and together they migrated to Rohrbach. In 1811, Maria gave birth to Michael Ehli in their new home of Rohrbach. Michael grew to adulthood in their newly adopted home, and all indications point to the Ehli's having become farmers.

In 1830, at the age of 29, he married Charlotte Magdalena Schlegel (born 1811), a citizen of Rohrbach. To this union, a son named Joseph was born on December 14, 1836. This Joseph was destined to become mayor of Rohrbach before he decided to immigrate to the United States. In 1859 Joseph married Margaretha Wuest or Wiest.

The 1848 Schoolmaster's Report for Rohrbach noted that some of the families moved into Odessa. Some also helped to found other colonies including Fredericksthal and Johannestal. At least four families returned to Germany. By 1848, one of the colonists was exiled to Siberia and another sent out of the country for chronic drunkenness.

In 1816 the population of Rohrbach was 602; by 1859 it had reached 1,581; in 1885, 2,912; and in 1894 it reached its peak population of 3,270. Nine years later in 1903, the population had dropped to 2,406, again the result of migrations to the United States. In the 1940s the population totaled 2,555. Rohrbach suffered a great deal after the Russian Revolution, the Stalin era, and WWII. Many of its citizens fled Russia with the retreating German Army to avoid death or being shipped east to slave labor camps.



Rohrbach was laid out on the steppe on the east side of the Zerigol Valley. The soil in Rohrbach was well suited to support vineyards, which were located along the rear of the village. Only four miles away from Worms, it must have had a better underground water stream. The schoolmaster observed that the wells of Rohrbach provided plenty of water with here and there excellent drinking water. As a result, the village had always been spared from water shortages. The soil also supported vegetable gardens and orchards filled with apple, pear, plum, cherry, and apricot trees. Shade trees included poplar, aspen, willow, and acacia. By 1848 the village contained between 4,000 and 5,000 trees. The schoolmaster wrote that they presented a wonderful sight on such a treeless steppe.

The colony had received a loan from the Crown totaling 28,711 silver rubles. The funds were used to build stone houses for each of the families and purchase the necessary livestock, farm machinery, and seed grain needed to put the land into production. In the early years this debt made it difficult for colonists to acquire additional funds since the total debt was due to be paid to the Crown in 1820, ten years after settlement. According to the schoolmaster, the people who settled Rohrbach were relatively poor. Upon their arrival, the only material wealth they had was their personal belongings, their clothing,

and the wagons that they used to arrive at the Russian border. Nonetheless, the estimated combined assets of the colonists upon arrival totaled 50,000 paper rubles.

In the way of "fateful events," the schoolmaster wrote that there was nothing to report except for frequent outbreaks of German measles and other children's diseases. There were some farm accidents which resulted in deaths. He also reported that the grasshoppers and other insects, as in Worms, did damage to the vineyards and grain. No doubt Rohrbach would have experienced the same crop failures that were experienced in Worms since the weather pattern in a four-mile area would have been very similar. The schoolmaster fails to mention it in his report, but according to Pastor Bonekemper's diary (the pastor of Rohrbach from 1824-1847) a cholera epidemic broke out in June of 1831, and a number of people died. By the middle of July, the epidemic had abated. Bonekemper also mentioned an earthquake.

Religion in Rohrbach

Schoolmaster Fritschle was not very complimentary of the colonists as far as their morality was concerned. Others report that as a result of the Napoleonic Wars, morality in all of Western Europe had declined. It is therefore difficult to determine whether his comments were the rantings of an overzealous Christian, or whether there was some substance to what he had to say. In the closing remarks of his report, he noted that the bad needs to be told along with the good. His views of the morality of the colonists during the early years of the colonies are supported by Joseph Height in the following excerpt:

"The founding of the Evangelical parishes in the newly established colonies in the Black Sea region was beset with considerable difficulties. The village communities were not composed of homogeneous groups, since the immigrants had come from various parts of Germany and often had diverse religious backgrounds and tendencies. While the majority belonged to the Lutheran-Evangelical Church, there were also minority groups of greater or lesser size who were estranged and in some cases, separated from the regular establishment. In addition to the Reformed congregations, there were also the nonconformist groups of Schwabian (Württemberg) pietists, some of whom had even established Separatist communities [in Germany]. It is understandable that these religious differences and dissensions made it difficult to secure the kind of spiritual unity and cooperation that was needed to organize and build up a new parish."

"The second major obstacle in the growth and development of the Church in the early years of settlement was a woeful lack of pastors. It is a rather astonishing fact that not a single Lutheran pastor had accompanied the hundreds of families who immigrated from Württemberg to Odessa in the pioneer years of 1803 to 1815." (Height, *Homesteaders on the Steppe*, p. 245)

Without spiritual leadership, religious instruction fell to the local schoolmaster or other laymen who on many occasions lacked any formal training. Height estimates that fewer than 25 percent of the colonists could read and write since many were unable to attend school as a result of the disruption of society created by the Napoleonic Wars. In the early years with tough economic times, colonists could not afford to support ministers of the faith and once prosperity had been achieved, they failed to supply the necessary funds. Materialism failed to bring with it commitment to spirituality. Most likely it was not until the 1850s and 1860s, after the spiritual awakening brought about by the Brotherhood Movement, that colonists became more devout Christians.

Schoolmaster Fritschle was particularly critical of those who sat in the shade near the whiskey taverns and tipped their glasses with uncaring concern for the welfare of their families. He placed the village mayors, their councilmen, earlier schoolteachers, and the village secretaries in this category. He also lamented the fact that many of the politicians were elected because they would not crack down on such behavior. He reported that the children were unable to read because their parents had neglected schooling. By 1848, however, the schoolmaster believed that things were on the mend when he noted: "The young people did not grow up in so vulgar a fashion. The schoolmasters now are no longer hired according to the old policy, 'as cheap as possible.' Now ability and Christian character are considered." (Height, p. 165)

Schoolmaster Fritschle reported that in 1826 the community employed an energetic schoolmaster by the name of Wilhelm Eberhard, Fritschle's predecessor, who continued to serve the community until 1843. Through his censure of sin and appropriate discipline, writes the schoolmaster, the fear of God has returned and with it, blessings and economic prosperity.

Notes from Jim Griess:

Both Ehli and Ridinger are my relatives. The Ehlys originated in Niederhochstadt or perhaps, Schaidt, in the Pfalz. At one time the name may also have been spelled Ohly or Oehly. Jakob Ridinger, the son or grandson of Georg, is also my great-grandfather, but no place of origin is given for him in the 1816 census. The name is sometimes spelled Redinger or Reidinger, but a bank loan with Jacob's signature indicates that he spelled his name Ridinger.

There is evidence that the Ehlys began leaving Niederhochstadt as early as 1732. The following records are part of an entry for the Ely Family of Pennsylvania: " ELY, Christian- 1732 Age 49 on "Royal Judith" of London, Robert Turpin, Master, with Palatines, from Rotterdam, last from Cowes, arriving Philadelphia 25 Sept 1732. Children with him were: David, age 20; Simon, age 18; Philip Jacobus, age 12; and George Christophel age 1. Church records of this family are found in Hochstadt, Rheinland-Pfalz, Germany. The family settled in Berks County. Sources: Printed "Archives of the State of Pennsylvania," Series 2, Volume 17, Page 64; Strassburger, Ralph Beaver, "Pennsylvania German Pioneers," PA German Society, Norristown, PA 1934; Vol. 1, pg 87; Evangelisch-Reformierte Kirche Niederhochstadt (BA. Landau) Kirchenbuch 1708-1955 (LDS Auf 7) .Mikrofilmrollen 35mm 0193076); "Berks County Land Records and Tax Lists."