

Trip to Northern Bessarabia

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[Note: Comments in square brackets in the document are those of the translator. Maps at the end are not part of the document translated.]

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[Translation Begins]

Trip into the Northern Part of Bessarabia

From the pages of the 1910 diary of Wilhelm Mutschall.

In the northern part of the Soroka District, in the middle of a handful of Germans, my old friend, Dr. Grüner, former regional physician of the Akkerman era, had opened his residence after his resignation, living in all solitude and silence from his modest pension. His real estate barely comprised $\frac{1}{4}$ *dessjatine* [0.7 acres / 0.27 hectares].

Our thread of friendship continued. Letters and cards, however, are only a weak substitute for the personal communication of friendly people and families. The promise to once visit the old friend was made, and every time the summer came, I was reminded of it. But it was only when I myself had retired and set up my own home that I was able to accept the invitation and follow the desire and will of the deed.

If one wants to get from the south to the north of Bessarabia, one must forego being transported there in the shortest way. A highway that connects the south with the north was not found necessary to build in the state and commercial interest and only envisioned in the connection with foreign countries through 3 lines generally running across Bessarabia. As many roads lead to Rome, the steam engine also brings us to the line with great detours via Bender-Rasdelnaja-Slobodka-Rybniza-Okniza.

Over undulating hills, which form the outermost foothills and branches of the Carpathian Mountains stretching through northern Bessarabia, the iron rail first leads to Bender, where Bessarabia stops. But we have to move further away from our line until near to Rasdelnaja where the Odessa train picks us up and carries us northwards. Through gently undulating flatlands it goes on, tiring for the eye and mind. But stop! Should the left bank of the Dnjestr River not have received something of the creased garment of middle Bessarabia, is it just the train of the garment? And right: the closer we get to the deeply embedded Dnjestr, the more varied the terrain becomes. The puffs of smoke from the engine follow more quickly, the wheels rotate faster; the track descends, following a narrow valley gorge; the train rolls through a tunnel, and soon after a long shrill whistle announces its arrival in Rybniza, which is firmly set on the banks of the Dnjestr. This little spot offers an attractive, captivating image, a picture to paint! The roofs are white as if they were covered with hoar-frost, the platform white, the caps and footwear of the officials and those in service white. We do not need to ask about the cause of this phenomenon. A look to the right of the freight wagons loaded with limestone tells us that we have arrived in the area of the limestone camps and the famous lime kilns of Bessarabia.

As the train crosses the bridge, the Dnjestr shows us a small section of its low-lying bank, running in many bends, in which it silently and noiselessly pushes its water towards the sea. On the Bessarabian side, a deep valley gorge with steep rocky slopes on whose left slope the track winds halfway up. Soon rough broken up and fractured, soon stratified layers above each other, soon in the form of a wide strip, which is left behind by a flowing and at the same time stagnant mash, walled in from top to bottom, so the steep walls of the narrow valley form an image through the strange structure of its rock masses, which one would like to hold on to and contemplate longer. And to our right, towering cone-shaped furnaces scurry past us: one—two—three—four, and still some more. They are the kilns through which the already mentioned limestone must pass in order to become, by strong heating, separated from its inherent carbonic acid, to become marketable and usable. Narrow bridges, which start from the railway track, lead over to the vents, to an opening through which the contents of the ovens are managed. We have barely left the valley and reached the higher ground, so night casts its veils over the area, so that the whole route to Okniza, where the railway joins the northernmost line (Mohilyev-Novoseliza), is lost to the eye. A person now has time to look at ones fellow passengers. Trade and small business are mainly in the hands of the children of Israel, who are strongly represented here in the north, and the Moldovans, although they make up the bulk of the rural population, are far away from both air travel and business trips. The Ruthenians or Russians, a tribe related to the Little Russians, are represented quite numerous among the travelers, as their language already reveals. “Have to die!” (*Prichoditsja umriti*) a woman cries out because of her uncomfortable seat, “*Nitschego, dojidish!*” a comforting and reassuring voice calls out to her. What all rests in the musical sounding word “good! good!” (*dobre! dobre!*) especially if you meet by chance after years and celebrate the joy of the reunion and the friend of the friend does the favor, the last contents of the bottle, albeit after some stumbling, to bring to mind: praise and applause, joy and satisfaction, thanks and blessings! So a merchant and a railway employee, two fathers, were astonished and delighted when they found each other in Okniza in the swaying crowd. I do not want to say that these two are typical of their tribe; after all, the Russians seem to be a cheerful and carefree people.

At dawn, the train takes me to the destination of my journey, the halfway-station Nalawtscha, on the right slope of a valley gorge running in many twists and turns following the Dnjestr. Deep

down the thatched roof houses, which appear like beehives on an enlarged scale and lend the village something idyllic. Trees of strong growth, especially poplars, accompany the stream to the mouth into the river. Everything breathes peace and quiet here. The station building is lonely, the towering rock face in front of it. As the train has released steam after one minute of stay, only 3 people remain behind: the one in charge, his helper and the attendant.

In the morning light, I walk, the aforementioned attendant as a giver of direction and luggage carrier at the side, to the village 4-5 *Werst* [2.7-3.4 mi / 4.7-5.3 km] away and am at the destination of my journey.

Here my friend Grüner lives with his wife, sister-in-law and an adopted little daughter in a rurally beautiful area in his own home, which he bought at the time from his good friend, Provost Faltin, in quiet and seclusion. His possessions are basic; a yard with a house, outbuildings and a piece of garden land for growing vegetables make up the whole thing, but enough for people who make such modest demands on life as this.

For three days, I enjoyed the hospitality of this house and experienced a lot of love and joy. There was a lot to say and to ask.

But let us take a closer look at the landscape. In the strong bend that the Dniestr makes to the east, in the form of a broad tongue, which extends somewhat to the right corner of the mouth, the farmland and meadows belonging to the Germans of Naslawtscha. Over there, on the almost vertically supporting mountain slope, extending to an altitude of about 300 feet (*Fuß*), a Russian church dedicated to the memory of St. John the Baptizer. It is quiet and abandoned today; but on certain days of the year thousands of pious worshippers from near and far are to gather here to do their devotion. The church is a place of pilgrimage. We take a trip there. For 1 kopeck the ferryman takes us across; we climb and rest, climb some more and are finally at the top. In the courtyard of the church, covered public spaces are prepared for the pilgrims; Aging gray frescoes, such as the blessing of the children and the feeding of the people in the wilderness, are to be a devotional. We climb even higher through oak scrub and now also have the church at our feet. What a view from this height! At the front of the headland stubble fields, further off vineyards and corn fields, and finally, limiting the horizon in the west, a dense oak forest. Tired, the August sun shines on all and sinks toward sunset. We start the return walk in the twilight.

The neighbors of my friend are the Germans mentioned above, currently 9 families. Their village is located at the end of the 5 *Werst* [3.4 mi / 5.3 km] long street inhabited by Ruthenians. When the people immigrated here, and where they come from, no one can say with certainty. If the German colonists have been called “a tribe without history,” then this is all the more true of them. By calculation one comes back to the year 1815, in which the grandfathers could have immigrated. Where from? The answers are even more uncertain. From Courland, from Germany, from Klöstitz they tell me. But Sexton Ritter wants to reveal more precisely that his grandfather comes from Baden-Baden, but from which village (!) he could not specify. Their land, 72 *dessjatinen* [194 acres / 78.5 hectares], once belonged to the Krupenski Estate and was only bought 15 years ago for inheritance and ownership when the rent had risen from 50 kopecks to 20 rubles. Their family names sound really German; Besser, Rauch, Groß, Müller, Ritter, Zailer. Their language is imperfect and poor. This splinter of the German people was discovered decades ago by the former Provost Faltin, when he also came to this corner of the earth in search

of fellow believers. The little congregation owes much to him, so, for example, the house of prayer. Here Sexton Ritter holds the reading service on Sundays and holidays with 8 burning candles, even if he only has, as at that time, 8 listeners. The sexton has stopped teaching the few children because the people cannot or do not want to pay him a salary.

One more word about the Ruthenian. According to descent and language, pure Slavs and so with tribal brothers of the Little Russians, they are the pure Moldavians according to the outward person. The sheepskin cap, the linen over-shirt, held together by a wide red or green belt, the shaved face with the trimmed mustache make it confusingly similar to the Moldovan, not to forget the open chest. They inhabit almost all the villages of the Khotin District and can be found by the Pruth River and in the Bjelzy District. Their total number is given as ¼ million.

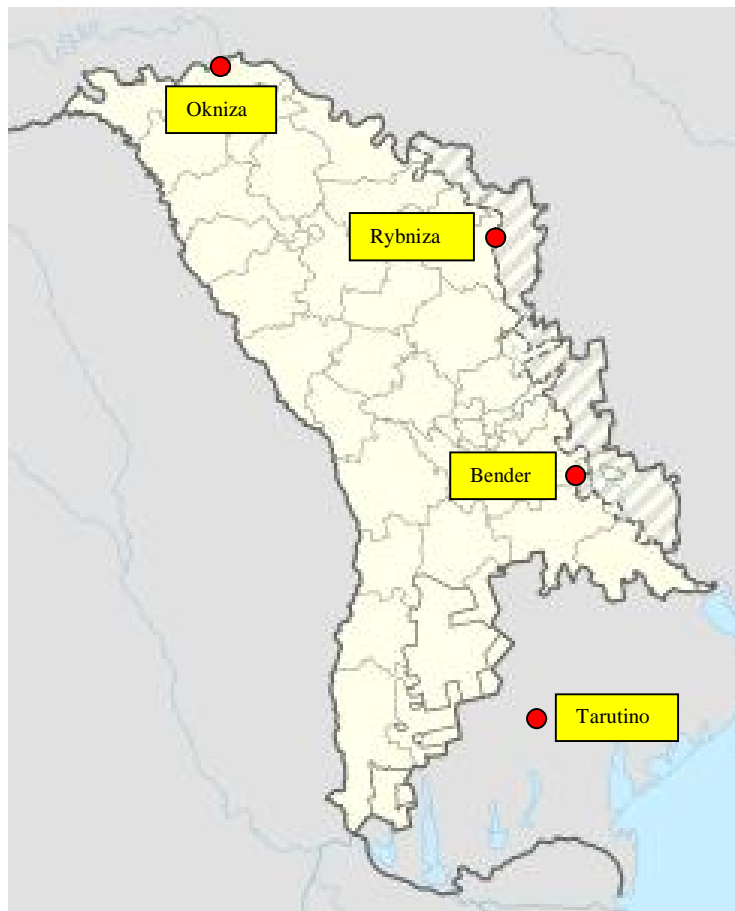
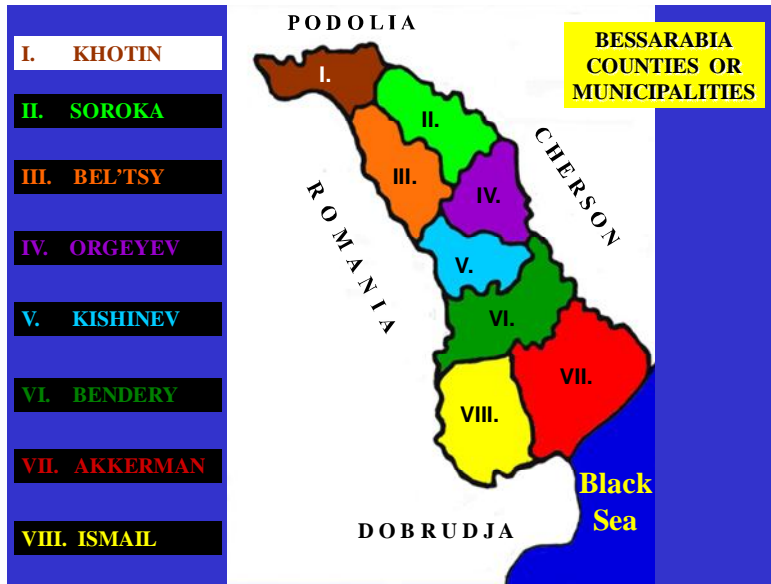
I part from this quiet corner of the world and start the return journey. In the house of the old doctor it soon became even quieter after the (second) wife died. What could be more obvious for him now than to sell his property and move to his homeland of Courland.

For the return journey, I choose the way via Schmerinka [40 mi / 64 km NNE of Okniza] to visit a childhood friend, who serves as a railway master at the Wapnjarka station, and whom I had only seen once in more than 40 years. This is my schoolmate Adolf Kurz, son of the former sexton Johannes Kurz in Tarutino. "It would have been so nice, but it was not meant to be." The good friend is busy on the line and camping somewhere outdoors. Upset, I spend the night in the waiting room. Two other travelers share my fate. One, a fruit merchant, had gone out to buy a batch of plums and had returned too soon. The other had not received from his country doctor the papers necessary for emigration to Siberia, so he had encountered unprofitable expenses. It is a consolation not to be alone in misfortune. But the night passes, the morning dawns. New impressions will blur the unpleasant ones and make the mind cheerful. An express train rumbles in, deposits some passengers and races away. Through the window, I am aware of a gentleman who seems to belong to the rich. From his chair he gives instructions to his wife, and she runs back and forth, the lap dog in her arms, and returns to take new orders. A stressed-out lord and master, I think to myself, how pitiful for a woman who has such a man. In the meantime, a carriage with a four horse team has driven up and stops behind the station building. Two pack carriers rush in and hupp! They take the lord and his chair on their shoulders and carry him into the carriage. Poor rich man! I have to think now. Who would trade with you!/? Paralyzed on all limbs and helpless like a child, he returns from the spa or a sanatorium, where he has sought healing and has not found it.

If the well-known story of the rich man, who sits in the wagon in front of the inn and lets himself be served there in the best possible way, were not in our reading books, this story would provide the material for an equally instructive narrative. In our reading books, in addition to many "true" stories, there are just as many made-up stories, compiled for their morals. If one wanted to look deeper into human life and record strange experiences and practical knowledge, one would find some grateful material for stories for the youth. And the experienced and practical informed, the true and the real undoubtedly have the advantage over the artfully made up and pretend ones.

I have regained the joy of the soul and return alive and well to my homeland, where my own people receive me with joy.

[Translation Ends]



[Today map of Moldova, in 1937 part of Bessarabia]

[Source of Map only: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ocni%C8%9Ba>]