

Life in the German Villages around Shitomir

Source: DAI Microfilm T-81; Roll #599; Serial 816; Group 1035;
Item 1267; Frame 5386472-5386478

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[Translator's Note: The following information is taken from a file folder of DAI (Deutsches Ausland-Institut) documents captured in Germany during World War II which contains documents dealing with ethnic Germans from Russia between 1940 and 1941. The 7 page document is superscripted as document of 1941, 37/I-VII. This document is a DAI assistant's report about the ethnic Germans in the area around Shitomir, Volhynia, what life was like on the collective farms, in school, the years of famine and banishment, and the arrival of the German troops in World War II. Information in square brackets indicate translator's comments.]

[Translation Begins]

A. Life in the German Villages around Shitomir From the Russian Diary of our Assistant ST. (Similar to Document B in Number 35)

1. Type of Settlement and House

The outward appearance of the settlement of German villages changed completely after the introduction of the collective. As opposed to the Volga and Black Sea Districts, here, before the World War, there were no German settlements where all lived close together, but, on the contrary, the German farmers put up their living quarters on their land. For that reason, the houses were situated far apart and the settlements spread out over a wide area. The mode of settlement impeded the realization of the collective (*Kolchos*) system. The Soviets abruptly ordered that the houses be torn down and rebuilt on a prescribed place. Again and again one would hear from the ethnic Germans the expression: "This is a transplanted house." The new settlements were rebuilt with completely different layouts. The Ukrainians and the Germans, and also some Polish yards, were all mixed together. The church steeple of the villages disappeared and the churches were, without exception, converted into clubs or granaries, if indeed they were not demolished as, for an example, it happened in Heimtal. Typically, the collective buildings in all the settlements were long barns for cattle and horses and a spacious room for the farm machinery. The buildings stood mostly all in one location. It fell to every settlement to have a high, long, narrow building, constructed in front of a heated room, made of red brick, which served to dry ("*Hopfendarre*") the hops. Typical also is the windmill. To every house there belonged a yard from 30-60 hectares (*Hundertstel*) [1 hectare = 2.47 acres, or 10,000 square meters]. Most of the locals occupied 60 hectares, the new folks coming in got 30 hectares. (The Volhynian Germans are always talking about 30 to 60 *Sotjen*.)

The houses all look alike. They are constructed of lumber measuring 30 cm [11.8 inches] wide and 8 cm [3.2 inches] thick. The whole house consists of three inner rooms: a living room, kitchen and barn. A bed is located in the living room and, at best, a couch made of plain boards.

You very seldom see a clothes cupboard. A whole family lives in this room. The wife sleeps in the bed with one or two children, the husband on a framework of boards. If there are more children, they sleep on the floor, or, if they are already a little older, in the kitchen. Housing is relatively simple and, for instance, the toilet utterly primitive. The people have very few eating utensils and very primitive forks and knives.

2. Collective Farms

Collectivization got started in 1929 and everything else that came along with it (banishment, the imposition of unbearable taxes, etc.). The forced gathering together of people and the work in the collective had brought with it, in every respect, a complete transformation and worsening of the way of life. The German people became slaves to the job.

Throughout the whole pay off system (*Entlohnungssystem*), people were bled to death. Day after day, without a pause for rest, from morning until late, they had to work and labor to earn their bread. The axiom "he who does not work should also not eat" was foolishly clung to. If the husband was exiled, and there were only small children, the wife had to earn a livelihood all on her own. It was up to her, where time permitted, to raise the children, to rear them or feed them as best as possible. The children had to accompany her to the field, even if they were still nursing. The people had to give their all, as much as possible, to put in many work-days ("*Trudodjen*"). The work-day was figured according to a complicated system. For that reason, every village had its own system. There was also no unified pay off system because in each community it was different. First of all the grain had to be delivered to the state and provided for the horses, pigs and cattle. What was left over was handed out to the people according to the work-days entered in the workbook. The quantity of grain handed over to the people for a work-day fluctuated between 150 grams and 2.5 kg [1 kilogram = 2.2 pounds], cash payments between .3 and 2 rubles, potatoes between .5 and 2.5 kg. Bogoljubowka (Gotthilfsdorf) community had two years where they received neither grain nor cash.

The assessment of taxes is a gloomy chapter. The various taxes, deductions and loans ("*Sajomi*") depended on the size of the acreage, wages and receipts. In one village, for example, the salary of a teacher amounted to 240 rubles [1.95 rubles = 1 US\$ in 1930], from which 46 rubles were deducted. Thereby, for example, an average deduction for that teacher amounted to 700-800 and on the high side from 1,000-1,500, even as much as 2,000 rubles. Shoes with rubber soles cost 60 rubles, with leather soles, 200-300 rubles. A teacher's family was able to live only if the wife also worked in the collective. In addition to the taxes paid in cash, the farmers had to deliver up foodstuffs from their private cow, chickens and pigs. From the cow 110 liters [1 liter = .26 US gallons] of milk was required plus meat. The quantity of meat could be delivered up in the form of chickens, geese, ducks. Every family had a cow, 5-15 chickens and 1-3 pigs. There were no horses in private hands.

The general complaint was that the collective system required far too many administrative officials. These were always well dressed and had enough to eat, worked very little, but, on the contrary, frequently drank too much. In the little village of Feodorowka, with a population of 303, there were 40 administrative officials.

The collective system brought with it the serious neglect of the fields. While in earlier times an individual farmer, supplied with horses, consequently had fertilizer for his field, but now few collectives had sufficient fertilizer. As a result of this the harvest yields were significantly less and the fields became overgrown with weeds and looked neglected. Frequently, one saw potatoes completely overgrown with weeds. The same held true here for the vast plantings of buckwheat. If the work plan was not able to be carried out, these fields then just remained unworked.

As a substitute for the absence of fertilizer, every community was supposed to make use of the "*Semipolke*" system, which meant a seven year crop rotation: wheat, rye, flax, barley, oats, clover and black fallow.

The harvest here, as compared to the Lemberg and Starokonstatino districts, is considered average and at times bad. In many communities, due to the present war, considerable harm is inflicted (over-grazing, trenches, damage by tanks, etc.). In addition to the customary cultivation, such as wheat, rye, buckwheat, oats and barley, are flax, hops and (india)-rubber (*Kautschuk*). The people eat rye bread and buckwheat grits almost exclusively. The wheat goes entirely to the state. Conspicuous in the landscape are the many dark green hop fields. Hundreds of German women are working on the hop fields. To be sure, it takes a lot of effort to work the hops, but, on the other hand, they also bring in the most revenue.

3. The school and the ethnic biological situation

Since 1938, the school has been conducted entirely in the Ukrainian language, up till then the lessons were taught in German. It was in this year that a large portion of the German teachers were exiled or relocated. Today, there are only a few German teachers here, most are Ukrainian. The German language is used for instruction only in the upper classes. Controls over the educational system are getting ever more strict, so much so that an intelligent lesson in German is entirely impossible.

In the last three years, there are hardly any children that can read or write German. Instead, they have to learn Bolshevik songs and poems. What must a student, whose parents were exiles or starving, what must a poorly clothed and famished child experience when it, by chance, hears the following verse:

We are as free in the Soviet land as a eagle,
which moves gently in the air,
for here is for ever and ever the multitude
which defeats the bloody tyrant

or

Brothers, to the sun, to freedom,
Brothers, upward to the light!
Brightness departing from the darkness
goes ahead to light the future.

Brothers, hands now joined as one!
Brothers, laugh at death!
Eternal servitude has come to an end!
Hallowed the final battle.

Of course, poems interject just like Goethe's *Mailed* and *Sah ein Knab ein Roeslein*. The German school children are much better clothed than the Ukrainian children, but they also appear very tattered and go barefooted in cooler and wetter weather. One often meets up with school children on the country road, coming from neighboring towns, with their books and shoes under their arms.

The common religious life is lost. The churches are, without exception, shut down and now function as clubs or granaries. All the church steeples have been taken down. Generally speaking, there is no more German spirituality. Most of the children here are also not baptized. Funeral services, as thought of in earlier times, are the exception. Just about no one dares to carry out a burial according to the religious practices of his family's church. Here and there, brave old men or women can be found who, at the graveside, come up with something from the Bible or the hymnal. The cemeteries have become overgrown and seldom does one see a cross.

Despite distress and persecution, the Volhynian Germans maintain their ethnicity. German is spoken exclusively in the home of one's parents. It is only in the towns that Ukrainian is frequently spoken in the home of one's parents. The youth still sing German songs. The strict old morals have suffered a decline. Still, the cases of divorce are quite rare. Although the Germans live mixed together with other nationalities, a relatively small number of mixed marriages occur. In most cases, it is where a German woman married a Ukrainian or Polish man.

Reason: First of all, because of the banishment, men escaping to find some peace;
Secondly, due to the apprehension that the German husband would be sent away and so she would be left without a husband;
Thirdly, due to a lack of German men because most have been sent into exile.

The number of children, compared to earlier times, has decreased:

1. Farming distress,
2. Job abandonment,
3. The children have the foolish impression that they have no future,
4. The negative influences on people (*kuenstliche Verhuetung*) of the period from 1926 to 1938 also found its way into the German communities.

It is alarming to consider how poorly even the German people are clothed. The men especially often go in torn and patched pants and shirts. Everyone goes barefooted from spring time until the fall.

4. Famine and Banishment

The Volhynian Germans withstood fairly good the famine of 1921-1922, and especially 1933-1934, in which 10,000 starved to death in the Black Sea and Volga Districts. Cases of starvation

did show up in a few communities. At the same time, hundreds died of hunger in the neighboring Ukrainian villages. The ethnic Germans give these as the reasons:

1. In Volhynia, owing to an abundant amount of moisture, there were no total crop failures.
2. Within one's own yard, a person could always plant some potatoes, beans and peas which helped tide one over in the difficult times.
3. By setting aside a reserve, the German always fared better than the Ukrainian.
4. Above all, however, special attention is always given to the help which came from Germany. Making use of the Reichs Mark banknotes ("*Hitlerscheinen*"), the people were able to purchase their necessities in the "*Torgsin*" [state-run hard currency stores]. To be sure, many who received such notes in 1937 were arrested and sent off into exile.

With terror, ethnic Germans talk about the banishment. The following periods of banishment are to be distinguished:

1. In 1929, the wealthy farmers, along with their families, were shipped off specifically to Siberia, the Ural Mountains, Murmansk, Archangelsk, Dalni-Wostok and into the Don District.
2. The banishment of the greatest magnitude took place in 1935. For example, in the communities of Heimtal and Pulin-Huta alone, 97 families were "resettled". This resettlement was to a zone at a distance of a hundred kilometers from the frontier. Whole communities disappeared into this zone and reliable Bolsheviki from the Tachernigow Rayon, with very few exceptions mainly Ukrainians and a few Germans, were resettled in these vacated places. Hardest hit were the almost completely German districts of Pulin and Zwiahah (Nowograd-Wolynsk).
3. Once again, in 1937-1938, under Interior Minister Jeshow and due primarily for political reasons, another banishment took place. It was mostly men who were arrested and shipped off.
4. Shortly before the outbreak of this present war, many men were sent into exile. Most dealt with families who had connections with Germany or who had relatives living there.

As a result of this banishment, the best families and, above all, the men are gone. A majority of families are without family head of households. Those men who remained are, for the most part, old or in some way or another frail.

Due to these banishments, many families, for all kinds of reasons, left their home villages and found themselves in neighboring towns or villages, or were resettled into the interior of Russia, as far as into Siberia.

The Volhynians Germans have, comparatively speaking, exhibited little pain and sacrifice in this present war. For them, the entry of the German troops happened so suddenly that the planned executions of the ethnic Germans, who were included on special lists, were not able to be carried out.

Concerning the destiny of those called into military service (averaging from 6-10) and those arrested, nothing is known about them. The following was the overall plan to be carried out in every community, by order and under the threat of the death penalty:

1. The collective cattle were to be driven off toward the suitable districts in the east. There are collective communities today who do not have a single cow. But all or some of the cattle were brought back again in other communities,. A large number of horses were also taken along.
2. In every community, men were designated, under the supervision of a communist, to destroy the farm machinery and make it useless. All over the collective yards, one can see such destroyed and useless machinery.
3. All council documents (financial records, village plans, etc.) were burned.
4. The plan to burn the houses was carried out only in a few cases.

The Volhynian Germans were fortunate, in this difficult years, to have experienced the entry of the German troops. The emotional and physical agony of the past decade has left behind deep tracks. Now a new life enters again and new hope. People once again feel free. Now, when they speak about the past, their faces are serious and tears are in their eyes. Again and again one hears the joy over the fact that we have given back to them the Sunday and the church. Now, they can not only get some rest, but above all, they can spend time with their families on Sunday. Naturally, there are always burning questions in their hearts and they have special desires.

What is going to happen to us next? Are we going to be resettled? Will we get back our land again?

As for their desires, one hears again and again:

1. We are fed up with the collective, try to get rid of it as fast as you can.
2. We would like to once again live in a closed German settlement. The permanent association with strangers is unbearable for us.
3. There is a great need for German books, first and foremost those with religious content, periodicals and newspapers.

[End of Translation]