

Resettlement Chronicle of Hoffnungsfeld, Bessarabia

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[Translator's Note: This is an account by G. Wernik, residing in the German territory of Posen/Wartheland, three months after the Resettlement in 1940, of what the people from Hoffnungsfeld, Bessarabia experienced in the last few months leading up to their resettlement from Bessarabia to Germany during World War II. In an attempt to estimate currency values, I came up with this: 49.50 Lei=1 Reichsmark; 1 Reichsmark=US\$4.20 ca. 1936. Words within square brackets indicate translator's comments.]

[Translation Begins]

Chronicle of Hoffnungsfeld Community, Akkerman District, Bessarabia

Composed by G. Wernik, Stubbenfeld Diocese, Seeheim Post Office, Posen District, Wartheland

Kratzau, January 1941

Resettlement

Motto: "What I am going through now, that
you do not know; however, you will
experience it afterwards!"

Oh, when I come to write this chapter, my hand wants to nearly become numb as I think about all the terrible and sorrowful things that we have experienced by our resettlement during the last three months!!!

This period in time was certainly the most difficult and darkest in the destiny of our colonists and things German in our Bessarabia. And if our German folk had not possessed such a strong trust in God and their future fate not been influenced by the above quoted motto, for sure, many a person would have been crushed under the weight of the events; however, our community individually and our Bessarabian Germans as a whole endured, without grumbling and with stoic heroism, the fate of the last three months from the side of the Russians and the separation from the homeland soil.

Since the outbreak of the war (01 September, 1939), with the beginning of the war between Germany and Poland, our suffering was also being set in place for us.

Although Romania had occupied Bessarabia in 1918 and remained neutral, the preparations for the "things to come" started there immediately after the war broke out. Men of military age were conscripted, alternately two to three times to refresher camp service (*Wiederholungsdienst*) and digging trenches. Horses, wagons and harnesses for horses were mobilized temporarily which made things

impossible for the farmer and farmers' wives, often leaving them without what was necessary to do their farm work.

The work should, must and was also carried out in our German villages. The organizations of our people met all the measures for this in good time. The indestructible strength and endurance of our German people really showed itself during this time.

A person consoled himself through all this with the hope of better times; but it would only get more difficult! And the calamity did not wait too long to reveal itself!

For some time already, one spoke grimly about the idea that the Russians wanted to occupy Bessarabia. This message settled down like a debilitating and obstructing frost on all branches of public life one spring night. It came blaring down and announced disaster! Although we, in recent years, had to suffer much from the Romanian authorities, primarily the school authorities, through their recently adopted, simply intolerable forms of quasi introduction of denationalization policy, and our children, in the truest sense of the word intellectually crippled "mutilated" in that the use of the mother tongue was entirely "forbidden", still, for us, the Romanians were still desired a hundred times more than the Russians, that is, the communists!

It was actually only a choice of the "lesser" evil between two evils. We were always treated with neglect in the post-war period.

28 June, 1940 brought about what we never thought possible, that is, did not want it to ever happen, but became a reality, namely, the actual occupation of Bessarabia by the Russians!

Now we knew that our "hour" had come!

But we were totally convinced that this step could only be taken in agreement with the German government and that the Führer, in everyway, would be taking care of us.

That was our only consolation which we clung to like someone drowning.

We had heard various horrible reports from those fleeing the Russian "Paradise" which was separated from us by the small Dnjester River and now it dawned on us that we would also have to experience the same! We had to submit ourselves!

No sooner had the Reds moved into Bessarabia, and hardly had the endless jubilation of the lower classes of Bessarabian Russians and Bulgarians died down when some Red soldiers also showed up in our village. Initially, our German villages were completely avoided, and that encouraged us with the hope that we were being taken care of.

Our national organization, lead by Dr. O. Broneske, which was already in place for several years and, lately, developed an extremely energetic and comprehensive organizational plan of action which ensured, through a well organized, Secret Connection Service (*Verbindungsdienst*), that in every German village, upon the first contact, a single reception (if one can put it that way) would take place.

On such an occasion, among other things, it would be said that we Bessarabian Germans have our own national organization with its headquarters in Tarutino, and that each municipality has a local chairman—in our case it was Eduard Klieber—and, if there should be a need, the *Towarischtschi* (comrades) might want to contact him, which would be seen as a “kind” gesture.

The leader of the troops, of course, a Jew by the way he spoke, must have seen the hidden troublesome fear on our faces, responded “reassuringly” that we need have no fear of the Red Workers Army (*roten Arbeiterarmee*) because they do not wrong anyone.

The appearance of the Reds was indeed black and—I have to say almost dark! He continued by saying that the Red Workers Army actually came to free us from capitalism and the Romanian Bulgars (*Bojarentum*), but what was actually meant was something quite different; they really wanted to “free” us from our own wealth! That reality was soon to be confirmed.

So the first contact was made and more was not long in coming.

After several days, a commissioner (civilian delegate) came to the village and took in hand the reins of the Administration, to put our “backward” economy on a new, modern track, informing us that our Bessarabian economy had stayed very far behind and that the economy of the Soviet Union today stood at the top of all countries and far surpassed even the “German” economy!

So now, because of the neglect on our part, in order to somewhat catch up, the commissioner discharged the duties of his office so energetically that our people, on account of pure and simple commands, quickly heard and saw it was time to disappear!

We had to live with the fact that our authorities, who had no idea of a proper function of agriculture, often gave us commands which, of all things, were just not practical!

But the Soviet citizen was not allowed to think and to criticize: “Comrade Stalin was caring and thinking for him!”

Shortly after the invasion, an announcement was made to us by the commissioner, in a solemn community gathering, that the Supreme Council of the People’s Commissar, through the request of Bessarabia’s representatives to become a part of the Soviet Union, decided to admit it into its union. Naturally, at this announcement, we all “had to” approve with a hearty “hurrah”! However, what our people really felt deep down inside was known only to us!

After a “show of hands”, which revealed that everybody was “in favor” and that no one was against the annexation, a long list of major civic laws and duties were announced to us, whose conscientious and punctual compliance was emphatically recommended to us as we were now actually Soviet Union citizens, whereby the commissioner especially stressed that the laws of the Soviet Union were very strict.

The most important order of the Soviet Union to its subjects, so concluded the commissioner loudly: “work, work, and once again, work!”

We soon discovered that the Soviet citizen had to work himself to death (*zum Schwarzwerden*), however, he was not going to enjoy the blessings of his work, but the State would!

We were hardly finished bringing in the huge harvest, which was doubly hard to accomplish under the prevailing tragic circumstances of the year, which cost our farmers double and triple in expenses because the state expelled some of the workers from the land, some were dragged off (*verschleppten*) and a fragment of the crops fell to the ground because the farmers did not want to work anymore, it was then that it started to “hail” directives concerning compulsory deposits of agricultural products of all sorts.

Because the deliveries were not made quickly enough, many of our countrymen were forced to deliver them even on Sundays! That was simply terrible for our people who hardly harnessed up a wagon on Sunday to go out visiting!

Immediately after the threshing the field had to be deep plowed (not shallow).

Since the summer had been very dry, it was impossible to plow our hard soil. But once the order was given, plowing had to take place, regardless of whether it was possible or not!

Almost daily, the commissioner, together with the community administrative board, which he had set up from all possible “specialists” people who until recently were no more than day laborers, walked through the village to determine whether all horses and all plows were engaged in the work of each day.

I would like to also add here that during the election of officials, no one came into consideration who had earlier played a leading roll. There were isolated exceptions, like in our village, where some were admitted initially. The Soviet Union is just that...a working class state.

Within a short time, under the new “blessed” regime, we came to the point where our granaries were empty and some of our fields were broken up, but prepared in a miserable manner!

For grain delivered, most of the time, we received only receipts or a joke of a price of 36 kopek for a Pud (= 16kg) of barley and 80 kopek for a Pud (= 16kg) of wheat.

We also had to deliver large amounts of various seed grains, and so it literally came to the point where we were “set free” from everything that we had!

However, the scariest thing in all this was that for many farmers the quota of grain to deliver often called for more than the supply of grain that was available. However, it was strictly forbidden to buy and sell grain. So many of our people viewed the future with fear and trembling. (Many other people of Bessarabia were in a similar situation.)

So the one who did not fulfill his obligations, that is, did not fill the quote demanded of him, was automatically turned over to the court and, without being present, was sentenced as an enemy of the State and then, during any night, a “black” car would pick him up and he would never see his homeland again. It often happened like that to those living in the Russian and Bulgarian villages.

It was 90% certain that this fate would also be granted to us Germans.

If we did not have the sure hope of a speedy resettlement, we would have really been desperate

The Bessarabian Russians were soon to realize that, too. When we tried to comfort them in their dismal situation and talk to them about better times, that things would get better, they usually replied, "Sure, you are lucky. You get to leave. However, we have to stay here and for us all is lost!"

"If help does not come to us from the outside, all of us will perish!"

Thanks to the circumstances, that the protective hand of the Führer held sway over us, which at least protected us personally from attacks, which we, under all harassment, consider ourselves to be truly "fortunate"!

Behavior of Workers

On top of all this also came the terrible disadvantage, when it came to our former foreign national laborers, as they saw that they themselves had the sympathy of the government and so exploited this most despicable situation.

Like an invisible omen, they came, day after day, into the village and formally "besieged" the village administration with complaints of all sorts!

You can be sure that they were incited.

These Germans, who up until this time had an unlimited, to the point of sentimental, trust from them for their proverbial honesty, were now presented to the commissioners as swindlers and exploiters without equal! And so the workers, in endless cases, could collect all possible earlier "deductions" and "unpaid" wages [deposited as loan guarantees] by orders of the commissioners.

And because the commissioner always considered the accuser to be in the right, the blackmail even went so far that what had been pledged as security at the time that person accepted the goods, and had not been redeemed, still had to be returned without even giving consideration to whether the grain or money received back then had been paid back.

And so it often happened that the laborer or some borrower came with claims of which the one "pounced upon" could no longer recall, or because it was a pledge that was drawn up some 10-15 years back. It did not make any difference, the one complaining had to be "appeased"!

The good part in all of this was that despite the enormity of the whole situation, these young guys always allowed themselves to be "negotiated" with and usually were satisfied with the payment of part of their claims, to which they then had to give their signature, allowing the person concerned to have no further demands put upon him which led to a hidden "demonic" smile, knowing that "their hour had finally come!"

But even in this case, the phrase soon became very true: “A life of unclouded joy will not be given to mortals.” Naturally, not in such circumstances!

Then as each neighbor strove to get “his own man” onto the general labor site, it did not take long until all enthusiasm was gone.

These events played themselves out in different ways in all German villages.

In the interest of justice it has to also be added that after most had their “chicken” plucked, the newly established People’s Court came up with the order that no one had the right to reclaim the pledged stuff, unless they had taken legal steps and the one providing the loan would not be allowed to claim any interest.

Arrival of the Resettlement Committee

Finally, after the much desired and impatiently waited for arrival of the Resettlement Commission, things started to go differently for us!

As devastating as the news of the invasion of the Russians was, even more so the extreme joy and cheering at the news of the arrival of the Resettlement Commission! Now all worries and the gloom of night were chased away. “Thank God, our savior is here!” is how it echoed from mouth to mouth and from village to village.

Words cannot express the cordiality and friendliness with which the settlers received and “welcomed” them. The physical encounter with our “German brethren” will remain unforgotten by us, and probably by them, too!

Eternal thanks to our God, our Führer and our German fatherland which is for us—and now also for our great Führer—the greatest accomplished deed of saving love for one’s fellow-men ever to be recorded in history!

We have been saved like something snatched out of a fire!

Liquidation

Because the Führer also had a concern that we need not leave empty handed, and seeing to it that we would not be robbed of our hard and laborious cultural work of 3 generations, we could, in the meantime, save at least a fraction of our assets through the sale of moveable property. (note: The final allocation should subsequently follow.)

The sale of our household furniture went good, in fact, often it went very good. Thanks to the circumstances where there was a lot of Romanian money in Bessarabia, and the people were afraid that it would soon be taken out of circulation, everyone sought somehow to convert his money into commodities.

Once the word got out that we were actually going to leave the country, droves of people showed up...the better Russians simply did not want to believe it, and the Jews told the people that Russia would not allow the kernels to depart and the chaff would also be kept here...also, people from the surrounding area showed up daily in our village and, over a period of 2 weeks, little by little, bought everything what we had to sell, except the better furniture and pianos.

Even these we were able to sell very well because we often sold these pieces of furniture at fabulous prices to the Soviet officials who, during this time, arrived in Bessarabia. Buffet cabinets often sold for up to 25,000 Lei [ca. US\$ 2,122]. It was not uncommon for clothing cupboards (*Kleiderschränke*) to go for 12,000 to 18,000 Lei. Pianos, and there were 12 of them in our small village, brought 40, up to 80 and 90 thousand Lei each.

Initially, army authorities paid from 5 to 8 thousand Lei per cow and toward the end up to 20 thousand.

The Jews, who were hunting directly for good cows, paid up to 50,000 Lei for exceptional cows.

In the beginning, the price for horses were around 15,000 Lei each, but, little by little, it rose to 60,000 and 70,000 Lei.

By the way, it must be noted that the Soviet officials, on the average, were poorly clothed, despite their having lots of money. Also, the wives of the officials wore only very poor stuff. You did not see any wearing stockings.

So it was that Bessarabia, which had huge stocks of all kinds of goods, was sold out within 3 weeks. Toward the end, it was simply impossible to get hold of a meter of material (*Schnittware*) or other colonial goods (*Kolonialwaren*). It was as if a fire had raged over Bessarabia!

As a result, an eerie mood of panic also seized the local population.

That Russia had nothing but grief and misery to offer to the population became clearer and more certain day by day.

One came quickly, after the long awaited help from Moscow in “reality” showed something quite different, to the conclusion, and the general conviction was, that the future could only bring slavery and poverty.

The following a case in point

A man who was a wholesale merchant came to me one day—his business was already “officially” liquidated, which is to say, the inventory was gone—and he asked me about my piano. He came from the town of Kilia.

As I was telling him that I myself was not ready to sell, since we were not yet certain as to our future—that was shortly before the arrival of the Resettlement Commission—he said to me, “Would that our future was as certain as yours, then we would be fortunate,” and then added, “Yesterday I had merchandise, today I have money; but what I will have tomorrow I have no idea.”

Then he said that he wanted to invest his money—and he had bundles of money—in furniture and home appliances, then, in the upcoming “black days”, little by little, sell them—assuming that they would not already have been confiscated—and thereby support himself and his family with them until he met up with “better” times.

A majority of the better off population of Bessarabia simply could not comprehend or believe that Bessarabia would remain under Russia. Then, without negotiating, he paid me 65,000 Lei for my old piano, and 16,000 Lei for a bicycle which my sons had used for 10-12 years. These were the prices that I asked for with the stipulation that he not take the things.

And so it was that we were able to save at least a portion of our assets.

In addition came also the real situation that, according to treaty, the Soviet Union committed itself to compensate us for house and yard on the basis of an assessment established by a special German-Russian Assessment Commission.

Then, also, on the part of the Resettlement Commission, all our receipts for delivered grain, for the purpose of subsequent settlement of accounts, were collected and it took upon itself to deal with what still had to be harvested, such as the maize and some cereal grains, such as soy beans, etc. that had not yet been brought to the farmyard.

Tax Extortion

Unfortunately, there was one thing that the Resettlement Commission was unable to prevent, notwithstanding their vigorous protesting against it; namely, the collection, or more accurately said, the extortion of agricultural tax, which, for a major portion of landed property added up into the millions. For example: 12 hectares – 12,000 Lei; 80 hectares 1,3000,000 Lei.

The “semi-annual” tax was completely collected before the taxes were due, which during the period of the Romanian State, had not all been called in yet for the year 1940.

The collection of this tax was ruthless in some villages and in some cases the individual was threatened with shooting or abduction, a severe bloodletting for our economy and made away with many millions!

Through this tax, the “individual” landowners were to be softened up for the “voluntary” entrance into the Collective.

The individual land-owner was in a difficult position because he was obligated to pay an imposed tax which was impossible to pay and if he did not meet his obligation he would end up being deported as an “enemy of the state”.

And this fate awaited most of us because most of us were well to do. However, the German authorities certainly worked this out by taking all the receipts of the taxes paid for by us and turned them over to the Resettlement Commission

As the Russian State undertook a land division in October, and wanted to allocate land to the landless, these folks were so intimidated that no one wanted to have any land anymore!

That left only one option: “Delivered into the Collective!”

These were and are the thumbscrews applied by the Soviet Union! It was perfectly clear that they were working on making the people submissive!

So it went until the first days in the month of October. The report finally came that Hoffnungsfeld would be able to depart on 11 October; however, only the women and children and those men who would not be driving with the Trek.

The men were to move out in the Trek on 13 October. Now everybody could breathe easier; now things got going!

Every family butchered a pig faster than one had never seen done before and roasted the meat for the coming winter.

Upon orders from our authorities, the wagons were equipped with covers against the rain, our stuff packed into bales or bags with the Resettlement Number of the head of the family and the home address noted on them, and then we were ready to....move out and resettle!!!

The joy and jubilation was so great that the Bessarabian Russians kept saying, when they came into the village, “You are acting as if you were going to go to a wedding, not as if you were going to be relocated! Maybe they thought that the Soviet Union was resettling us.

So we, after coming to grips with our inner struggle over the surrendering of our “native homeland” — sacred word!— and after, on a specific day, taking part in a special ceremony led by one of our local leaders at the cemetery where, as an “ethnic unit”, we said our goodbyes to our ancestors and other deceased, we heeded the call of the Führer and the voice of the blood (*Stimme des Blutes*) and on 11 October, with bells ringing, but without any tears—The Russians were not going to see us crying!—with unshakeable confidence in God and Führer we headed out for home!

And so finally comes to an end the account of the Hoffnungsfeld community in Bessarabia.

Thanks for the Resettlement Work

It would not be right to forget to give consideration and thanks for the many-faceted, painstaking work of the Resettlement Commission and the preparatory work and the assistance of our Area Group leader Rudolf Pfeiffer and teacher Otto Wernick.

The former, in the course of the last half of the year, in his previous capacity often made trips and journeys which only could make things happen due to his great effort.

O. Wernick, who at one time was sexton of Kodschalak (Cogealca, Dobrogea) helped come up with an escape action for about 100 families from the Dobrudja and had thereby gained valuable experience and,

during the end when our community was without a sexton, took care of drawing up almost all the certificates for our community from the various parish offices.

There is also the female Area Leader Lilli Hetsch, who carried out her duties with much dedication, as well as the Youth Leader Hildbert Heth and the courier for the Secret Connection Service, Hugo Wernick, who both, by their youthful daring, took on difficult and dangerous tasks, which by what they did receives no less appreciative consideration.

Then, not to be left unmentioned, there are the Johann Keller and the Friedrich Voßler families who made available their magnificent homes throughout the entire period of the Resettlement.

In conclusion, we need to think as worthy of praise our brave SA men, who worked in shifts, day and night, in the Resettlement Office and stood guard, and all who contributed something toward the good success of the Resettlement such as V.G. Eduard Wernick, who worked all day long with the Resettlement Commission in the various villages, drove around and assisted in the speeding up of the Commission's work, plus the local man Ed. Klaiber, who was always exemplary in ethnic affairs.

Summary

In summary, it can be said perhaps that the founding of the Hoffnungsfeld community by our ancestors took place in poor and difficult circumstances but in the firm reliance on God and the blessing of manual labor.

Through the stubborn unrelenting work and thrift of two generations it became one of the richest and most flourishing of German communities.

The village, as such, will through its stately rows of houses and neat full of promise orchards down the middle of the village, will for a long time proclaim the German culture and German industriousness, if communism, which is the end of all culture, does not allow everything to collapse. Only the future will tell!

However, my wish for the Hoffnungsfeld community in its new homeland is for her blessing and well-being, to continue the old trust in God, the old diligence and the old frugality to the delight our dear Führer and our fatherland.

Final Note

When I let the history of my hometown pass before my mind's eye and consider particularly the interaction of various circumstances which for us were so ideal...when also painful ways culminated in the big step toward Resettlement, I cannot conclude my chronicle any other way than with the words: Miraculous Beginning! Wonderful End, where the miraculous hand of God led us in and led us out! Miraculous is his counsel; wonderful his deeds! And you replied: What is still ahead for us? (*Wo wills hinaus?*)

Signed: G. Wernick

[End of Translation]