

Crimea: a personal connection

by Mervin Weiss

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Crimea is a peninsula which juts out from mainland Ukraine into the Black Sea. It is not very big, only 250 km east to west, and 150 km north to south. A little more than 26,000 square kilometers, Crimea would fit inside Saskatchewan's boundaries about 25 times. About three-quarters of Crimea is low-lying fertile steppeland, with a low range of mountains guarding the southern coast. Outside of the Black Sea Germans, few people are familiar with what or where Crimea is.



Surrounded by the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov, Crimea enjoys a moderate climate. The 45th parallel runs through the main city of Simferopol, which puts it in line with Venice, Italy and the south of France. Crimea does experience snow, but it only lasts for a day or two. Of course, snowfall is common in the mountains. A temperature of -5 to -10 is considered extremely cold. Farmers and gardeners are usually working the soil by the end of February. The peninsula is known for its many hours of sunshine. Summers are long, dry, hot, although temperatures rarely exceed +30. The agricultural plains or steppe receive about 15 inches of rainfall per year. The climate really favors winter wheat. Palm trees grow naturally on the Yalta coast. I wonder how many of our Crimea Germans wanted to go back after one winter in Saskatchewan!

It is still easy to envision what Crimea would have looked like to the first German settlers who arrived in 1804. The new arrivals entered an ancient land. Already in the fifth century BC,

Greek traders began to settle along the Black Sea Coast, and founded sea-ports at Chersones (Sevastopol) and at Feodosia. The peninsula became a major source of wheat for the ancient Greeks. The ancient Greeks called Crimea *Taurida*, after the huge ox “Taurus” with which Hercules is said to have ploughed the land. Through later centuries, Crimea was occupied by many and various tribes, most notably the Mongols in 1237. Prince Vladimir I of Kiev brought Christianity to Crimea when he was baptized in Sevastopol during the reign of the Kievan Rus’. In the fourteenth century, the Italian Republic of Genoa seized settlements along the south Crimean coast. They built a strategic fort at Sudak, and controlled much of the Crimean economy and the Black Sea Commerce for two hundred years. Sudak was a major port of the so-called Silk Trade Route from China and India.



A view of the steppe from atop an ancient burial mound in the Nature Preserve of Askania Nova, mainland Ukraine, north of Crimea.



The Archeological Ruins of Chersones, Crimea

The ruins of Chersones, near Sevastopol, Crimea.



The Genoese Fortress at Sudak, on Crimea's south coast. A small community of Germans once lived in Sudak.

After the demise of the Mongols, the Ottoman Turks asserted control of the peninsula by 1475. Although subservient to the Turks, the Crimean Tatars were powerful rulers who became the scourge of Ukraine and Poland. The Crimean rulers were called “khans”, after the great Mongol ruler Genghis Khan. For two centuries, Crimea was the home of the Golden Horde which operated one of the largest slave trade markets in the world. They even raided Moscow in 1572. Two hundred years later, rising Russian imperialism brought an end to Turkish rule in Crimea. Crimea became part of the Russian Empire in 1783.

During the height of Khanate rule, it is estimated the Crimean Tatars numbered at least 5 million. After Crimea was claimed as Russian territory, the Tatars emigrated en masse, mostly to Turkey. The repressive rule of the Tsars resulted in more deportations of the Tatars, and by the time of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, fewer than 300,000 Tatars remained in Crimea. As the Tatars left, other nationalities moved in and took over their small villages and agricultural holdings. While most Germans initially settled in the low foothills on the north side of the Crimean mountains, (Neusatz, Friedental, Rosental, Heilbrunn, Zürichthal), they gradually spread throughout the Crimean peninsula.

After the Crimean War (1854-1856), a second wave of colonization witnessed a large influx of Germans from other regions of South Russia, most notably from the Molotschna colonies to the north, with lesser numbers from the Mariupol colonies and from Bessarabia. Joining them also were a large number of Czech German families from Bohemia, part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. By the end of the nineteenth century, Germans were concentrated on the northern steppelands, and became the dominant economic presence in Crimea. By 1914 there were over 300 small German colonies in Crimea with a total population of about 30- 40,000. In addition to the village colonies, there were hundreds of German families living on their own estates or khutors, and not attached to any colony. Of course, significant out-migration had already occurred before 1914.

During the early settlement years, the main Catholic village was Rosental. The main Lutheran village was Neusatz. Zürichthal and Kronental were mixed. Of the Crimean Germans, Lutherans

made up about half of their numbers, with the Catholics and Mennonites at roughly 25% each. Cumulatively, by 1906 the Germans owned 41 % of the arable land in Crimea, while comprising less than 6 percent of the population. All of the flour and oil mills were owned by Mennonites or Lutherans. By the year 1900, the Germans seemed to have every advantage. Augmenting the German work ethic, they owned the best available agricultural machinery like sheaf-binders, threshing machines, and seeding equipment, ensuring the German colonists greater production per acre than other farmers. Germans owned many of the vineyards and wineries. They had access to a system of private credit, whereby wealthier Germans financed their countrymen at favorable interest rates. Neighbors and relatives guaranteed loans for one another.

But despite an above-average standard of living, our Germans began to leave Crimea. They had become disillusioned with the new rules put in place by St. Petersburg in the 1870's. The Germans lost their right to teach their children in German in their own schools. They had lost their local system of justice and administrative affairs. And worst of all, the young men were now eligible for military service in the notoriously brutal living conditions of the Russian army. All of these conditions contravened the original settlement manifesto. Underlying all of this was a growing tension among the poor landless peasants who resented the success of the Germans. The so-called Mini-Revolution which followed the war with Japan in 1904-05 highlighted the many problems of "Mother Russia". Thousands began to leave, including my widowed Great-Grandmother Rosina Schafer, nee Hoerner, along with 11 of her 12 children. They left for "America" in the summer of 1911, planning to join her brother in North Dakota. They ended up south of Richmond, Saskatchewan tight up against the Alberta border. But thousands remained behind, including Rosina's twelfth child, my Grandfather Philip, who had to stay behind because he had been conscripted just as the large family was making preparations to leave. And so now, the story becomes personal.



My Grandfather Philipp Schafer served in the Russian Imperial Army during World War I.

The Schafers had obviously been successful farmers. Before emigrating, they owned, and lived on their own khutor, or private estate. The Ship Manifest records that Gr-Grandmother Rosina

was traveling with \$2000 and each of her six adult sons was travelling with several hundreds of dollars. This was after paying the fares for the large Schafer party –Rosina, her children, spouses and grandchildren – a total of 33 people, and another was born on the transatlantic passage. I have copies of the pages of the Ship’s Manifest, and most of the other families were traveling with \$5-\$50.

Passenger	Amount of Cash	NAME IN FULL	AGE				Sex	Married, Single, Widowed, Divorced	Have you ever been in the U.S. before?	When	Where	How Long	Do you have any other relatives on board?	Have you ever been in any other country?	Have you ever been in any other country?	OF BIRTH
			Adults	14 Years	Under 14	Infants										
600		Schaffer Franz	30			M									Prussia	
		Regina	28			M									"	
		Rosalie			2	F									"	
2000		Schaffer Rosina	58			W				to son former					"	
		Katharina	23			F									"	
		Philippine	22			F									"	
		Alexandra	19			F									"	
		Helena	17			F									"	
		Christoph	15			M									"	
		Lanz Elizabeth	26			W				Detained					"	
		Marianna	57			F				Hospital					"	
800		Schaffer Anton	28			M									"	
		Maria	29			F									"	
		Paul			2	M									"	
		Anton			1	M									"	

copy of page from Ship’s Manifest, the S.S. Ausonia arriving in Quebec from Southampton on 09 August 1911.

I can trace my Schafer ancestors back to one Franz Anton Schafer, who arrived in the Molotschna colonies about 1809. About 1840 the Schafer family moved to Crimea, and they lived in several places on the peninsula until they purchased the Khutor Tasanai in the early 1900’s. It was the last place they lived before they emigrated. I can only surmise that the money with which they were traveling came from the successful sale of this asset. I have been unsuccessful in finding the German birthplace of Franz Anton. I can however, trace the Hoerner line back to 1651 in the village of Dettenheim, Baden-Württemberg.

While his siblings were setting down roots in Canada, my Grandfather Philip Schafer served six years in the Tsar’s Russian Army, 1912 to 1918. In that time period, he married and fathered four children. As a German, he was not trusted to fight against other Germans on the Western Front of World War I in Europe. Rather he was sent to the Caucasus region, to fight against the Turks, or at least to keep Turkey from getting involved in the war in Europe. The Russian Revolutions occurred in February and in October, 1917. As the country fell into turmoil, the far-flung Army units just disintegrated, and the soldiers melted away, and made their way home, relieved the war was over, and anxious to participate in the Bolsheviks’ exciting new slogan, “Land, Peace, Bread”.

But the entire country became engulfed in a brutal Civil War which lasted until 1922 in Crimea. Most of South Russia, where the fighting between rival factions was most severe, experienced a famine, the result of several factors – all usable horses had been confiscated for the Army, reduced manpower to farm because of fatalities and injuries from the War, constant raiding of the farms by every military group, and of course weather. My mother was born into these



conditions in 1923. An older sister had died of dysentery the year before. An uncle had died of starvation in 1921. I heard many stories as a kid about things people had to do to survive in Crimea during those years. Grandfather Philip had no contact with his family in Canada for four years. It was only after postal service was restored by Russia's new administration that Philip was able to write again to his family in Canada. With the support of his brothers, the twelfth Schafer, along with his wife and four children, left Crimea in December 1924. They spent both Christmas Day and New Year's Day on the Atlantic Ocean, landing at Saint John, New Brunswick, 05 January 1925.

Grandmother's brother, Joseph Tichy, died of starvation in Crimea, 1922. I have met with Joseph's grandson and granddaughter who knew only that their father Peter was an orphan, born in Crimea.

Below: Grandmother's passport photo with her four children. My mother is the baby.



The Philip Schafer family was very fortunate to get out of Crimea after the Revolution and the Civil War. By 1929, Stalin had closed the borders of Russia to out-migration. His first Five-Year Plan was put into action by forcing collectivization upon the farmers. Resisters were exiled to the Gulags of Siberia. Another famine descended upon South Russia. And when Germany invaded Russia (without a formal declaration of war) in June of 1941, Stalin was not prepared for war. But he did have time to forcibly evacuate all of the Germans from Crimea in August of 1941. Figures vary but between 50- and 60,000 Germans were “shipped” in cattle cars out of Crimea. First stop was in the Caucasus region where the survivors were used as slave laborers to help with the harvest. After the harvest was complete, they were shipped further east into and behind the Ural Mountains, where the survivors of the trip were again used as slave laborers in a variety of industries – lumber, pulp, mining, munition factories, to name a few.

One of those German evacuees from Crimea was my mother’s older brother Philipp Schafer born in 1916. No one in my family knew this story until I found his name on a list of Gulag laborers published since the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1989. Our family knew about this brother, but we had always been told that he died as a young boy before the family left Crimea in 1924. It turns out young Philip was left behind because he was handicapped in some fashion, and Canadian immigration rules at the time would have prevented him from entering Canada. Nothing is known of his life until he was placed in a labor camp in the Sverdlovsk region in the Urals. I have obtained his file from Russian Archives which says he was released from the camp in 1943 because he was no longer able to work. It is presumed that he died shortly thereafter in the vicinity.

It is my observation that most of the Germans from Crimea who came to Saskatchewan were Catholic. In my area –Fox Valley, Richmond, Mendham -- these names were common: Antoni, Fauth, Schafer, Jehli (Ihly), Jangula, Schneider, Hauk, Tumbach, Grunewald, Ries, Bosch, Dorn, Ruckhaber,

In the Tramping Lake, Macklin area: Schmidt, Schaad, Vollman, Reinbold, Dewald, Boser, Koenig, Feist, Kuhn, Herbst.

Holdfast -- Boser

Balgonie – Seiferling, Schneider

North Dakota – Beulah: Boeckel, Weigum, Boeshans, Hauck, Huber, Miller, Reinhardt, Sailer, Hafner, Hermann, Walz, Stiefel, Morast, Muhlhauser (more Lutheran families)

Czech Germans in North Dakota: Roller, Pelzl, Markl, Kupischta.

All of these families knew each other in Crimea. Rarely did a family just leave Russia and then randomly select a spot to take up a homestead in North America. There was almost always a connection to the place named as their destination on the Ship Manifest. It could have been a brother, sister, brother-in-law, cousin, uncle, parent, child, friend. In this way, families from the same local area in Russia re-settled in a similar cluster of families in North America. And so it was with the Germans from Crimea.

I have been actively researching the Catholic families of Crimea for at least ten years. All of the Catholic Church records (baptism, marriage, and death) for all of the parishes of South Russia are archived in the Russia State Archives of Saratov. Some records are missing. I have learned how to read the old Cyrillic script of the old Catholic Church records in Russia. I have translated thousands and thousands of Baptism-Marriage-Death records, Catholic and Lutheran. I have paid particular attention to those Catholic Germans from Crimea who immigrated to Saskatchewan. The indexes of information can be found on the GRHS website, and in my database at BSGR or the Black Sea German Research found at www.blackseagr.org



Nikita Khrushchev, 1894 – 1971

In 1954, General Secretary Nikita Khrushchev “gifted” Crimea to Ukraine. But was it really a gift? Crimea has always had a large Russian population. So, in 1954 nearly one-million ethnic Russians were “gifted” to Ukraine. It was a subtle way to further tie Ukraine to Moscow. Henry Kissinger once said that he suspected Khrushchev was drunk when he made the announcement. A 2007 Census shows Crimea with a population of just under 2 million, with 70% of them indicated as ethnic Russians, with Ukrainians and Tatars about 15% each. Russia now claims the 1954 transfer of territory was illegal and unconstitutional at the time. And this legitimized the re-taking of Crimea for Russia in 2014. Moscow, ie. Vladimir Putin, further justified the action as the only way to protect the language and rights of Russians living in Crimea, who preferred to be part of Russia than part of Ukraine. As soon as the Sochi Olympics were over, Russia invaded the territory of Ukraine in the Donbas region, to divert the world’s attention from Russia’s aggression in Crimea. Not one United Nations member country has yet recognized Crimea as part of Russia. In my opinion, Crimea will be Russia’s bargaining chip in any negotiations aimed at getting Russia to retreat from the Donbas. The world will have to recognize Russian sovereignty in Crimea before it will give up any claims in eastern Ukraine. That brings us to where we are in Crimea today. The peninsula is de facto Russian occupied territory, and Ukraine is forced to endure a “hybrid” war, which will be no different than a “hybrid” peace, should Russia ever withdraw its armaments from the Donbas region.

Note: The presentation ended with personal stories and scenic photos from my six trips to Crimea and Ukraine over the years 2004 to 2013.



My Great-Grandfather Anton Schaffer, and his 1848 Baptism record. He was born in 1847 near Zurichtal, Crimea.

17	18. 18.	Покрсење во свѣтъ со срѣка восемьго года Апрелья во семнадцатого дня, въ Църквѣ Каплицѣ дополненъ образъ свѣта го крещенія надъ младен- цемъ по имени Антоний Настоятелемъ Розиктав- скаго Римско-Католичес- скаго Приходского Костѣла Викентіемъ Нетрашев- ичемъ окрещенъ одного во- доу Шувлейтроемъ 10. Июля 1847. года.	Малоганскихъ Ко- лонистовъ Матвея Шерферъ и Катери- ны уродженкой Бухманъ закон- чнатъ супруговъ сынъ родившійся въ деревни Асам- бай 14 Июля 1847. года.	Воспріемни- ками были Ан- тоній Шерферъ Малоганскій Колонистъ и Анна Марія Кернеръ Църк- внѣская Ко- нистка.
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Подотдел записей актов гражданского состояния при <i>Учрежденіи въ Севастополе</i> 1923 г.	
В Ы П И С ь о рождении	
1	№ записи
2	Место и время совершения записи <i>19 Октября</i>
3	Пол ребенка <i>жен. пола</i>
4	Фамилия и имя ребенка <i>Шерферъ Анна</i>
5	Число, месяц и год рождения <i>29 Октяб 1923 года</i>
6	Место рождения (губерния, уезд, город, поселок, село, дача и проч.) <i>Дер. Асамбай, въ Крымской обл. Севастопольск. уездъ, въ Асамбайской Църквѣ</i>
7	Фамилия и имя <i>Шерферъ Павелъ</i> <i>Шерферъ Анна</i> <i>Кернеръ</i> <i>Кернеръ</i>
8	Возраст (число, месяц и год рождения) <i>37 летъ 21</i> <i>3 мес. 21 недѣль</i> <i>май 1886г.</i> <i>1887г.</i>
9	Постоянное местожительство (указать постоянный адрес) <i>Дер. Асамбай, въ Крымской обл. Севастопольск. уездъ, въ Асамбайской Църквѣ</i>

My mother was born in Crimea in 1923. This is her Russian civil birth registration. Church Baptisms were no longer allowed.



2008. Eating Chebureki and drinking beer on the Yalta coast of Crimea. My Grandfather could never even have dreamt of the possibility of one of his grandchildren visiting Crimea!