

# German Settlements in Dobrudscha

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[Note: A brief overview of the topography; original people on the land; arrival of German settlers; about their villages, churches and schools; and daily life among the various ethnic Germans.]

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[Translation Begins]

## German Settlements in Dobrudscha/Dobruja

On the threshold of the Orient, girded by the Danube River and the Black Sea, stretching some 200 square miles of flat area, is the Romanian Province of Dobruja.

The steppe character of the greatest part of this area can be thought of as the work of Mother Nature in a step-motherly fashion and seems very charming to the casual visitor.

Only the northern part of Dobruja displays a more friendly picture. Beginning a little north of Lake Golovitza (*Ezerul Golovitza*) [in Tulcea District], long high mountain ridges pass through in a northwesterly direction. Green valleys accompany and cut through them. For long distances, the heights are covered with dense forest and one encounters magnificent stands of mighty oak, beech, linden and ash. Here, one has the impression of mountainous land everywhere. Whoever sees an overview of Dobruja from the upper bank of the wide flood plain of the Danube River around Braila sees a long line of looming dark heights and domes displaying themselves against a clear sky.

Things are a little less romantic in the central and southern parts of Dobruja. Here it offers the barren picture of endless thin grasses and tall thistle flat land through which pass low ridges and depressions.

During the grim cold winter, where the sharp Siberian wind sweeps over the snow-covered fields, a playground for foxes and wolves, the Steppe wakes up in the spring to a brief new life and is granted a slightly friendlier appearance at this time.

The aromatic scented sea grasses and sea weeds wither away only too quickly under the influence of the scorching sun. The scorching summer, where daytime temperatures of over 40° C [ca. 105° F] are not uncommon, transforms the landscape of the new growth into a desert-like wasteland that is exposed in its low-lying stretches with many frequent flooding and, during this time, becomes a virtual source for

fever; a hell for man and beast, a paradise for bird life, which appear here for a rendezvous with almost all their European companions.

The Tartars were the chief resident population who resided in a widely scattered area, consisting of wretched hut settlements, which could barely be considered as villages, and pursued the usual agriculture of their early ancestors on an obstinate soil which one could barely wrestle a scanty harvest to live off of. Every year, in the Spring, Siebenbürgen shepherds came to Dobruja with their flocks numbering in the thousands to drive them to pasture in the abandoned regions. They came and went with the migratory birds. In the river lowlands and by the lakes, isolated Russian fishing families and numerous Russian sects, who sought refuge here from the persecution of the Orthodox Church, including old faithful Cossacks, had settled here; along with hordes of aimlessly wandering about Gypsies who made the country unsafe.

A sober, treeless country, which even oppressed the mind of Ovid: "You see neither tree nor bushes on bare fields. Neither does the open country here produce fruit nor lovely herbs." And around 1840, it was also still unreservedly noted: "Wherever one looks, the land is without farmers, and even worse, no one wants this ground." It was shortly after 1830 that the first German farmer immigrants arrived in Dobruja.

At this time, the cultural world of Europe knew still little about this part of the Lower Danube. There were no cities within it that would have made its name known. Neither old nor new cultural monuments had made reference to it. Constanta was a half-ruined nest of a few inhabitants and had not yet had recognition as did the old Greek settlement of Tomi, which was the city of exile for many years for the unfortunate Ovid. The famous walls, named after Trajan, between the Danube River and the Black Sea, which the scientific circles were so long and eagerly busy with later on, had not yet drawn their attention. Only when there was war between Russia and Turkey, did one also heard about Dobruja. Eventually, in 1828-1829, it got recognition when the Turkish Danube Fortresses were conquered and the Russian armies moved across the country. Generally speaking, Dobruja was an uninteresting and unknown piece of Europe.

If the conditions at this present time have turned significantly for the better and out of the fallow wasteland things have already, for the most part, made for productive granaries, thanks for this amazing transition is not in the least due to "German farmer diligence" and "German efficiency". As the completely neglected province was taken over by the Romanians after the Russian-Turkish wars, it was the new regime's primary endeavor to settle the nearly deserted region and turn it into a serviceable culture. These efforts, to integrate the thick-headed inhabitants living in this new country to become industrious and happy to work human material, turned out surprisingly well for Romania in that it attracted the land-hungry German peasantry from South Russia and the Volga Region. This German Russian peasantry, whose pioneering ancestors immigrated to the Russian Empire nearly a century before from Silesia, Alsace and Württemberg, no longer found the initial favorable conditions for expansion available for their many offspring. Land and soil had become scarce and expensive with the forward moving culture; but above all, the dreaded Russian service in the military led many young people to emigrate. So it was that the alluring recruitment calls of the Romanians, that the newcomers were to be guaranteed free apportionment of large land tracts, tax and duty exemption for many years and other privileges, many efficient and used to work German farmers responded to the call and established a new homeland in Dobruja.

As a result of these original beginnings of German settlement, over the last 50 years, large and prosperous villages developed whose inhabitants had the mind to hold on to their undiluted Germanness in the midst of the surrounding mix of people, and held on with stubborn perseverance to their old native customs and practices which were brought over.

Currently, there are about 20 thriving German communities over the whole of Dobruja whose villages are distinguished very much so from the neighboring foreigners due to their order and cleanliness, and also by their carefully cultivated fields as opposed to the mismanaged Romanian ones.

There are 17 closed German communities in Dobruja, 13 Lutheran (*evangelische*) villages and 4 Catholic. The Lutheran villages in the north are: Kataloi, Atmadscha, Tschukurowa, Cogealac and Tariverde. The Catholic ones are: Malkotsch and Calalia. In the central part are these Lutheran villages: Cogealia, Alakap, Karatai, Horoslar, Fachrie; and the Catholic village of Karamurat. We find the following Lutheran villages in the southern part of Dobruja: Cobadin, Sarighiol, and Mamuslia. Way in the southern part, lost among the Bulgarian villages, there is also the Catholic village of Kalfa. Apart from these closed communities, there are several small German settlements within foreign language ones, like in the lake village of Mangalia, in the rural town of Murfatlar, on an estate near Manschepunar, in the seaside resorts of Movila and Tekirghiol, in the so-called "Neuen Weingärten" near Constanta, another one 7 km from Constanta in the Turkish village of Palas by the lake, and, finally, Anadolkoï, a suburb of Constance, and in Constance itself. The total number of Germans in Dobruja may amount to approximately 9,000 souls. There are few purely German communities here as compared to Bessarabia because the government settled either a large or a small number of Romanians in each of the German villages.

The German village in Dobruja is usually only a single stretched out village street along which, on both sides, there is one yard after the other in a row. The house is always at the street front. Behind you find the stables and sheds, where the threshing place, called "*Harman*" is usually located, while the property ends with a fruit orchard or vegetable garden.

Clay is used almost exclusively as building material for housing construction. No doubt, here and there, larger localities are familiar with buildings made exclusive of stone and with a tile roof, but this is a preference of the richest, but the clay dwelling is the most common. As for craftsmen, there is a big shortage here, so much so that the local farmer is often left to be his own wagon-maker, blacksmith, harness-maker, and carpenter; in short, able to do by himself almost all the work that comes up.

In addition to cereal grain and fodder production, the Dubruja Germans were also quite vigorous and successful with wine culture. Horse and cattle breeding was pursued in significant measure; however, the horned cattle suffered much for a period due to occurring disease, probably caused by the seed of a Steppe plant consumed in the feed taken in during the free grazing of the cattle. Pig and poultry raising is left to the women. Entire flocks of chickens, ducks and geese populate the farmyards, strictly guarded and protected by the farmer-wife, who supplies her house in this manner with meat nourishment for the winter. In the summer, contending with fresh vegetables and also through hard work with cucumbers and melons, and meat, in one way or another, the farmer will compensate in the boring winter months for this somewhat involuntary frugality, by having what must appear on the table daily.

A praiseworthy familiar main product of Dobruja German farmers is their excellent butter, which receives twice as high a price as Romanian butter at the markets of the nearby towns and especially during the bathing season in the resorts. Once a week, the farm women transport their goods—eggs, butter, and cheese to the market in the city. The otherwise rather quiet and boring little towns of the province provide on such days an equally colorful moving and noisy, captivating image. What a mix of languages buzzing around; what a picturesque of costumes all found together! Awkward and serious as opposed to the hot-blooded Romanians, the German, at first glance, can also be identified in this colorful bustling. Trade is largely in the hands of Armenians and Turks. Attempts to maintain a cooperative in the German villages were short-lived.

The interchange of the German peasantry among themselves is weird. It is a solid structure of very extensive male & female cousin kinship, whose relatives strictly separate from other families so that nearly every village has its own particular ways such as in the construction of its farms, in customs and traditions, and especially in the dialect. One difference among the villages is that southern Germans are mostly Catholic and northern Germans usually Protestant, having only a little relationship to each other and which in turn leads significantly to groups coming together according to language, so that one hears genuine Schwabian in this place, in another pure Alsatian, and in a third place, in turn, the Silesian dialect. This characteristic peculiarity of German eccentricity goes so far that the individual extended families usually marry only among themselves. Where Swabians and Kashubians live together, it is the rule that the Kashubians practice the same habits of life as the Swabians, but never the other way around.

Two outstanding advantageous characteristics distinguish the Germans of both confessions from their Romanian and other neighbors: their deep piety, which is also evident outwardly in even poor communities through the stately church buildings, as well as their moderation in the pleasures of spirited drinks. In several localities, the community does not even allow the establishment of a tavern, which is a most important part of a Romanian village.

The school system is still very much in a bad way. Officially, the children receive only Romanian instruction. Nevertheless, most communities have appointed their own Sexton teacher, where allowed, one hour a day to impart German school instruction to the German children; in some communities, 2 hours a day. The saying: “Many children are the wealth of the farmers” applies to the Dobruja situation perhaps more than anywhere else and already, at a tender age, the children are used for heavy field work. The parents are almost universally illiterate, are satisfied if their offspring are entrusted with the basic concepts of reading, writing and arithmetic, performers, with whom the ‘teacher’ in many cases himself experiences strained relations.

As the school system of Dobruja is generally in a very bad way, so the ecclesiastical tendency is all the more enjoyable. The Church is the strongest bulwark against the strict nationalization. The Lutheran German communities of Dobruja are subordinate to the deanship of the Bucharest Evangelical State Church of the Augsburg Confession in Romania.

Originally, Dobruja had only two parishes: Atmagea and Constance; later came the parish of Cobadin, and more recently—founded the year 1924—the parish of Cogealac/Tariverde was added. At this time, only two pastor positions are occupied: by Pastor Herbert Hahn in Kobadin and Pastor Hellmut

Zimmerling in Atmagea. Within the Church exists the community movement, which has gathered wide circles in Dobruja. In some communities, just now, there are even Baptists in outspoken manner.

In the last few years, an attempt was made to create a political and economic organization of Dobruja Germans through the creation of a People's Council, which has its headquarters in Kanstanze, and whose head is Dr. Wenzel.

It would far exceed the scope of this paper to dwell on the domestic life and work of our compatriots in the Dobruja. The purpose of this impulsive portrayal is merely to point to the fact that it was well-done German endurance, bravery and enjoyment of work, even in the farthest part of Eastern Europe, that gained a solid foothold among half-barbarian tribes, and that there are a lot of thriving communities there that contributed.

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