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Mission Statements

The *American Historical Society of Germans from Russia* is an international organization dedicated to the discovery, collection, preservation, and the dissemination of information related to the history, cultural heritage, and genealogy of Germanic settlers in the Russian Empire and their descendants.

The *International Foundation of American Historical Society of Germans from Russia* is responsible for exercising financial stewardship to generate, manage, and allocate resources which advance the mission and assist in securing the future of AHSGR.

Cover Photo

Joan Breit is the Third Place Winner in the 2010 AHSGR Storytelling Contest. The photograph of these twelve people is the family of Joan's mother, Barbara Basgall Urban and her husband George Urban. Back row: George M. and Barbara, who emigrated as children from Russia; Middle row: Joseph, Edward, Frank, Genevieve, John, and Alois; Front row: Joseph's wife, Adelheit Befort, Jerome, Anna, and Marie

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'It is Like an Open-air Museum on Volga German History:' About a Trip to the Volga German Villages

by Tatjana Schell

An interview with Alexander Spack about his trip to the old Volga German villages in May 2009 including his ambitions and future plans for exploring the history and culture of the Volga Germans.

Ever more people, who are involved in researching the Germans from Russia are getting to know the one-of-a-kind website dedicated to the Volga Germans that was created by the history buff Alexander Spack of Srednaya Akhtuba, Russia. Launched in 2005, his website <http://www.wolgadeutschen.net> has generated much attention among the German-Russian community, both in Germany and Russia, and has become a major source for all things Volga German.

One of the latest projects completed by Alexander Spack in connection to the work on his website has been a trip to the old Volga German villages of the former Frank Kanton¹ of the Republic of the Volga Germans that existed until the deportation of the local German population in 1941. During the trip in May 2009 his team, consisting of himself, his son and a nephew, managed to visit sixteen former Volga German settlements, both existing and non-existing ones as well as the adjacent cemeteries. In an exclusive interview Alexander shared his reasons and goals for the trip and also discussed the recent success of his website.

Tatjana Schell: To visit and photograph sixteen Volga German villages seems like a rather marathon-like task. How did you come up with the idea of a trip to the area and what were your initial goals while planning it?

Alexander Spack: You are right; it was indeed a busy trip. However, thanks to the help of a local friend it was quite a manageable task to drive around the area and visit all these places. The idea for the trip has been long discussed on the website "Die Geschichte der Wolgadeutschen."² The website's visitors suggested visiting some of the old Volga German villages in order to photograph and document the way they look now. In order for our plans to come true we needed to get a group of enthusiasts as well as suitable

transportation and a local person who knows the area well. It was not easy to bring all of these components together, however, thanks to the generous help of a fellow Volga German, who now lives in Germany, I was finally able to complete the project.

As we went on with the planning part, some fixed goals were set for the trip. In early 2009 Dr. Viktor Krieger, a well-known German-Russian historian, shared some information he had found on the internet. It was about a project at <http://www.wolhynien.de> on the Volhynien Germans called "Grabstein-Projekt" that was actually a data base with a list of various cemetery sites and images of the existing German gravestones there. He urged me to think about starting a similar project which would be focused on the Volga Germans. The idea of creating a Volga German grave site catalog really appealed to me. Therefore, the primary goal of our trip to the villages was to visit various cemeteries and Volga German grave sites in order to document them and to photograph all German grave stones still existing at the cemeteries of the old Volga German villages of the former Frank Kanton.

T.S.: Why did you choose this route and this particular area? What do you and the others who went with you on the trip think about this experience?

A.S.: The former Frank Kanton, which today is a part of the Zhirnovsk County of the Volgograd region, was not a random choice. I have a Russian friend who lives in the area and I asked him to be our guide during the trip there, which he, fortunately, agreed to do.

I do not travel very often, that is why everything about the trip was very exciting for me. It was the first time that I happened to be in this area. I was stunned by the beauty of the local surroundings. Being more used to the endless flat steppe of the eastern bank of the Volga, I discovered that in the Frank Kanton there were numerous gullies and ravines; this made it clear why this side of the Volga Valley was called *die Bergseite*, the hilly side. It was also quite interesting to see the oil pumps all over the area.

'It is Like an Open-air Museum on Volga German History:' About a Trip to the Volga German Villages

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I knew beforehand what to expect after viewing some of the photos I receive from individuals for my website. Having lived in the countryside myself, I can imagine how things are nowadays. Therefore, the present condition of the villages in the former Frank Kanton was no surprise for me. Unfortunately, destroyed and abandoned villages are a common sight of our times. It is hard to watch everything that had been built by generations of our people now being destroyed or left for decay without any remorse. This is not right and is very disturbing.

We were astonished by the architecture of the old German buildings in the area. Be it a family house, a church, or a shed, every building has some architectural elements that are no longer being used in construction of buildings in our days. If you ask me, every one of these buildings is an architectural wonder. Even some half destroyed shed makes you want to stop and look at it in order to marvel at the hundred-year-old craftsmanship. Considering the age of the buildings, we were amazed by the look and stability. The intention of the builders who had built them was clearly that these buildings should last for a long time. They probably could not have imagined that one day most of it would be all in ruins.

Surely, the German Lutheran church in the village of Walter (now Gretchikha) has made the greatest impression among everything we saw on the trip. What an architectural wonder of the long gone epoch! The red brick building has stood for over 100 years and despite having not had any proper restoration for many decades it is still in quite good condition. This church could easily become a museum, open to public. We also discovered the site of the old German cemetery not too far away from the church building. This could be a good place for a memorial site dedicated to the memory of the Volga German settlers. It is very sad that the Walter church has not been taken care of or put under the protection of the government. It would clearly help to prevent further deterioration.

TS: Let us talk about your website named *Die Geschichte der Wolgadeutschen*, (The History of the Volga Germans). It began January 2005 and can now account for up to 10,000 hits daily. The website's message board includes people from all over Germany, Russia, and the former republics of the Soviet Union as well as guests from other countries where the Volga Germans have settled and are communicating with one other in two languages, German and Russian. Not only

does the website contain a lot of detailed information and unique photos of the German settlements of the Lower Volga region and their residents, but it also features the personal pages of some renowned German-Russian scholars and authors like Hugo Wormsbecher, Igor Pleve, Viktor Krieger, Robert Korn, and Viktor Diesendorf.

Perhaps the favorite part of the website is its message boards, the so-called *forum*, which accounts for up to 10,000 hits daily and more than 700 regular members. Here, in the separate message threads everyone is welcomed to discuss all topics concerned with the history and genealogy of the Germans from Russia, as well as their linguistic and cultural heritage. Though the main focus of the website in general is on Volga Germans, German settlements in other parts of the former Soviet Union, for instance Ukraine, the Caucasus region, or Siberia, as well as North America and South America are also being discussed here. Tell us about the history of the website. What made you want to start it? Has it developed the way you hoped it would?

A.S.: Since I was a kid, I have nursed an idea of being involved in a project that would tell the truth about the Volga Germans and their history. Thanks to the internet, I have been able to make my dream come true by creating a website dedicated to the history of the Volga Germans.

I first started working to develop the website in 2003. In the next few years, with my finances and financial help from friends, I began collecting a library for the website. This library contains about 150 publications on the history of the Germans in Russia in general and the Volga Germans in particular, including a few very rare and old publications. I have also been able to accumulate about 200 issues of some old German newspapers, of both the Tsarist period and the time when the Republic of the Volga Germans existed in the Volga Valley. There is also a large photo archive with copies of photos donated by individuals as well as many personal documents. I think the fact that so many individuals have joined our research work is the best praise in regard to the existence of the website.

T.S.: Do you do all the maintenance work in regard to the website yourself? Do you have anyone who helps you with it?

A.S.: For the first few years I, as administrator of the website, did all the work on my own. However, due to the increasing

size of work and subjects being discussed at the website's message boards, I had to find some helpers, some moderators. They alone manage the topics on the genealogy research.

T.S.: What does your family think of your work in regard to the website? Have your sons expressed a wish to help you with that?

A.S.: My family is fine with my work on the website. I would say that through the years of me working at the website it became a part of our family's life. I cannot say if my sons will take after me working at the website. For now they help me with the technical side of the project because the youngsters are more knowledgeable with this subject.

My elder son Georgiy and my nephew Eugeniy joined me for the trip to visit the Volga German villages and they both liked it. I guess it is always interesting to see something new, and I hope that this face-to-face experience with the history of the Volga Germans will stir a genuine interest in them towards the subject. It is best to get someone interested in the history of their people early on, so that it will take deep roots and bring some results later on.

T.S.: What are your plans for the future; more work on the website, maybe other trips focused on the history of the Volga Germans?

A.S.: As far as my website is concerned, I would like to make a Volga German gravesite database. We had gathered quite a lot of material during our trip to start this new project. And if this experience proves to be successful and we get a positive feedback on this project, we are going to continue contributing to the database. We shall also continue to do an electronic database of the old Volga German newspapers that appeared before 1941.

I have been busy writing short annotations about the individual villages since 2006. I am now planning to gather historical, geographical, and statistical descriptions of all Volga German settlements that existed from 1764 until 1941.

In regard to new trips to the Volga German area, I cannot say anything definite yet. For example, I do not live that far away from Sarepta but was only able to visit there last year.

Notes

- 1 Kanton – county (Germ.); a unit of the administrative system of the Autonomous Republic of the Volga Germans that existed from 1918 through 1941.
- 2 Die Geschichte der Wolgadeutschen (Germ.) – The history of the Volga Germans.

Alexander Spack, age forty-six, was born in the Volgograd region. He graduated with a degree in economics from the Volgograd Agricultural University in 1985 and currently works as an accountant for private companies. Alexander resides in Srednyaya Akhtuba near Volgograd with his wife and two sons. Both sons attend the Politechnical College in Volzhskiy near Volgograd.

Though most of the information posted on <http://www.wolgadeutschen.net> is in Russian, a detailed travelogue with photos from Alexander's trip has been translated into English and is accessible at http://wolgadeutsche.net/spack/reise_eng/Reise_1.htm. Some information in German on the ongoing project "Grabstein-Projekt" dedicated to the Volhynien Germans can be found at <http://www.volhynien.de>. Once on the website, go to "Namenslisten", then to "Grabsteine", then click at either "Friedhöfe" (if you want to search by cemeteries) or "Namen" (if you want to search by names).

Tatjana Schell is a Life Member of the AHSGR and has been actively involved in genealogy research for a few years now. She was born and grew up in Volgograd, Russia. Her family left Russia for Germany in 1998 and she now resides in Munich, Germany. She is currently finishing her Master's degree in English. Tatjana is into history and has authored and translated a few short stories, some of which won the AHSGR Storytelling Contest in 2006 and 2007.

Journal of the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia

Editorial Board

Irmgard Hein Ellingson earned a Master of Arts in Theology from Wartburg Theological Seminary and holds undergraduate degrees in political science, history, and German. She has been bilingual from birth and also reads old German script. Her research has been published in four countries and in three languages. She serves as an associate of ministry in three Evangelical Lutheran Church in America congregations, is an adjunct instructor of German at Waldorf College, and resides in Grafton, Iowa.

Arthur E. Flegel reads both printed and handwritten Old Gothic German Script, beginning instruction from his mother at the age of five. As a Certified Genealogist and a successful genealogical relationship with the famous Dr. Karl Stumpp, he has published research and other information related to German-Russian ancestry. He was one of the original founders of AHSGR; he currently lives in Menlo Park, California.

Velma Jesser earned a Ph.D. in Educational Policy and Management from the University of Oregon; half of her dissertation research on ethics and values was conducted on-site in Germany. She is a part of the team that published "Black Sea German Russian Census," Volumes I (2003) and II (2006) for the Germans from Russia Heritage Society (GRHS) and has published anthologies from the annual AHSGR Storytelling Contests since 1999. She taught business and management programs in Oregon for over twenty-five years before she retired and began teaching in New Mexico. She established the first joint chapter of AHSGR/GRHS.

William Keel received a Ph.D. in Germanic Linguistics from Indiana University in 1977 and has been a professor of German at the University of Kansas in Lawrence since 1978 where he currently serves as chair of the Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures. He researches German settlement dialects, especially the dialects of Germans from Russia, in Kansas and adjacent states. He lives in Lawrence, Kansas.

Peter J. Klassen holds a Ph.D. in history from the University of Southern California. He is professor emeritus of history at California State University, Fresno, where he has also served as dean and director of international programs. At the University of Tuebingen, he met often with Karl Stumpp and became extensively involved in research about Germans from Russia. He researches the history of Mennonites in Poland and Prussia and Germans in and from Russia.

Timothy J. Klobberdanz earned a Ph.D. in Folklore and Anthropology from Indiana University. His Master's Thesis and Doctoral Dissertation both dealt with the Germans from Russia. He has co-authored two books and published more than a hundred articles. He also wrote the script for a prize-winning television documentary. Professor Klobberdanz teaches at North Dakota State University, Fargo.

Sister Alice Ann Pfeifer, CSA, has a Master's degree in English from Marquette University and taught high school English for eleven years. She received a Master's degree in pastoral studies from St. Joseph's College, Standish, Maine, in 2008. She served as a Catholic missionary with the Sisters of St. Agnes in Chelyabinsk, Russia for five years, and speaks Russian. She has many years of editing and publishing experience. She was born and lives in Hays, Kansas where she serves the Congregation of St. Agnes.

Leona Wasinger Pfeifer speaks fluent German and taught the German language at Fort Hays State University in Kansas. German folklore, the survival of German-Russians left behind, and the accomplishments of German-Russian women interest her most. She resides in Hays, Kansas.

Eric J. Schmaltz earned a Ph.D. in History at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Since 2005, he has taught Modern European and World History at Northwestern Oklahoma State University in Alva. His research concentrates on Modern Germany and Modern Russia with an emphasis on ethnic and nationality issues. He has contributed a variety of articles and translations to AHSGR, GRHS, and North Dakota State University Libraries in Fargo. Several of his articles and reviews have appeared in local newspapers, interdisciplinary journals, and major international anthologies. He serves as editor to the GRHS *Heritage Review*. He is also an executive board member of the endowed Northwestern Oklahoma State University-Masonic Institute for Citizenship Studies.