

Bessarabian Clay Pits

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[Translation Begins]

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by Immanuel Manske



Clay pit in the vicinity of the Neu-Sarata municipality

When our ancestors came to Bessarabia, they saw nothing far and wide but a wild steppe, overgrown with tall grass and weeds, where wolves, snakes, and other wild and creeping animals lived undisturbed, and their first concern was to build a primitive little house to be protected from snow and cold, wind and rain.

Their first homes were dug-out pits. A few beams were laid over these pits, on top of them came reeds, rushes, or straw, and then the whole thing was covered with a layer of earth. The “*Semlyanka*” [Slavic term for earth house] was complete.

Such a construction had nothing in common with a modern house, and whereas today only airplanes manage to fly over a skyscraper, back then it was easy to drive a wheelbarrow over a house. It so happened that when a home was being built, a bull walked over such a “house” broke through, and landed with its front feet right above the face of a woman with child (*Wöchnerin*).

Soon people began to build houses, but not out of stone (oh no, the German pioneers were not that wealthy in the Bessarabian wilderness at the time), but out of clay.

“Broken up” (*Drash*) clay soil was brought to the place where the house was to be built, mixed with water, and then horses were driven through it until a thin mash (*Brei*) formed. This mash was covered with a layer of straw and the horses were driven through it again until it became a solid, sticky dough. The foundation was dug out and laid with stones. On it, the walls were built from the prepared building material. After a layer of about sixty centimeters [23.6 inches] had been formed and dried, the second layer was added, and so on, until the walls reached the proper height. A pitched roof was placed on top, and then the loft floor was laid from the same building material, with neighbors and relatives diligently helping.

Such houses “built” from clay often survived a century, and at the time of the Resettlement of the Bessarabian Germans to the German Reich, many of those built over a hundred years ago were still standing. But where did these pioneers of the wilderness get the clay that was needed for the construction of so many houses and barns? To reach a clay source, the settlers scraped off the sod at the periphery of the settlement, if possible on a slope, and removed the topsoil until they reached the clay. It was removed, and in this way a wide pit was created, which over time took the shape of a sickle, or rather a half-moon. Such pits existed in every German (and also non-German) settlement, as there was always a need for clay. Most of them did not disappear. On the contrary, they grew ever larger. Only a few were plowed over after years, as vineyards and orchards were established in their areas.

Until the Resettlement, there were still two at the southern end and one at the northern end of the village in the district of Eingenheim. Several others, over which the plow had passed, were located in the vineyards surrounding my village. As far as I can remember, there were eight of them in total. They held a strong attraction for me as a hunter, for partridges liked to frequent them. Fox dens were also often found here. But something else drew me there: in these former “Clay Depressions” (*Laimalöcher*), where snow accumulated in the winter and rainwater gathered, the vines were large and bushy, so that during the harvest quite a few grapes remained hanging unseen. Ha, how wonderfully an overlooked “grape cluster” (*Traubazöttele*) tasted back

then! It does not reflect well on us that it must be said that these clay pits were often places of filth. Dead pets found their final resting place here, unburied, and eagles and stray dogs fed on the carcasses. A lot of the dirt from the yards was also often dumped here.

Now and then, they were also sites of accidents. At the clay pit, one usually dug too deep, because the clay was more beautiful the deeper it was. In the process, the steep, usually slightly undercut wall would often give way and bury the ones digging, which were then recovered dead or with broken limbs.

There is a lot to say about that. An eighteen-year-old fellow from my home village was once buried. He was rescued alive, but soon fell ill. The illness was reminiscent of leprosy. His nose and some fingers had fallen off. Some attributed it to “suffocated blood” (*ersticktem Blut*). But the doctors (even a famous one from Odessa was consulted) claimed that the illness was due to a severe cold. Soon after, he died.

But other dangers also threatened from these pits. Once, for example, it happened...But let us hear from a Bessarabian farmer who witnessed the following incident. “I was driving with my wife and my child, a four-year-old boy, with a sleigh from the neighboring village, where we were visiting, across the far and wide deeply snow-covered fields back home. Since the distance between the two villages was ten kilometers [6.2 miles], the sky was covered with gray clouds, and it was nearing evening, I was in a hurry and urged my horses on. After about half an hour of travel, a few flakes fell, a strong wind arose, and it started to drift. Soon after, darkness set in. Strong gusts whirled the snow around the sleigh. I lost my bearings and thus let the horses run freely.

From time to time, the sound of bells reached our ears from somewhere. I noticed that my horses were heading in the direction of the sound, and I was content. We had perhaps been driving into the unknown for about an hour when suddenly my horses came to a halt with a strong jerk backward.

‘What is happening,’ my wife asked in alarm. ‘Yes, what is going on? I cannot see anything,’ I replied. I struck the horses with the whip to get them moving again. In vain. They snorted, danced backward on all fours, suddenly turned at a right angle to the right, and ran away from there.

‘My God, what was that there?’ my wife asked even more anxiously, and the little one in her lap under the fur started to cry. ‘It was not a wolf, was it?’ ‘I did not see anything,’ I comforted the two of them.

Suddenly the wind had died down and the sky had brightened; the snow cloud had passed by, and the snow flurry had come to an end.

Now I could get my bearings again. We were behind the vineyards of my village. Shortly after, we arrived at our farmyard.

Before going to bed, I said to my wife: ‘Tomorrow morning I will follow our trail. The spot where the horses shied and stopped I will easily find, for the snow must be trampled there. It is possible that I can determine the cause of their shying; perhaps I will find a wolf track there.’

I did not find a wolf track, but I did discover something else there, something that made my heart stop: Close behind the trampled spot yawned the steep, six-meter-high [19.6 feet] wall of the clay pit. One more step, and it would have been the end for us.”

[Translation Ends]