

The Germans in Dobrudscha (Part 15)

The book listed below, containing 248 pages of information, is being translated chapter by chapter and posted as each chapter is completed. Part 1 gives you a summary of each of the 15 chapters in the “Contents” section. The words in the [square brackets] are those of the translator and are not found in the original text.

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The Germans in Dobrudscha

**along with a contribution
to the history of the German
migration in Eastern Europe**

**by
Paul Traeger**

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15.

Preservation of Nationhood in Language, Attitude, and Blood Mix

Let us summarize one more time how the situation of the German colonists in Dobrudscha has formed.

They are separated from the tribal lands for a full century and more. It was a complete separation without lines of communication. No replenishment has brought them fresh blood. The weak communication, which may have taken place with the homeland in the early days, was already as good as to an end by the second generation in Russia, and in Dobrudscha there was no more talk of it. The individual case where a farmer had once decided to visit the village of his forefathers in the Black Forest was not important for the general public. The great fatherland was no longer concerned about them. They had neither political protection, nor national and cultural proactive support. Only the Lutheran pastor came from Germany, but most of the colonies only came face to face with him a few times a year. In the widespread dispersion of the municipalities, the fulfillment of ecclesiastical duties already required his full strength so that little was left over for cultural activity. The schools of the colonies were only stopgap for decades, later they were generally no longer German, and the Romanian State looked around in them and to that end established kindergartens in order to win over the German youth for themselves. Some villages have obtained a German teacher out of their own resources on a shorter or longer term, Germany itself has done almost nothing for the preservation of the schools because the one supported by it in Constantza was of little use to the distant colonies. German books and newspapers, which can produce a living bond with the homeland, were also absent. The farmers themselves settled between all kinds of strange people groups, their folklore was not shored up by any side, but seriously threatened by the systematic Romanization efforts of the government.

To what extent, after such a long time of isolation and under such hostile conditions, have these German farmers still remained German in their physical and spiritual appearance? Has their image changed by a lose of color or strange shades of color and their folk consciousness weakened? Or the overall question: Did their folklore get hurt?

They are questions that force themselves upon a person with anxious uncertainty upon first arriving in the country. Joy and certainty increase as from village to village in the realization that there are no lost sons of the German mother, that they have remained stouthearted. So stouthearted that one cannot even speak of individual deserters.

We have seen how they have faithfully preserved the faith, practices and customs of the homeland. They also remained Germans in their language, disposition and blood.

If one considers how strongly the German of the North American colonies is influenced by English, how many Romanesque constituents have penetrated into the colloquial language of the colonists of South America, then one is somewhat surprised at how free the dialects of the Dobrudscha villagers have been kept from foreign elements. It is significant that the few that

they have adopted are mostly from Russia and almost without exception limited to factual terms, some of the things they first met there, such as *Tschai* (tee), *Hambar* (amber store room), *Lavke* (small store), *Scherf* (necktie, from tapered end, sash), *Harman* (the open summer stable). From Romanian words like *Papschai* (papușoiu of corn/maize) and *Papschestrempele* (corn/maize stalk) have become adopted words. Otherwise, almost only the names of administrative persons and institutions are considered to be in this category. On the whole, the number of words of non-German tribes is so low that it is only the odd word that one hears coming out of the mouth of the farmer. One can even say that the German of the colonists contains less acquired foreign terms than our literate colloquial language, because it lacks most of the foreign words that have become all too familiar to us. Therefore, a few expressions and words still exist in his vocabulary that have been lost in our written language for quite some time. Here, too, apart from the dialect, there is still a difference in some Swabians and Kashubians. So for me it was always a safe test to determine whether I was dealing with someone of Swabian or northern German origin by asking for a *Kluf*.¹ Without hesitation, every Swabian searched for a pin, while a Kaschubin did not understand me at all or only after thinking about it. Furthermore, the dialect of the so-called Swabian colonies is by no means uniform. The fact that it is not possible to speak of Schwäbisch in the actual sense has been verified through more precise investigations set up by Wolf von Unwerth in 1917, in several prisoner of war camps, concerning the dialects of the soldiers from the South Russian colonies.² Among his informants was also one from Malcoci, whose chief elements of the dialect pointed to the area between Lauter and Otterback.

And no less than their language, the farmers have kept their blood pure. I have investigated in every village whether and how many mixed marriages have occurred at the present and earlier. I have only been able to discover a few, none in some colonies, or, since its establishment, only one or two cases. That a German boy took a stranger as a wife probably did not happen at all in the closed farmer colonies. On the other hand, members of the other nations often were successful in courting the German girls. In the first place, there were Russians, in recent times especially those sailors who escaped from the *Potemkin* and came into the colonies together with their German comrades. In all these cases, the children were educated German, usually the Russian fathers themselves learned German and some accepted the religion of their wives. Some German girls also married Romanians, here one with the mayor of the place, there with the Romanian teacher, a few also with Bulgarians and Greeks. A number of them are connections with foreign language speakers and, once separated from the Germans, are drawn in such as the mill owners and the like who moved into foreign villages. It has even happened that families already lost their Germans in the second generation, such as those of a mill owner in Babadag, who, of the four sons, three married Bulgarians and brought up their children in the Bulgarian way.

Taken altogether, however, mixed marriages have remained rare exceptions. In this respect, good old tradition has also been effective. This proves the earlier mentioned entry in the oldest church book of Atmagea, where, in a marriage with a Molokan, it specifies that the bridegroom

¹ Middle High German *Gluse*, *Stecknadel* (pin); in Alsatian dialects *Kuf*, cf. Zienhart, H. The dialect of the middle Zernthals. *Elsäss. Jahrb.* II, 143. Also, *Beheim=Schwarzbach* (Hohenzollernsche Colonisation. 440) emphasizes this word as characteristic of the dialect of the Swabian settlers in West Prussia.

² *Proben deutsch=russischer Mundarten aus den Wolgakolonien und dem Gouvernement Cherson*, *Abh. d. preuß. Ak. d. W.*, Jahrg. 1918, Nr. 11.

and his father have promised to educate the children as Lutherans. As the German immigrants in Russia were anxious from the outset to avoid not only denominational, but also nationality mixed marriages, an 1823 draft of the first Church Order for the Trans-Caucasian colonies proposed, but not approved by the Russian governor, that “no one without particularly urgent and inevitable causes should enter into a marriage with a person who belonged to a different denomination or nation.”³ The concern for the unity of faith was not, for example, the main motivation, because marriage between Catholics and Lutherans occurred quite frequently in the Dobrudscha colonies, especially in the early days.

What the people consciousness of the colonists and their inner resistance to the foreign environment in Russia had fostered and kept alive, the feeling of cultural superiority above their neighbors, has certainly not been diminished in Dobrudscha over-against the Turks, Tatars and Walachians. They not only knew that they were German, they also felt themselves to be such. And as everywhere in the world, the pride of the German folklore received new, powerful support through the victories of 1870/71 and the establishment of the Empire. As little as they had from it, as little as their connections were with it, they never stopped taking part in its destinies in their hearts. This is confirmed in a beautiful way in the observations made by H. Meyer about the parishioners under his care: “Most of them have as their ultimate goal for life on this earth that they could save enough to once travel to Germany and see the land where their fathers used to live. They carry the silent pain of homesickness throughout their lives and their eyes light up when the pastor, on the silent winter evenings, tells them about the German Emperor, or Bismarck, or the last wars.”⁴ And in this context, it was confirmed in the collection taken by the colonists of Atmagea for the invalids of the war, attesting to the gratitude of Emperor Frederick of Versailles, and for the Golden Wedding Anniversary of Kaiser Wilhelm.

I have already mentioned how in the transition of Dobrudscha into Romanian hands the colonists have an eagerness to again request German nationality. Even in the course of this war, despite their own murky situation, the farmers have proved that they had feelings for the old fatherland and were prepared to bring offerings, and this was already taking place in the time before Romania entered the war and we ourselves invaded the country. For obvious reasons, I cannot give the details about the collections for the German Red Cross, the drawings of the war bonds and others.

But even more than all what has been cited is their loyal, conscious desire to hold fast and protect the German folklore in all villages by their stubborn battle to save their German school for the purpose of continued hours of German instruction and to hold on to their German teacher.

It was unfounded pessimism when Franz Schmidt had already feared the decline of the germanness in Dobrudscha two decades ago.⁵ It has remained a healthy, powerful branch, with no indications of decline. If we still have to reckon today that it is going to decline, then it has other, external reasons. The Romanians are again the lords in the country. The political situation of the German farmers and their prospects for further land acquisition is hardly going to happen anymore. They do not look forward to the future without concern, and it is to be

³ Schenk. Gesch. d. deutschen Colonien in Transkaukasien, Tiflis 1869.

⁴ Die Diaspora, S. 405.

⁵ Ein Stück untergehenden Deutschtums in: Die deutsche Schule im Auslande, 1. Jahrg. S. 603.

expected that the exodus, as we saw, was already considerable in the decades before the war, is going to again be set up to a greater extent. Only that they, as many hoped and wished, will return to the old homeland, but to a new foreign place across the ocean.