THE BLACK SEA GERMAN WEBSITE: A CANDY STORE FOR RESEARCHERS

By Carolyn Schott CG® and Sandy Schilling Payne

Do you remember the day you first got interested in exploring your family's history? Maybe it was because of something your grandparents told you. Or maybe it was the apparent contradiction of a German family coming from the Russian Empire.

On that day as a beginning researcher, what did you most wish you had to help you?

- A database where you could enter your surname and find your ancestors?
- Maps to find that strange-sounding village name that your grandmother talked about?
- Indexes to help you find your family in records written in old-style German *Kurrentschrift* or Cyrillic?
- Historical information to better understand why German families were in the Russian Empire?

Wish no more, because the Black Sea German Research (BSGR) team has created a website (www.blackseagr.org) to put all of this information at a researcher's fingertips. Think of it as a "one-stop shop" to learn everything about what it means to be a German from the Black Sea region.

Not only does the website have abundant information to understand and research your Black Sea German family, but it is completely free—no membership or subscription is needed.

What is the Black Sea region?

If you ask five people which areas should be included in the Black Sea region, you will probably get five different answers. However, the BSGR team defines the following areas as part of the Black Sea region:

- Kherson Province, including the Odessa area and Swedish colonies[1]
- Taurida Province, including Crimea
- Bessarabia
- Dobrudscha
- Ekaterinoslaw
- Don Cossacks Host
- Caucasus (North and South)

Germans from Russia Settlement Locations map of the Black Sea region

The BSGR website helps genealogists understand a holistic history of their Black Sea German families—including where they came from and where they went. Research tips are given for searching families' places of origin prior to coming to the Black Sea region (Germany of course, but also Poland/Prussia and Hungary). The website also provides assistance in researching families after they left the Black Sea region—either due to voluntary migration (North and South America, sometimes Asiatic Russia) or involuntary deportation (Germany and Asiatic Russia).
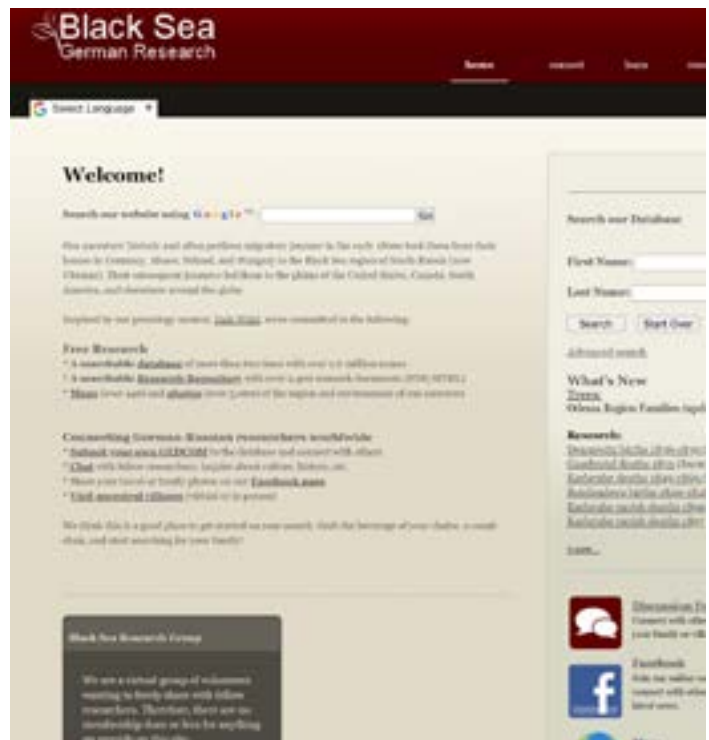
The history of the Black Sea region is a complex story of changing borders and shifting political alliances. Some parts of the Black Sea region were always part of the Russian Empire (and its successor, the Soviet Union). Some parts (such as Bessarabia) were part of the Russian Empire when Germans arrived but were later separated from Russia. Some parts (such as Dobrudscha) were never part of the Russian Empire. And very few of these areas (only the Don Cossack region and North Caucasus) are part of today's Russia.

Black Sea German families often had branches in many different parts of the Black Sea region. However, the region's complex history resulted in these different branches having very different experiences…and very different records available for research. The BSGR team and website support both new and more experienced researchers as they try to solve the jigsaw puzzle that is their family history.

Website features

The centerpiece of the BSGR website is a database that includes 2.8 million individuals in 664 individual trees. Some of those trees have been contributed by individuals who have documented their own family history. Other trees have been created by the BSGR team (plus volunteers) indexing historical records, such as village church records and town history books. Finding an indexed record in the database provides researchers with an easy reference to locate the original historical record for review. Individuals can also connect with distant cousins if they find a tree from another researcher in the database.

One of the most popular groups of records indexed in the database are the EWZ (*Einwanderungszentralstelle)* records. These records document family data for individuals who tried to repatriate to Germany during World War II. The BSGR database has indexes for nearly 100 percent of the EWZ-50s (ethnic Germans from the Odessa region) and about 15 percent of the EWZ-51s (ethnic Germans from Romania, which includes Bessarabia and Dobrudscha). Researchers finding their families' EWZ entries in the data-

base often provide the BSGR team with new information about those families. That information is then updated in the BSGR database to provide the most complete and current information possible.

The website also includes a large research repository with additional information to guide researchers.

- The "Learn" page provides high-level information to get a researcher started. It includes overviews for researching each geographic area within the Black Sea region (such as Crimea, Bessarabia, South Caucasus, etc.), as well as the areas where Germans lived before coming to the Black Sea region and where they went when they left. The "Learn" page also includes FAQs, history book recommendations, and research aids (such as guides to reading Cyrillic or German *Kurrentschrift)*.
- The "Research" page provides a deep dive into additional indexed records (in pdf format). Many of these are church records from all across the Black Sea region that are not included in the database. Any records that are indexed by volunteers under the supervision of the BSGR team are reviewed and sometimes edited to ensure accuracy.
- The "Research" page includes numerous lists showing original settlers in the region, those who were repressed in the Soviet Union, and those who

fled the area during World War II. This page also has articles on history and customs to help researchers better understand their ancestors' lives.

- Like many genealogy libraries, the BSGR website receives donated materials that the contributor may (or may not) have researched using sound genealogical methods. Researchers are always encouraged to thoroughly review the information they find to identify conflicting information and appropriate use of original sources.

Another popular collection on the website is the map collection. The BSGR site includes links to the detailed Germans from Russia Settlements Location map, which shows German colonies throughout the region and beyond (including Poland/Prussia and Asiatic Russia). The BSGR website also has a large collection of village plat maps with detailed views of individual villages that usually show where each family lived.

Other features of the BSGR website include:

- A photo collection of historic and current-day photos of Black Sea German villages
- Online discussion forums for researchers to ask questions about specific villages or family surnames
- An active Facebook group of 3,400 members from North America, Germany, Ukraine, and as far as Australia; some members living in the Black Sea region share current updates and photos from the former German colonies

How can you contribute?

Because the website is completely free, people sometimes ask, "I found so much great stuff on my family. How can I contribute to support this website?"

The BSGR team does not want your money. Really. (When have you ever heard anyone say that?) But they *do* want your data! Welcome submissions include family trees (in GEDCOM format), written family stories, records you may have acquired from an archive (a volunteer will be found to index them), and any other Black Sea German family history.

Or you can join us and pay it forward to help other researchers! Contact webmaster@blackseagr.org with anything you are interested in donating.

BSGR website background

The BSGR website is maintained by a team of volunteers, dedicated to "paying it forward" by helping other Black Sea German researchers learn more about their families. Each of the nine members of the BSGR team specializes in a specific geographic area (such as Crimea or Glueckstal) or a specific skill set (such as tech support, mapping, reading *Kurrentschrift* or Cyrillic). The complementary skills of the team members have created a rich tapestry of available information for both beginning and experienced Black Sea German genealogy researchers.

The tenth team member was probably the most influential of all, however. Dale Wahl (1938-2008) was the inspiration for the BSGR website and a genealogy mentor to most of the BSGR team.

"Dale knew there were ethnic Germans all over the Black Sea region," said David Kilwien, one of the BSGR team founders. "He didn't like the idea of directing effort to one specific area or one specific faith. He favored inclusion rather than exclusion; he was a big picture guy. Above all, he felt genealogy in our ethnic group must be freely shared."

When Dale passed away in 2008, his family felt strongly that his genealogy legacy must not be forgotten. They gave the responsibility of preserving his collection to four of his close genealogy colleagues. The Wahl family made the specific request that his materials not be used to profit any individual or organization. The initial small group recruited others who shared Dale's vision of freely sharing data and helping others.

The BSGR group decided the best way to honor Dale's legacy and his family's request was to start the BSGR website, which was launched in June 2011 on the anniversary of Dale's death. The website preserves Dale's collection for his family and for Black Sea German researchers everywhere. Making information available using a website enables researchers around the world to access the collection, not just those who can visit a physical location.

The BSGR team focuses on sharing data and guiding researchers to resources they may not know about. Dale sometimes said, "We can't do genealogy for everyone looking for a family tree," so the BSGR team equips individuals to do their own research rather than providing research services. As new researchers grow in their knowledge, the hope is that these people will in turn "pay it forward" by helping future researchers learn and grow.

As a group of volunteers, the BSGR team does not have an organizational structure supporting them (like FamilySearch or Ancestry) to negotiate the legal contracts necessary to provide online access to original documents. Instead, the focus is on indexing these documents, so researchers can find their families (even if they do not read old German or Russian handwriting), and then directing researchers to where they can find the original records.

The BSGR team also plays a vital role in helping new researchers learn and follow sound genealogical research standards.[2] As one team member said, "It takes some gentle education to convince someone that just because Great-Grandfather's date of birth was written in the family Bible, that does not make it the truth!"

By coaching researchers to evaluate and analyze the data they find, whether in indexes or family stories, and comparing that to the most reliable original records, the BSGR team "pays it forward" by helping individuals grow in their research skills.

The BSGR team also helps researchers understand the complex historical background of Black Sea Germans, so they can make sense of their family's history. Families migrated freely throughout the Black Sea region, but the changing borders and horrific repressions of the Soviet era meant families living just 10 miles apart may have experi-

Back row L to R - Rich Aspenleiter, David Kilwien. Front row L to R: Gayla Aspenleiter, Carolyn Schott, Sandy Schilling Payne. Not pictured Elli Wise, Bob Schauer, Merv Weiss, Murray Gauer.

enced vastly different circumstances. As a result, a vastly different set of records may be available for their research. This complex history has made records notoriously difficult to find, which highlights why it is so important that Black Sea German researchers who are making new discoveries share their knowledge with others.

If your family came from the Black Sea region, see what new information you might find on the website. The BSGR team is here to help!

Black Sea Research Team Specialty Areas

The Black Sea Research Team has a number of areas that specific team members specialize in, both geographically as well as skill related.

- Odessa area: Gayla Aspenleiter, Lutherans; Bob Schauer & Sandy Schilling Payne, Glueckstal colonies; Merv Weiss, Kutschurgan Catholics; David Kilwien and Rich Aspenleiter, Beresan Catholics; Bob Schauer & Murray Gauer, Hoffnungstal/Odessa
- Crimea: Merv Weiss
- Bessarabia: Elli Wise and Carolyn Schott
- Dobrudscha: Rich Aspenleiter
- Molotschna/Chortiza: Gayla Aspenleiter, Hutterites and Mennonites
- Germans from Hungary: Gayla Aspenleiter and Carolyn Schott
- Mapping and finding obscure locations: Sandy Schilling Payne
- German *Kurrentschrift:* Elli Wise
- Cyrillic Handwriting: Merv Weiss and David Kilwein
- DNA: David Kilwien
- Webmaster & Database Administrator: Gayla Aspenleiter
- Server Administrator: Rich Aspenleiter
- Technology issues: Bob Schauer, Murray Gauer (emeritus)
- Facebook Administrators: Carolyn Schott, Rich Aspenleiter

The BSGR team also serves as AHSGR village coordinators for the following villages:

- Liebental District, Odessa, Kherson (Alexanderhilf, Franzfeld, Freudental, Grossliebental, Gueldendorf, Helenental, Josefstal, Kleinliebental, Lustdorf, Mariental, Neuburg, Neu Freudental, Odessa City, Peterstal)

- Kutschurgan District, Odessa, Kherson (Baden, Elsass, Kandel, Mannheim, Selz, Strasburg)
- Beresan District, Odessa, Kherson (Johannestal, Karlsruhe, Katharinental, Landau, Muenchen, Rastadt, Rohrbach, Speier, Sulz, Waterloo, Worms)
- Crimea, Taurida (Neusatz, Zuerichtal)
- Bessarabia (Alt Elft, Alt Posttal, Arzis, Beresina, Borodino, Brienne, Dennewitz, Friedenstal, Gnadental, Hoffnungstal, Katzbach, Kloestitz, Krasna, Kulm, Leipzig, Lichtental, Neu Elft, Paris, Plotzk, Sarata, Schabo, Tarutino, Teplitz, Wittenberg)
- Molotschna/Prischib District, Taurida (Alt Montal, Alt Nassau, Blumental, Durlach, Friedrichsfeld, Gruental, Heidelberg, Hochheim, Hochstaedt, Hoffental, Karlsruhe, Kostheim, Kronsfeld, Leitershausen, Neudorf, Neu Montal, Neu Nassau, Prischib, Reichenfeld, Rosental, Tiefenbrunn, Waldorf, Wasserau, Weinau)
- Kherson parishes (Alt Danzig, Elisabethgrad, Kronau, Neu Danzig, Nikolajew)
- Swedish Colonies (Alt Schwedendorf, Klosterdorf, Muehlhausendorf, Schlangendorf)
- Podolia (Dunajewzy, Niemirow)

Since this article was written, Elli Wise, one of the founders of the Black Sea Research Group has passed away. Elli was born on 22 September 1947 in Ohringen, Germany, to Arnold and Leontine Faelchle Noetzel. Her parents were immigrants from Bessarabia and Dobrudscha who were resettled into Poland in the early 1940s before making their way to Germany. Elli immigrated to the United States in 1969 where she proudly became a U.S. citizen and raised her family. Elli was a prolific translator of German documents, including more than 3,000 documents for BSGR. Elli passed away on 7 August 2024 in Kentucky.

About the Authors

Carolyn Schott CG® has researched her German ancestors in Germany and Eastern Europe for 20+ years. She's one of the founders of the Black Sea German Research Community, a former board member of the Germans from Russia Heritage Society, and author of the book, "Visiting Your Ancestral Town."

Sandy Schilling Payne has been researching her ancestors off and on for 30 years. She is a former editorial board member of the Germans from Russia Heritage Society and currently the webmaster of the Glückstal Colonies Research Association. She is author of Germans from Russia Settlement Locations and joined the Black Sea German Research team in 2022.

Endnotes

1   Although the correct present-day spelling is Odesa, this article will use the Russian spelling of Odessa as it focuses on the historical time period when the city was part of the Russian Empire.

2   The Genealogical Proof Standard is the accepted approach for high-quality genealogical research. "Genealogical Proof Standard" in *FamilySearch Wiki (*https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/Genealogical_Proof_Standard : accessed 3 July 2024).