Hunger Revolt in Tarutino

Bessarabischer Heimatkalender—1960
W. Rumpeltin, Buchdruckerei und Zeitungsverlag K.G.
[Book Printing and Newspaper Publishing Limited]
Burgdorf, Hannover/Germany
Pages 54-57
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July, 2025
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Note: Information within [brackets] are comments by the translator.

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[Translation Begins]

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by R.W.

It was in the year of prosperity 1815. The community of Elisabeth, later to be called Tarutino, had only existed for about nine months. The settlers had hardly gotten warm in their new homes, which is also to be understood literally, as they froze miserably in their earth huts during the winter, where there were no stoves. In addition, the flour and fat rations were very meager. Since the farmers could not cultivate the fields in 1814, they had nothing harvested and were completely reliant on the provisions from the "Crown". Therefore, twice a week, several men and women from the village appeared in front of the warehouses, the magazines (*Magazinen*), and received the food designated for their district. The management of the supply depot was under the direct supervision of the Smotritels and their assistants.

Who was the *Smotritel*? — *Smotritel* is a Russian word that means supervisor or inspector. It is important to know that the Russian government had set up a special administration for the German colonists called the Welfare Committee, which was first based in Jekaterinoslaw, then in Kischinew [Chișinău], and finally (until 1870) in Odessa. This committee, led by a president, had eight inspectors, one of whom resided in Elisabeth or Tarutino. They were responsible for ensuring that the villages were properly laid out and that all regulations of the Welfare Committee were carried out on time.

[1] This narrative is based on a report contained in "History of the Community of Tarutino" by W. Mutschall (page 25 ff)

The Elizabeth overseer Mendelsohn lived in a house built especially for him on the southeastern street leading to Katzbach, exactly where the district hospital later stood. Mendelsohn had the one advantage that he spoke not only Russian but also German. Otherwise, it was not easy to deal with him. The chronicler writes about him: "He led a merciless dictatorship and, accompanied by Cossacks, he conducted house visits from time to time that made the colonists tremble. His brutal violence knew no bounds." He loved to ride, and people humorously said in their assessment that it suited him well, as he liked to sit on a high horse.

By the way, the provision of food was relatively good; just before the harvest, which promised to be good in the very first year. Then misfortune struck. The farmers were already counting the days until the grain harvest, when the supply officer suddenly stopped the provision distribution. What was going on? No one really figured it out. "Was it the stubbornness of the supervisor that made him leave the people hungry, or was he waiting for written permission to reopen the warehouse?" (W. Mutschall). The consequences of this refusal were catastrophic. Deeply offended in their sense of justice, the men gathered in groups in the streets, making noise and clenching their fists.

"What is the meaning of this?" they exclaimed. "We demand what is ours by right! Should we eat grass like cattle?" Weeping women joined them. "The milk that our skinny Moldovan cows give," they lamented, "is not enough to satisfy the hunger of our children. And our men demand bacon and ham so that they have strength for their upcoming hard work."

It was a beautiful gesture from the population that they did not immediately resort to violence. The whole crowd moved towards the house where the pastor lived to ask for his support.

Pastor Schnabel lived in a farmhouse due to the lack of a pastoral residence. He had also arrived in Elisabeth with his family on 25 February, 1815. What motivated the forty-three-year-old man to leave his homeland of Livonia and move to the remote Bessarabia? It is assumed that he followed an inner voice, as he was an enthusiast and a dreamer. He simultaneously let himself be guided by the teachings of Christ and the writings of the so-called "Enlighteners", who were leading in the spiritual realm at that time. Pastor Schnabel hated evil in all its forms and believed in the ultimate victory of good. He hoped to be able to establish a new society in the German colonies, where justice and brotherhood would prevail. W. Kludt, the sexton of Posttal, said of him: "He was an easy-going, friendly, and legally minded preacher of virtue, who took great care of the colonists."

When Schnabel learns about the state of affairs, he does not hesitate for a moment. "In the name of God," he says, and joins the women and men.

Meanwhile, the inspector is sitting in his study and looking out the window. There is wonderful spring weather outside, and he has a great urge to get on his black horse [*Rappen*] and take a leisurely ride, possibly to a neighboring village. Suddenly, he sees a crowd of people approaching his house. "Well," he thinks, "it seems these people are not to be dealt with lightly." He quickly locks the front door from the inside and hides in his innermost room. Unfortunately, none of his Cossacks are nearby either.

The men leading the crowd first try to open the door by pressing down on the handle, but since it does not yield, they modestly knock on the wood with their fingers. However, nothing stirs inside.

“He is inside!” said a man, “I saw him go in a while ago.”

Instead of a finger, the whole hand is now used for knocking. Still always in complete calm and modesty. However, it remains quiet inside. — Now the women are also getting involved and supporting the efforts of the men in their own way.

“We want flour! We want meat!” they shout in chorus. One carries a child in her arms. When it hears the loud voices of the mothers, it begins to cry pitifully. Soon, the other children, both small and large, standing around, follow its example. They start a concert that causes the pastor to involuntarily cover his ears. The *Smotritel* must have heard it too. He trembles for his life, especially as the fist poundings against the door become more urgent and threatening.

All of a sudden, someone calls out: “Look, look, there he flies.” Everyone involuntarily looks upward. “No, on the road!” the voice corrects itself. And now the crowd sees the inspector like a flash racing away on his horse across the open area next to his property in a northern direction. He had saddled the horse in the backyard and had raced away over the garden ditch.

The men looked at each other, surprised. Now what? — “He is not going to be coming back anytime soon,” said one. — “We will have to manage without him until he is back,” said another. — Yes, then what does one do? They exchanged silent glances. Then they said to the pastor: “Pastor, it would be best if you went home now. We do not need you anymore.”

Schnabel immediately understood what they meant. “Think carefully about what you want to do,” he warned, “also consider the consequences that could arise from it.” — Later, he blamed himself for having left the people alone.

The avalanche had now started rolling. Outwardly, it appeared in the form of a ball of human beings, which grew larger and was now moving towards the warehouse. A smith quickly ran home and fetched some tools: axe, hammer, and pliers. In no time, the door of the warehouse was opened and the entrance to the interior was free. Nevertheless, the crowd did not rush in like a wild horde, but allowed the sensible men to go ahead. The distribution of food now proceeded in a fairly orderly manner. A man even found time to note down on a list what and how much each person received. Some witty words were exchanged, not in favor of the *Smotritel*. — The rumor spread like wildfire in the village that the warehouse had been opened, and everyone came to get their share. Then the blacksmith artfully closed the door again and everyone went home satisfied. The break-in at the warehouse was praised as a true rogue's prank, with the heads of the leaders surrounded by a halo.

So two or three days passed, and nothing was heard or seen of the *Smotritel*. Then something unexpected happened, something terrible. When the people of Tarutino woke up one morning, they saw cannons positioned on the hillsides on both sides of the village, their threatening

muzzles directed straight at the village. In between, Cossacks were riding and moving to and fro. Everyone immediately understood what this meant and what it was related to.

A great excitement seized the population. People gathered again in groups and debated what to do. Fight, defend themselves? Out of the question! No one even had a rifle in their hands. Meanwhile, the village mayor, who had already been elected during the founding of the village, summoned the village elders. Time was precious. At any moment, the cannons could go off and lay the entire village to rubble and ashes. Only a few residents would remain alive. A delegation was immediately elected, with the mayor at the head, to go to the troops' quarters and negotiate. The pastor had to be there again. He could not only be an intercessor but also a translator, as he spoke Russian almost as well as German. With a slight premonition, he put on his robe and placed the beret on his head. Then he positioned himself at the head of the small group, which moved up the hill like a funeral procession, accompanied by the gazes and blessings of the residents. As they passed the first military post, the soldier presented his rifle. Such was the impression that the pastor's official attire made on him, or was it the weather-beaten faces of his companions that contributed to it? The parliamentarians were immediately taken to the tent of the commanding general, and after a few brief moments, the interrogation also began. First, those present had to endure a barrage of insults. They were asked whether they had come to Russia to incite a rebellion here and to also entice other parts of the population to do the same. What on earth had they been thinking, they were asked. Soon, the pastor intervened and calmly described the situation in which the people found themselves before the incident and emphasized that it was about the lives of the poor children who had literally been starving.

"Could you not come to Kischinew and file a complaint there?" the general asked somewhat calmly.

"Yes, Your Excellency, but a trip to Kischinew, there and back—takes, with the weak horses [*Gäulen*] of our farmers, at least four to five days. However, quick assistance was necessary here, as some people had already gone two days without eating."

"Be that as it may," continued the general, "the rebellion against the state power, the attempt to forcibly enter the residence of the *Smotritel*, the break-in into the state's storerooms and the theft of state property, these are offenses that are severely punished according to our laws. It was therefore decided to level the village to the ground. I say this forcefully. However, I will show mercy before justice and spare the village. The main culprits, the rioters and burglars, must receive exemplary punishment. Who are these people, Mayor?"

Good or bad, the mayor now had to name a few names.

"Bring them to me immediately! I will send some Cossacks with you to pick them up." The delegation was dismissed. Except for the pastor. With Schnabel, a special interrogation began.

"And you, Pastor," the general addressed him, "have also made yourself guilty in this matter again. I explicitly say again, because you have repeatedly interfered in matters that exclusively belong to the authorities of the *Smotritel*. Why did you even go along when the crowd urged you to visit the residence of the *Smotritel*?"

“Excellency, I considered it my duty as a caretaker of souls.”

“Do you not believe that the people would not have committed the act of violence on their own if you had not accompanied them, and that this riot would not have happened?” “For certain, they would have done it because the hunger would have driven them to it, and then it might have turned out even worse. And moreover, they would have lost the belief that anyone would stand by them in the injustice they suffered. The loss of this belief, which in reality is the belief in justice, would have been more terrible than anything else, because it would have demoralized these people and even led them to commit injustices themselves.” “You are an idealist, Reverend Sir,” the general scoffed, “but there is no place for idealism here; ruthless strictness must be applied here.”

Pastor Schnabel nevertheless felt he had gained the upper hand because he was addressed with respect and considered the timing appropriate to also put in a word for the leaders who would soon be arriving. One cannot exactly say that he started this particularly skillfully. “Moreover,” he said, “I see no great wrongdoing in people taking the food that was due to them, especially since everything has gone smoothly and no one has been harmed.”

That was too much. “You see, you see,” the general raged again, “You even give the people the right... No, my dear fellow, it does not go this way. You must also receive your punishment for this. I will make sure that you are transferred to another area. You will go with me to Kischinew and your family will follow.” The pastor wanted to bring up many points in his defense. However, His Excellency cut him off shortly and sent him with a Cossack to the neighboring tent, where he was placed under guard.

In the meantime, the “rebels” were brought forward in chains and the poor pastor had to watch as they were punished. It cannot be otherwise—this should be a punishment for himself, for never before and never since in his life has he endured such anguish as during this execution. It did not take much for him to have suffered a nervous breakdown. The Cossacks beat their victims mercilessly, who now screamed in pain, now whimpered, now moaned and wept. Schnabel stood next to it and wrung his hands. “Stop it!” he cried again and again, “Stop, you are beating them to death!”

Finally, the blood-soaked figures were taken away, and the clergyman was allowed to go to his tent, where he was still held captive. The siege of the village lasted three days. During this time, the general and the *Smotritel*, who had also returned by now, inspected the communities of Krasna and Borodino, which had already been established in 1814. On the way back, they stopped in Klöstitz and in Beresina, where the first transports of settlers had just arrived and where the excavation of earth huts was in full swing.

Having returned to Elisabeth, the general assured himself that the uprising, as he liked to express it, had been “completely suppressed” and rode off with his glorious men towards Kischinew.

With that, our story is actually at an end. However, we would not be doing justice to the honest man Schnabel, a man for God and a man of the people, if we did not say a few words about his

further fate. As the chronicler reports, he was indeed taken away with his family to Kischinew and brought before the court. "Here, although the metropolitan intervenes for him, the trial drags on, and it takes a year and a half until his acquittal occurs and he is allowed to return to the joy of his congregation (late 1816)." He died at the age of forty-eight. The emotional turmoil he suffered led to his premature death. A mysterious darkness surrounds his "first" burial. Although his date of death was known, the location where he was buried was not. "On Good Friday 1875," the chronicler recounts, "children playing in a garden notice small pieces of wood from a coffin and other bits and pieces. The pastor, informed of this, rushes to the site and finds that Pastor Schnabel lies buried here. A found ring, boots, and remnants of the clergy gown speak clearly. The pastor orders the return of what has been taken and the covering of the grave. With the permission of the Consistory, the remains of Schnabel's found body will be transferred to the new cemetery on 6 October of the year with the participation of many parishioners and buried in a grave vault." Thus, after years, the deserving man still received an honorable funeral and a dignified resting place.

Perhaps the reader is also interested in the fate of the other main character of our story, the mean Mendelsohn. At the urging of the Evangelical Lutheran Consistory, an investigation into the Tarutino incident was initiated in Petersburg, which concluded with not only the *Smotritel* being removed from his post, but also the supporting president of the Welfare Committee, Harting. He was succeeded as president by General Insow, who was friendly towards the Germans. Thus, the arm of justice has also intervened here in a timely manner.

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