



**A History of the Wagner Family,
From Kronach, Bavaria
to Insheim, Pfalz
to München, Ukraine
to Dickinson, North Dakota**

by

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A work in progress
Written in or about 2013-2016

Chapter 1

Introduction

The roots of our Wagner family in the USA are not really all that deep. It's only a small step back in time to my grandparents who were immigrants, and from them we take a large step across the ocean to Tsarist Russia. Our family are such newcomers that my generation was the first to be raised speaking English in the home. My parents, aunts, and uncles were all raised speaking German, and they often conversed in German when the family got together. Some of my cousins didn't learn English until they went to school. Many of our family friends were also ethnic Germans from North Dakota, and some of my earliest memories are of my dad playing the banjo at German dances and weddings.

One question that puzzled me as a youth was how it came to be that our grandparents had emigrated from Tsarist Russia in the 1890s, yet the older members of our family were always adamant that they weren't "Rooshans." The German immigrants from Russia and Ukraine were one of the largest ethnic groups in the Midwest, and today their descendants make up over half of the German element in the Dakotas and nearby states. How did this come to be? Although my parents knew much about family history in the USA, their details beyond the immigration of my grandparents were sketchy. It was as if a mysterious door had closed when they crossed the Atlantic ocean, shutting off most of the earliest family memories of the old country. We knew that my grandparents came from villages with names like "Rastadt," "München," and "Karlsruhe," but not much was known beyond that. For awhile I thought that my parents were mistaken when they said their parents had come from Russia because these villages bore the same names as larger cities in Germany, and surely small villages in far away Ukraine wouldn't bear those same names.

The break-through came in 1968 when the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia came into being in Lincoln, Nebraska, followed in 1971 by the Germans from Russia Heritage Society in Bismarck, North Dakota. Many thousands of us, the children and grandchildren of the immigrants, had come of age and we were all asking the same questions about our family backgrounds. We discovered that a rich and detailed literature had been produced in Germany about the colonies in Russia. Publications and translations began to appear in the 1970s and many of the former mysteries were answered.

Given the information in the Russian archives, I was able to identify the villages in Rhineland Pfalz from which the Wagner family emigrated, and from there traced them back to Kronach, in Bavaria where the family originated. In the summers of 1992 and 1994 I traveled to Germany and visited those places. I found much information at the *Institut für Pfälzische Geschichte und Volkskunde* (Institute for History and Ethnic Research of the Pfalz) in Kaiserslautern. The Institute has an extensive library on the early history of the Pfalz, as well as a file-

card system that tracks the emigration of thousands of people out of the region to Tsarist Russia and other parts of the world in the 18th and 19th centuries.¹

Overview of our Wagner family history

The following is a brief summary of our Wagner family history -- all of which will be expanded in much greater detail as this narrative unfolds. The earliest roots of our family are in Kronach, Bavaria, where our ancestor, Franz Wagner was born on Dec. 20, 1754. His first marriage was with Margaretha Karmann, whose family resided in Mannheim on the Rhine. They were married in the village of Rohrbach on the west bank of the Rhine in 1792. They had a son Ferdinand in 1793, but Margaretha apparently died in childbirth. Franz remarried to Eva Würth, with whom he had a second son, Franz jr., in 1798. Franz, Eva, and his two sons emigrated to Tsarist Russia in 1809 and they were among the original founders of the German colony of Rastadt in the Black Sea region. They were part of a massive wave of emigrants from southwestern Germany in the first decade of the 19th century, seeking escape from the chaos of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars that devastated Central Europe. The elder Franz died in 1811, within one year after the family had settled in the colony of Rastadt. After Franz's death, his widow Eva and two sons moved to the neighboring colony of München, from where my grandfather Adam later emigrated to the USA in 1891 and homesteaded near Dickinson, North Dakota.

The old baptismal, marriage, and death records for the city of Kronach, Bavaria, are stored today in the Archbishop's Archive in Bamberg, and they are available on microfiche. I visited Kronach and Bamberg and extracted most of the information available on the Wagner family in the old records. The quest backward in time took me to our earliest known ancestor, Mattheus Wagner, who was married in Kronach in 1710. Beyond that date, the historical detective story disappears into the mists of time.

This narrative will be presented chronologically, beginning with the earliest records for the Wagner family in Kronach, then we will follow a detailed history of events in the Rhineland Pfalz during the Napoleonic era, which leads directly to the immigration to the Tsarist empire, and from there to the USA. I decided not to carry the story any further forward than my own grandparents, Adam Wagner and Katherina Reis. Although all my aunts and uncles are gone at this time, my cousins have their own stories to tell about their own parents and I am leaving that task to them.

¹ The *Institut für pfälzische Geschichte und Volkskunde* is located at Benzinoring 6, 67657, in Kaiserslautern. The modern state of Rhineland Pfalz is located on the west bank of the Rhine, north of Alsace. A more detailed history of the Rhineland Pfalz will be given later in this narrative.



Some comments on the organization of this manuscript

Before we launch onto this journey, I should say a few words about my own orientations. I have been accumulating bits and pieces of the family history for over 40 years. Fortunately, I began the process while my parents and several of the older generation were still alive and they could recall details as told by their parents. I put off writing this family history for a long time, but I was finally nudged into action by the birth of my grandson, David Matthew Wagner, on Nov. 6, 2008. The birth of a grandson always sets one's mind turning on the greater cycle of life. Personally, I have always found great inspiration from our family's saga – and indeed it is a real saga, involving challenges faced by our ancestors that vastly outweigh anything that we are likely to face today. I hope that you too will derive some inspiration from this narrative, and perhaps a sense of a larger identity that you can carry with you throughout your own life. David's middle-name, Matthew, is the same as our earliest known ancestor, Mattheus Wagner, in 1710. The wheel of life does keep turning.

As I write these words, I am now retired, after 32 years as a university professor. I received my doctorate in anthropology. As you might guess, given my background and the natural bent of my interests, I like to view events in their cultural and historical context. Bear with me when I lapse into detailed (sometimes overly detailed) side excursions on various topics– such as the history and background of Kronach, the impact of the French Revolution and Napoleonic wars on the German villagers along the Rhine, and daily life in the German colonies in Tsarist Russia. I have made a distinction between those chapters which provide broad historical background, and those which provide direct information on the Wagner family. Portions of the historical chapters were written years ago and it seemed appropriate to incorporate them into this

narrative. Readers who wish to skip the detailed history discussions can jump ahead as they wish. During my career in academia I became accustomed to documentation and footnotes; it has become my natural style of writing and it is too late to change now!

I hope you will agree that the background chapters help us to better understand the challenges faced by our ancestors and the choices they made. We should never forget that the bare outlines of births, marriages, and deaths in the old church records are snapshots of lives that were lived with an intensity equal to our own. Indeed, their lives were likely much more intense because they faced tumultuous events that dwarf our safe and comfortable lives today.

