

Some Funny Experiences from the German Colonies

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[Translator's Note: Recollections by Miss A. Schrein, the daughter of a Lutheran pastor who served in South Russia.]

[Begin Translation]

Some Funny Experiences from the German Colonies

My husband first attended the village school of a Swabian German colony. The village schools, until the reign of Alexander II, were under the supervision of the local pastor and had only one qualified teacher, sometimes for as many as 100 students, and, if need be, also a so-called assistant (*Provisor*), usually a youth aspiring to be a teacher's helper, or, if there was no one like that, then the teacher got help from the older student who had to keep a section of the students occupied. Naturally, it was quite an art to maintain peace and order when there were at least three main sections. While the teacher taught something new to one section, the other section was to do some writing or calculating. But this was not always very peaceful, as the following example shows. A student had a snub-nose and his classmates often reminded him of it with the nickname "*Hoppnas*". When the calculations and the sitting still got too boring one day, the fellow next to him ventured to tease him by calling out "*Hoppnas, Hoppnas*" time and time again until the fellow's patience ran out and he gave this fellow a resounding slap in the face (*Ohrfeige*). The one who got slapped got up and complained, "Teacher, Michel Maier hit me." (*Herr Lehrer, dr Michel Maier hat mich g'schlagen*) To which Michel Maier replied, "It is only now that you know what my name is." (*Woischt jetzt, wie i heiss.*)

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School examinations in the colonies were put under the supervision of the pastor. There was an exam every spring. During one particular examination, the father of the late General Superintendent Pingoud, Pastor P. in Tarutino, stood before a student and asked him to recite the words of Luther's Second Article of the Apostles Creed, but there was no answer. As he stood there for some time, waiting and without anything happening, he said, "Now hurry up, I do not have the time, I have to go somewhere else." Came the reply, "It's okay, you can go." (*Kascht ja ga'*).

As my husband's father had been a teacher in a Swabian colony, he was called be to the district secretary of the Mennonites in Northern Crimea and had moved there, so the Mennonite children, who came from the region of Danzig and Marienburg and spoke Low German (*Plattdeutsch*) could not make any sense out of what kind of people these children of the district secretary were. "It is for sure that they are not from our people (*Von unsere Liet sen se nich*) –

and also not Germans” because German and Low German were to them one and the same thing. As they stood opposite to each other for a long time with their ball in hand and no one daring to ask the first question of the other, a Low German-speaking boy did finally approach my husband and asked quietly, “What kind of people are you actually—are you Jews?” Shocked, my husband stood up straight and said, “No, I am not a Jew. We are Germans just as much as you are.” (*nein, ein Jud’ bin I net, wir sind Deutsche grad so gut wie ihr*). The energy behind that attempt to give an answer gave him the victory. Out came the balls, friendship sealed and still, in his old age and until his death, he corresponded with one of the schoolmates from the Gnadenfeld school, who, in the interim years, had found a new homeland in America.

What Provost St. experienced in a South Russia colony with his Vicar W.

Provost St. was from the Baltic and an urbanite by birth and was unable to find himself in the character of the German colonists throughout his life, which always seemed to him as being associated with boorishness and insolence. There was a time when an assistant was sent to him who originated from the East Sea Province and spoke the South or West German dialect of the colonists which he was absolutely unable to understand. Among the South Russian colonies, there were also some daughter colonies in the *Woronesh Gouv.* whose inhabitants had previously migrated to Russia under the reign of Empress Catherine II and had no, or very primitive schools, and, therefore, stayed particularly backward in terms of European culture, science and especially the knowledge of the High German language. There were capable farmers throughout the area. Now, the Provost wanted to send the vicar to one of these colonies and so he wrote to the church trustee (*Kirchenvormund*) that he himself was unable to come and so he would be sending his vicar to represent him. Because this person had not yet been long in the south, and not yet familiar with the history of the colonies, he wanted to have a driver accompany him who could introduce him a little to the history, area, and conditions of the colony. The church trustee, or church father (*Kirchenvater*) as the people said, understood this to mean that he was supposed to send someone who would be able to entertain him so that the trip from the railway to the colony would not be so long. So he chose a real talkative man. The train arrive and the vicar began to worry as to how he was going to be able to find the driver. He let everyone to the last man get off then he got off and finally saw a gentleman across the way. That man asked him, (*Seien sie der Prieschter?*) “Are you the preacher?” The vicar repeated, “*der Prieschter?*” The man said, (*nun seind ihr der Paschtor?*) “Well, are you the pastor?” The vicar replied, “Am I the pastor? Yes, I am he.” The driver said, (*nu setzt euch nuf*) “So come up and take a seat.” The vicar took a seat on the wagon. The driver sat down beside him. As the horses took off in a good trot and the wheels of the wagon got rolling, the driver started something new. (*Wie alt bisch?*) “How old are you,” he asked. The vicar repeated inquiringly, “*Bisch, Busch?*” The driver said, (*Nu, wieviel Jahr du hosch?*) “So how many years do you have?” The vicar asked, “*Johr—Jahr?* You mean how old I am? I am 32 years old.” The driver continued, (*Hasch scho g’heuret?*) “Are you already married?” The vicar asked, “Are you asking whether I have already married? No.” To that the driver, who, as a genuine Riebendorf resident, who was used to the idea that a youth got married at the age of 18, replied, (*Wie wollt ich den so lang solch ein Luderleben fuehren?*) “How would I want to manage such a long dissolute life?” After that, there was no answer on the part of the vicar. He told the story to his provost and this led the provost to ask the church trustee who the lout was who would ask such intimate questions about family affairs from his assistant. However, I would have to say that there were only a few

colonies that were that backward (*rückständig*). Most of the colonies in South Russia already had real good schools at the turn of the century and they had to learn two languages, so they were ahead of many farmers back in Germany. Yes, many among them had progressed so far that they could write articles and books, or this or that one could paper the post-office with letters.

[End of Translation]