

## German Literature in Bessarabia 02—Rudolf Zeiler

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[Note: Comments in square brackets in the document are those of the translator.]

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[Translation Begins]

### **Rudolf Zeiler (Hans Nimmerruh = Johnny Never Rest)**

Born on 26 August, 1893, in the northern German-Bessarabian colony of Naslawtscha. His father was a wealthy colonist and managed a large wagon workshop. In 1900, the family of a great number emigrated to Siberia, but returned after 2 years and settled in Kiev. Rudolf Zeiler attended the Russian trade school. In 1905, we find the family again in northern Bessarabia, at the Oknitza railway station, in the very place where the twelve-year-old trade student graduated from the railway school. Since he had a talent for drawing, he attended the imperial school of painting in Odessa for 2 years, but had to give up his studies due to lack of funds. In 1911, completely Russified, he entered the German Werner Training School in Sarata, which he completed in 1914. He completed his probationary year as a teacher in Hoffnungstal (South Bessarabia). The next year he was sent with other colonists from Naslavcha. He came to the Caucasus, where he settled in the colony of Martinsfeld as a sexton-teacher. In 1916, he married Alma Wojak, daughter of an old brother in the profession. In the autumn of 1918, he fled the Red [communist] Caucasus with his wife and child. In the 3 months of suffering while



escaping, he lost his child and fell ill himself. His brave wife managed to bring him through to Pomerania [Germany], where, despite his illness, he was used with other refugees on the estates of noblemen to replace the Russian prisoners of war. Broken in body and soul, he finally came to the Stettin hospital, where he struggled between life and death for almost a year. Barely healthy, he was occupied with forestry work. In the spring of 1920, he returned to northern Bessarabia. Since he found his home colony of Naslawtscha empty, he settled as a state teacher and sexton in the colony of Neu-Strymba (North Bessarabia). In the struggle for the German school in 1925, he lost his rights as a state teacher and had to go as a private teacher to Strymbeni (Middle Bessarabia), where he was forcibly transferred because of his German cultural activities. Since 1928, he again holds the German teacher position in Neu-Strymba.

[Story by Rudolf Zeiler]

### **Peter Müller, the American**

School holidays. Tired and exhausted, I now sit at the window of my empty schoolroom and idly leaf through the church books of my congregation. I find all the well-known good German names in it: Schmidt, Maier, Weber, Müller, Wagner, Zeiler, Ritter, Groß and Lang. Like on a circular railway, all these colorful faces appear in front of me and alternate with each other. And every face is a destiny.

The church books slip gently out of my hands and my gaze wanders out the window. Like a well-known, cherished picture, my home village lies in front of me. The small whitewashed houses emerge picturesquely from the lush green of the orchards. Pondering, the eye glides from one house to another. How dear and comfortable everything is to me! Every fate under these straw and shingle roofs is an open book for me. And this book tells of German misery and German suffering. Do you want to read it, dear reader? So follow me!

Let us go to the little house not far from the school; it belongs to Peter Müller, called the American, and we enter the spacious summer kitchen. There, the whole family sits around the noon-time table. At the head of it sits the head of the household. He is a strong, broad-shouldered man with a weather-burned, furrowed face. His steel-blue eyes look sharply around under the graying bushy brows; where these glance at there must be order. To his right sits his guest, Adam Klein from Scholtoi. This is a slender skinny man with a drawn out pale face and big dreamy eyes. A blond head of hair covers the high forehead. His painful features betray that he has experienced a lot of bad things. To the left of the head of the household sits his wife, a tall bony figure with a face from suffering grief. Her gray eyes look stern, but quite maternal. You can see it: she has had a lot of work and worries in her life. Now the children follow: five neat boys with short-cropped white heads and four girls with thick light blond braids, which reach far down the bench. People love the faces of Swabian children. On the long table are several bowls of strudels and potatoes, plates of prepared salad in cream and several pots of thick milk.

The children ate in silence. The old folks engaged in small talk.

“You have a nice little house of children,” the guest began the new conversation. “I’ll go with you on that,” replied the head of the household with a grin. And whenever the pastor comes here in the spring, he immediately asks me: Well Peter, already another child? Most of the time he gets it right. And when I come to our school teacher to register a baptism, he laughs with all his heart and says: You have done that well again, dear Mr. Müller! Even if you cannot do much else for our nationhood, you do give it a healthy offspring. And that already says a lot. For we are now in a hard time when the German people, most unfortunately (*leider Gottes*), is declining in numbers. The German mother of today is ashamed of many children. She aspires to the man and ceases more and more to be a mother. And this is a bad disease from which our people suffer. But we German-Bessarabians, especially we here in the north, are not affected by this disease. We are still well-disposed Germans from the old beat and ensure a German future. That is what our schoolteacher told me.”

“And he is right,” said the fellow from Scholtoi. “But it is difficult at this time to bring up the many children.” “If God gives the house, he also gives the grass,” replied the wife. Then the head of the household laughed and said, “You see, Adam, my old lady always agrees with me. Thank God, so far we have still managed to get by, and no one has starved to death. We have gone through many bad times, and the good Lord has always helped.”

“You have wandered a lot in the world, Peter, not so? You can tell a lot of things. It is not for nothing that you are called the American.”

“Oh yes. I have already looked at a good piece of the world. And I always came back to the homeland. My homeland attracted me mightily.” “Homeland, you say,” said the guest thoughtfully. “Do we Germans living abroad also have a real homeland? We have no homeland. We are homeless. We are like the Jews; only the Jews have no mother state. We have one, but it is a stranger to us, and we are strangers to it. We are like a barge that has been pushed off its shores but cannot reach the other side and is now drifting downstream. So we drift through a confused sea of nations, until the waves of the foreign sea devour us. We have no homeland.”

“Stop, Adam,” Peter interrupted his guest. “I think about it quite differently and have had quite an experience in this area as well. My home is where I was born and raised. My homeland is Bessarabia. Do you know the beautiful verse: *Man needs a place, no matter how small, of which he can say: Look here, this is mine. Here I live, here I love, here I rest. Here is my homeland, here I feel at home.* This little place is Neu-Strymba for me. Here it has always strongly drawn me. Here I want to stay now and strive here as well. Because in the homeland one dies well.”

“All right, Peter. I would like to leave you with your opinion. But listen! I was born and raised in Galicia. My people were doing pretty badly there. The Slovaks looked at us suspiciously; we were only the strangers, the invaders. I came to northern Bessarabia at the age of 20. Here it went much better. But soon, also here, the Russians also began to incite hatred of Germans. We were called—The accursed Germans. This God-blessed land was turned into a veritable hell for us. And when the world war broke out, we were arrested like criminals by night and fog and expelled to distant Siberia. The graves of our old people and children marked the long path of suffering. Some of us had to bleed to death under the Cossack terrorism. When the overthrow came, we were allowed to return. I had to go to Galicia, to my old homeland. The Poles were

now the masters of the country. With us who were sent, there was not much ceremony on their part. They called us 'bloody dogs' (*Hundeblut*) and drove us away. So we had to move on. To where? We were now homeless beggars on a strange country road, and avoided every policeman; for he had the right to mistreat us and also to lock us up. We were just 'bloody dogs' without a homeland and defenseless. To Germany! That was our last hope. If the motherland does not take care of its lost and languishing children, then, yes, then we must look for our homeland a meter [three feet] deep underground. There, no one can deny us a homeland spot. Worn out and starved, with bundles on the backs and under our arms, we made our way on foot to the genuine homeland. Homeland! The word also did me good at that time and was like ointment for our sick souls. It was—I remember it well—29 November, 1918, when we arrived in the area of Podejuch near Stettin. There was a grim wet cold at that time. We froze tremendously in our few rags. I felt infinitely sorry for the poor children we had remaining. We old people took off our last shirts and vests to wrap the little ones. It was a real pity! A few spectators stood at the small train station, staring at us curiously. "What kind of people are they?" one of them asked. "Don't know?" wondered another. "These are the German gypsies from Galicia and Bessarabia. Folks are fed up with them everywhere, and now we are supposed to feed and clothe them." That was our welcome in the dear German homeland! Later I had to learn more. I was asked, for example, how I got my pure German name and where I had learned to speak German so well. I have to admit that we were pretty much taken care of. We were all distributed among the large noblemen estates and replaced the Russian prisoners of war there. Most of us were taken to cold dwellings and barracks, some of which had been occupied by prisoners of war. Wages were barely sufficient and food even less sufficient; the treatment military harsh. No, I did not want to stay here. Here we were the foreigners again: Russians, Poles, Austrians, but no Germans. When I first heard the word 'you Russian pig,' I took a rope to hang myself; my wife thwarted the suicide. Now I wanted to leave my German homeland, because here I was not considered a German fellow-countryman. Away, but where to now? Back to Bessarabia. I heard that it had become Romanian. Since I myself had already lived there for 15 years and had papers about it, I turned to the then Romanian military mission in Berlin. With the help of this mission, I returned to Bessarabia with other fellow sufferers in the spring of 1920. We were well received in Bucharest. A Lutheran clergyman greeted us and held a worship service for us. When we received sacks of bread and canned meat for food, we thought we were like the children of Israel in the land of Canaan. We ate this bread with tears of joy, the gift of a land blessed by God; because now, after so many years of starvation, we could finally eat our fill.

"Where is my real home, Peter? My children sing a beautiful song taught to them by our school teacher: *It is beautiful at home*. I can weep at this song; for I have no real home. I do not know anything about homesickness either. I do not know this blissful feeling. Where is my home, Peter? I do not have any."

"You do not have to say that, Adam. The grief has darkened your soul and robbed you of your sense of homeland. And even if your cradle was not here, your children were born here. And for 30 years you have already soaked Bessarabian soil with your sweat and eaten Bessarabian bread honestly. Bessarabia is now your homeland. You just lack the right sense of homeland. This sense of homeland is already unconsciously in the creature. The ox knows and loves its manger, the horse its stable and the cat its house, and if you take them miles away, they find their way

back again. All the more so the human being. Only bad people have no sense of homeland, no homesickness. And you are not one of the bad guys, are you?"

Meanwhile, eating continued on conscientiously. Then the head of the household suddenly put down the spoon and began to laugh. His wife looked at him in surprise; laughter while eating was not one of the good manners.

"Well, what is the matter, Peter?" said the guest in surprise.

"What is the matter? There was just a interesting story going through my head, which is very true for you. I have to tell you. A Prussian registrar asked a traveler who needed a passport:

"Are you a German subject?"

"Yes, my mother was German. She married a Frenchman in Italy."

"And where were you born?"

"I was born on a Spanish ship that was on its way to the Cape of Good Hope. But my parents died in Brazil when I was only four years old. Then a Chinese man adopted me, who went with me to Russia and there....."

"Stop! Stop!" shouted the desperate official. "You are a real League of Nations!"

The fellow from Scholtoi had to laugh instinctively.

"It is like that with you, too, Adam. You have already changed five countries: Austria, Russia, Poland, Germany and Romania, and now you do not know where you belong. You are also a kind of League of Nations."

Meanwhile, the bowls have become empty. Peter stood up, and the whole family stood up and folded their hands. "Give thanks to the Lord, for he is kind, and his goodness is everlasting. Amen!" prayed the father, and the family joined in with the Amen.

"So, now, children, to work! And today I will sit with our guest and have a glass of wine. It is a real rarity that a German person shows himself in our world-forsaken corner."

One by one, the sons left the table and went out. The girls stayed and helped their mother with the clearing away of things.

The two men each rolled a cigarette and began smoking.

"And now I will tell you," began the head of the household, "how I have fared in the wide world. I was still a boy of 12 years, when my blessed father sold land and house and moved with us 10 children to Siberia. The Russian tsar had promised each settler 10 *Deßjatinen* [like acres/hectares] of land for each male soul. And that attracted many Germans. At that time, our colonists were very hungry for land. Everyone, of those that could, bought land. The land rose enormously in price, and this aroused the envy and hatred of the Russians. And those who were poor migrated to Siberia, where the tsar gave the land to his subjects. We left here in the spring and when we got there, there was still meters of snow. And because of that a grim cold. We

children were wrapped in pillows and feather blankets in a big sleigh. Father himself navigated our sleigh. He did not want to entrust us to a stranger: it was only through us that he received much land. The little Siberian horses stomped with difficulty through the snow. Suddenly, boom! We broke down and lay in a warm barn between cows and calves. We were in a village and did not even notice it: everything lay in the snow. But everything passed graciously, and we were soon able to continue. On one occasion, father caused [the sleigh] to toss and we children rolled around like balls in the snow. Father struggled to fish us all out. When we were all finally sitting in the sleigh and teeth chattering, father carefully counted us again, saying: praise and thanks be to God, and drove on. When we arrived at the new German settlement, we saw only snow and more snow. And everywhere there were deep trenches, like on a battlefield. Because when it snowed hard here at night, people would work their way out through the roof and then dig trenches from the door to all the buildings. We stopped at a relative's [place]. It looked pathetic here. At that time, the houses were all still built of sod (*Wasenstücke*) and also covered with the same. No sooner had we been with our relative for several days than one night my mother cried out: "Oh, God in heaven!" The house began to slide. We all jumped out into the snow in just our underwear. We later moved to another house, but even there we were never sure for our lives. Without first a spring, summer suddenly set in. And there was a terrible heat. And on top of that, the many different insects—God help us! People and cattle were attacked by them and tortured mercilessly. Now plowing and sowing took place quickly; because there the produce has only two months time [to grow]. And there on the steppe was grass meters high! We children played hide-and-seek in it and did not need to bend down. And there were fish in the rivers! We caught them with our bare hands. Soon, however, a nasty plague broke out among the children. Large numbers of children died at that time. Two of my siblings also fell ill and died. My father shook his head more and more. "No, I do not want to die here," he often said. Eventually, after a year and a half, he sold everything and we wandered back again. Back home, the money was just enough to buy back our house. We now had to lease land. So, that would be my first travel story," concluded the head of the household and filled both glasses with wine.

"I have also been to Siberia," said the fellow from Scholtoi, drinking slowly from his glass. "I am well aware of the Siberian suffering. I had to bury my elderly father and three children there. But your trip to America would actually be much more interesting to hear. You are not the American for nothing." "Yes, you are going to also get to hear about it. So, as I already told you, my father remained landless. When I got married, I stayed in father's house and leased land. There was enough land back then. Only the lease became more and more expensive. In 1908, 20 families set out and moved to North America. Since I could not raise so much money, I left my family with the parents and joined them. Our guide was the former village mayor Ludwig Maier, who had already been to America once. What wonders there were to see! The dear world of God is surely beautiful, Adam. We especially liked the trip through Germany. There I saw villages, more beautiful than our cities. And the cities themselves! A sea of enormous houses and factories. I am not in a position to describe all the beautiful things to you. And, at the same time, a meticulous cleanliness and order. Everything works like the movement in a clock. I am really proud that I have such a beautiful motherland. It surprises me that you have had such bad experiences in Germany. After all, it was a bitter time in Germany at that time, and everything went upside down. To me they were very polite and accommodating. Only one stupid story happened to me there. I have to tell you. It was in Hamburg. We had to wait a

longer time for our embarkation. So I went into town with our guide. We all wanted to take a closer look at the wonders; after all, it did not cost any money. "Watch out, Peter," the guide told me. "Always look at my straw hat so you do not get lost." "All right, cousin Ludwig," I replied, fixing the eyes on his new straw hat. But this was not always possible. There were too many wonders to see. And when finally such a witch's thing (*Hexending*) [bus] whizzed by, without horses and coachmen, and spread a stench as if it were the incarnate himself, it was over with the straw hat. I stood there for a long time and looked after the thing. And when I finally looked around, my straw hat was gone. Merciful heavens, I thought, now I am lost. Then I saw a straw hat on the other side of the street. I set out after it. The straw hat turned into a large bank. Of course, I followed. A blue-uniformed fat gentleman with golden buttons bowed deeply to the straw hat. Oh Lord, I thought, our Strymba people are tremendously honored here. It went to my head so neatly, and I took an attitude like that of the Emperor Napoleon. The straw hat now climbed the stairs covered with rich carpets. I rushed after him. It can go wherever it wants, I thought; if I only had the straw hat in my sight. But then the fat man, from behind, grabbed me by the collar and asked very politely: "To where the hurry, my fine fellow? Are you not one of those bank thieves we have been looking for for weeks?" Oh my goodness (*Jesses*), my heart fell into my pants, and my proud attitude was now over. "No," I stuttered. "Over there, the [man with the] straw hat is my good friend." The fat man looked me over again, turned to the straw hat and said with a bow: "Your Grace, Lord Baron, do you know this man?" Then the straw hat slowly looked around. "No, that was not my cousin Ludwig, but a completely strange face. And yet so noble and domineering. I felt the cold sweat running down my back. Fine thing that you have now done, I thought to myself. The Baron looking at me with a very brief glance, just said, "Do not ask me. I have no idea," and walked on. "You see," the fat man said triumphantly. "So you are after all one of the bandits."

"No," I shouted out now in my bad situation. "I am Peter Müller from Neu-Strymba."

"Strymba? Is it located somewhere among the black people in Africa?"

"No, it is that way," I said and pointed toward where the sun rises. "And at our place the people are all white, the Devil only is black."

The fat fellow looked me over and said with a smile: "No, you can not be one of the bandits, you are much too stupid for me." "Stupid?" I shouted angrily. "According to our school teacher, I had been the best student and know almost all the holy Psalms by heart. I can recite one for you right now."

"No," said the fat man, becoming more and more friendly. "Do not do that, I am not a lover of Psalms. Better you tell me whether you are not from Russia, because that is where people seem to me to be the dumbest." I would have liked to attack him! But the fat man had such big golden buttons; the sweater white, what a rank he had.

"Yes," I simply said and remained silent.

"Maybe you know Kiev or Moscow?"

"Yes, but they are further into Russia."

"So, so! Then maybe you know Odessa, Kishinev?"

“Oh yes,” I exclaimed now, quite calmed down. “Our pastor lives in Kishinev. He confirmed me and married me.”

“So, you are a Bessarabian? Good. And what are you looking for in Hamburg and also in this bank?”

I told him quite frankly the story of the straw hat. Then the fat man laughed, so that his stomach wobbled. He patted me on the shoulder and said, “Just go straight down the road, dear friend, and there ask a guard for the steamer going to North America. You will get the information.”

I thanked him nicely and headed down the road. And I soon joined my people. I have to tell you, Adam: the people in Germany are very courteous and do not let anyone get lost. I was pretty happy about the trip over the big water. There was a lot to eat and nothing to do, just like in the land of milk and honey. Arriving in New York, curiosity again drove me back into the city. My God, are there houses there! As high as compared with the length of the *Deßjatinen*. And trees grow on the roofs and people walk there. And on the streets a noise like the Tower of Babel. And people, people—oh my goodness! Black ones with curly hair and thick lips, copper-red ones with broad faces and pitch-black hair, yellow ones with crooked slit eyes and braids, brown ones with black beards—all different kinds. I could not resist doing it and tugged at a yellow one’s braid. He looked around, laughed at me, and began to make a chattering that hurt my ears. I kept nodding my head, and the yellow one continued to chatter. When I had enough of that, I turned around and wanted to go back to my people. But the further I went, the more I got lost. Finally, I turned to a guard. But oh dear!

“Who are you?” he asked.

“I do not understand English,” I replied.

“Are you a German?”

“No,” I said, “I am not a Schermann, I am Peter Müller from Neu-Strymba near Kischinev.”

Then the guard laughed, took hold of me lightly and said, “Come with me!” So I came along. I already understood that. And the guard took me to the German immigrant house. But I did not find my people here. I had to pay something and was able to stay here for the time being. I was not alone here. There were Germans from all over the world who sought their fortune in America. On the third day, a farmer’s agent arrived and recruited farm workers. Since he spoke German, I immediately announced myself. He looked at me closely and said, “All right.” We 10 of our group were the lucky ones who were recruited. We immediately got into such a bus (*Hexending*). At first, I was not all that comfortable with it. But later it went great. So for half a day, we kept driving into the country. Then the vehicle stopped in front of a large country estate. A fat, well-dressed man came to our vehicle and talked to the agent for a long time, finally turning to me, “Do you want to work with me?” “Sir,” I said, “I came to America to work and earn money for my family. If you pay well, I will stay with you.” The farmer smiled and said, “We Americans also want to work and earn dollars. We also pay well for a good job. First of all, I have to see what you can do and then I can offer you a fixed wage.” So I got off. The farmer settled with the agent and led me to his farm.

I stayed with this farmer for eleven years. I had it good with him. But when the world war broke out, the good days of the Germans in North America were numbered. An atrocity of lying



propaganda and German- harassing began. We were called German barbarians, Huns. The English farmers and factory owners put their German workers out on the streets. They pointed fingers at us and shouted after us: These also belong to the child butchers and church molesters! I could not stand it any longer. With the first opportunity I got ready to travel and drove home. I had saved myself a nice sum of money. Since my parents had already died, I paid off to my brothers my part of the house of the parents, bought my own land and began to farm independently. Now I have remained seated in my homeland and enjoy to the fullest the blessing of the homeland, for which I had such a strong longing for in a foreign country, for which I prayed in many agonizing nights and for which I wept like a small child.

Homeland! Homeland! Oh, there is something great around the homeland! And if it is only a poor little nest like Neu-Strymba, still it is the homeland. I saw people over there withering and dying out of sheer longing for the homeland.

The head of the household was now silent and looked thoughtfully through the small kitchen window into the distance.

It was evening. Then the prayer bell rang. The men stood up and prayed silently. “The bell of the homeland,” said the head of the household simply, but in such a solemn tone that it involuntarily gripped the guest.

“When I returned from America,” continued the head of the household, “and heard the homeland bell for the first time, I fell to my knees and thanked God that he let me see my homeland once more. Out there, in a foreign country, I always had such a feeling of fear, anxiety and restlessness. I was always missing something. It was not just the wife and children. It was the homeland.”

“You are lucky, Peter! I almost want to envy you.”

“Yes, I am lucky. I am in my homeland.”

\* \* \* \* \*

So, dear reader, now we want to quietly return to my schoolhouse. You have now seen a piece of my homeland. It is only a poor homeland and the people have to fight hard for their meager piece of bread, but it is the homeland, and it is beautiful in the homeland.

[Translation Ends]