

Our Flight from Ukraine to Bessarabia

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Translated by: Allen E. Konrad
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[Note: What the Wilhelm couple encountered after selling their property in Odessa, traveling to the Dniester River, and then being smuggled over into Bessarabia with Tarutino as their destination.]

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[Begin Translation]

Our Flight from Ukraine to Bessarabia by Emma Wilhelm

We already decided to leave Ukraine in the Winter of 1920. At first, we sought legal ways, but for us it was not possible because no one was being release to go abroad, so there was no other way but to leave Ukraine secretly. As the warmer season was coming, my husband made several trips to explore where it would be possible to cross over to Bessarabia. There were all kinds of obstacles that stood in the way. It seemed most appropriate to temporarily locate ourselves was in the vicinity of the Dniester River and do the crossing over from there. And such a place most appropriate seemed to be Glückstal.

We gradually prepared ourselves for the difficult journey. Above all, it was necessary to sell our things, and it was especially hard to sell the furniture. We had the opportunity to leave our residence to a young couple and with it the largest part of the furniture. The remaining property was easier to sell. After we had prepared ourselves in this way, we left Odessa on 8 June, 1921. We had hired a colonists from Hoffnungstal. He was from the working class now, who earlier had been a wealthy merchant, but the Reds so completely plundered him that all he had left was a pair of unsightly horses and a rickety wagon.

As the case was, we still had a lot of stuff left over so that the money for the trip would not cover it. We also took many pillows and blankets, which in the end was necessary, which made for good seating since no colonist had a spring seat on his wagon because they had already been confiscated earlier, or were hidden. We had a long way to drive, first the 100 *Werst* [1 verst = .66miles/1.06km] to Hoffnungstal and from there another 60 *Verst* to Glückstal. And our wagon was really packed. We left Odessa at 3 o'clock in the afternoon and had to drive almost all the night. The trip went without incident all the way to Neu-Glückstal, about 5 versts from Hoffnungstal,, where we were stopped by the Red militia and suspected of being speculators. As

it turned out, my husband had a paper as an employee of the Soviet Government. My husband was Honorary Chairman of the German Sports Clubs and he had a paper drawn up to that effect, that he was commissioned to give lectures on sports in the colonies of the Tiraspol District. They examined only a few things and let us continue. Later, it turned out that our driver had soldier's underclothing hidden under his seat. Fortunately, they did not find them, otherwise, things would have gone badly for us. In Hoffnungstal, we stayed at our driver's place until dawn, drank coffee there along with bread and butter, milk and cheese and then we went to Sister Katherine, a fellow countrywoman of my husband, and stayed with her temporarily. She was very sweet and friendly, cooked us a very good meal and fed us all day. She is the nurse in Hoffnungstal, one could say, the doctor. We stayed with her for 5 days, made several visits, also saw Pastor Merz, who found it hard to believe that we had so much courage and that we wanted to take on the difficult route.

We waited here in vain for an opportunity a travel for Glückstal and we were left with no other option but to hire an extra wagon. This cost us 100,000 Rbl. (from Odessa to Hoffnungstal we paid 50,000). This part of the journey also went good. In Glueckstal, we stayed with teacher Albrecht, a fellow countryman of my husband. Both are very nice people, childless. We stay with them for 10 days, but paid everything. We had it good, were well boarded and fed. It is here the plan for the crossing of the Dniester was made. A German assistant medical officer was familiar with the history and volunteered to arrange things. The journey should start from the village of Koschniza. The discussions lasted a whole week. We knew that it would cost a lot of money, but we had not expected it to cost that much. We were really astonished when our agent reported to us that it would cost 1,300,000 Rbl. to get over to the Bessarabian side. We were not expecting such a sum (we had paid 558,000 Rbl. in Odessa for the 2,000 Lei). We had only 350,000 Rbl.; where to get hold of that kind of money now? Then it came to us, we still had clothing, bedding, and such things that we could do without. On a single day, we came up with the money. For my last silk dress, I received 150,000 Rbl.; for my winter overcoat, 200,000 Rbl.; for my husband's winter topcoat, 350,000 Rbl.; and, with the bedding and the other things, the rest came together. Now, the journey could get started! In Koschnize, we stopped at an assistant medical officer's place (a friend to the one from Glückstal), were received in a friendly manner, but with the stipulation not to leave the room. Blessed evening, a big, strong, young Moldavian came, who spoke good Russian, and told us that the trip as planned would not happen that evening, but first the next evening. We had to stay at the assistant medical officer's place. The Moldavians have very hard beds, which is to say, they are not really beds, but more like platforms. They are like benches, all along the wall, which are covered with home-woven carpets. Of course, these platforms are quite hard to lay on. For now it meant, put up with it. We were woken up early in the morning. A big Moldavian arrived, Grigorij by name, who was a smuggler, and demanded the money (1,300,000 Rbl.) that I had kept in a bag. We had become millionaires, unaware of how enormously rich we were. It was obvious how little he considered the wealth, because, without counting it, put it into various pockets without even checking to see if it was old newspaper or the real thing. Once he had received the money, he promised that the journey would take place in the evening. We had to stay in the room the whole day, we were not let anyone see us. Time really was long for us. We had enough to eat, the wife of Albrecht had given us a whole bag full of cakes, bread, eggs, ham, butter, and other things like that. Also, the wife of the assistant medical officer gave us milk, tea; she also cooked Moldovan borscht; there were even cheese cakes. We did not suffer a shortage of anything. I even watched how the

carpets were made. They are very nice thick carpets with solid patterns, but in beautiful colors. They make everything on their own. The wool is spun, dyed and woven.

Up to now, our whole trip went very good from the start, without any special effort. But now the hardships began. At 10 o'clock in the evening, an ordinary farmer wagon came with some straw on it to sit on and now we it headed beyond the forest. The journey went at a gallop and we had a lot of trouble taking care of ourselves. We had to duck continually so that the branches of trees did not scratch the face. So it went for a whole hour during the pitch darkness of night, soon through thickets and hedges, over fallen branches, over roots and things like that. Finally, we stopped. Then we had to get out quickly, and since we did not move so fast, Grigorij took me in his arm, like a child, and sat me on the ground under a dense thicket, where they also brought our things, (a small basket, a small suitcase and a wooden hatbox) that contained all our wealth. So we sat with Grigorij for about half an hour, while the driver hid the vehicle. Then we continued by foot, the two Moldavians ahead with our things and us behind, through thick and thin, through hedges, over tree branches, through potato and corn fields, over ditches and fences, over which Grigorij again held me like a child. Everything was at such a running pace that we sometimes felt that we would run out breath. Then, once again, a stop was made under a thicket. Then it continued in the same way for almost 2 hours along with stops. Finally, the crazy race (*Lanferei*) came to an end. They took us into a dense thicket, where we were supposed to remain quiet. The leaders wanted to go to the river bank to look out for a boat that should be coming over from the other side. The men disappeared and we now sat in the forest, all alone in dark night. We were not to talk to each other so that no one would notice us. We sat there until dawn without someone showing up. It was quite scary for us, especially since it started to rain, a situation which was not comfortable.

When it became light, our leaders finally returned with the news that nothing is going to happen today. There was a commander of the Red Army by the river bank who had sent a Jew to Kishinev to return with an important report. He had waited all night at the river bank for the Jew to return and had not withdrawn from the site. It is only now that he was driving away. Now it was too late for today. We had to endure one more day and the crossing would first take place on the next night. The whole story about the commander at the river bank was very suspicious to us; the whole thing was probably just made up, but for what purpose, we could not figure out.

Now it meant going back to the village which was close to the river bank. It was back to that terrible wagon and we had to bundle up and were not allowed to speak a word. On it went at breakneck speed to the next hut in the village. The name of the place was Pereif. Once there, we were quickly taken in a room and locked in. We were as if captured. We were so exhausted that we hardly noticed it. We took off our wet clothes and once again laid on the hard benches and slept until 10 o'clock in the morning. Then Grigorij came back and brought us bread and boiled eggs. We had left our bag with many provisions with the assistant medical official since we were of the opinion that there was no longer any need for them. The wife of the Moldavian brought us some milk, cheese, and sour cream. The what all we had for the day. The people in this village were very poor, because everything had been taken everything away from them; barely the clothes on the body remained for them; they were able to only save a skinny cow. Because we were locked in, we slept most of the day. Our vehicle was back at 10 o'clock that night and the trip took us back into the forest again. However, this time the trip lasted only a

short distance. The wagon stopped and they brought us and the things into a dense thicket. "The river is very close," said Grigorij and he only went to the river bank to put everything in order. Soon, he returned with two men and led us down to the river bank. It was agreed to hand over 2,000 Lei to a man at the boat which was to be for the Bessarabian side and also for the driver on that side, who would then bring us to the next stop.

Our guides led us down because the river bank was quite steep, the boat was already there. I handed the man the 2,000 Lei and sat myself on a narrow board which was situated diagonally in the boat, while my husband sat himself down on the edges of the boat. The boat was very small, flat-bottomed and full of dirt. The trip lasted less than five minutes (the river at that place is quite narrow). 2 Jews met us on the other side and led us up the steep slope and brought us to a small room. We immediately asked the driver. We were informed a driver was there, but he was demanding 500 Lei. We said that everything had already been paid for. The Jews were also demanding 5,000 Lei. We repeated that everything was included in the 2,000 Lei and we have nothing else to pay for. It made no difference to them and we have to pay them 5,000 Lei. My husband got angry and protested, telling them that he had no more Lei, just Romanian money. They would not accept that; we should give gold. They took from me a beautiful golden brooch with a genuine stone and the watch of my husband. While one was searching us, the other went out and sought to take away something from our things. Because the basket and the cases were locked, he turned to the hat box that was only bound with cords. There, they took a beautiful, black feather-boa stole (*Federboa*), a beautiful embroidered towel, combs and other things, also my husband's good house slippers. Now we wanted to continue as soon as possible. The Carter demanded but 500 Lei, which we didn't have. We wanted to drive to the village of Neu-Nikolajewka since my husband's good friend lived there. After a long time of bargaining, we drove to Mr Wildermoth. We borrowed the 500 Lei from him for the driver and were now happy to be on Bessarabian soil and among German colonists. This was on 25 June. We were received very graciously. The next day, we went to Marijewka, a German village and from there to my husband's birthplace, Lichtental. The joy was great to see us, because they thought that we had died a long time ago. All the relatives came to welcome us, especially my husband's only brother John, with whom we spent 4 happy and joyful weeks spent, until we moved to Tarutino. Here, my husband got a job at the "German Newspaper of Bessarabia" (*Deutschen Zeitung Bessarabiens*). Unfortunately, the job lasted only a month. My husband had a mild stroke (probably from overwork; he is 73 years old) and had to leave the post upon the strict advice of the doctor. Since we have children abroad who are anxious to take us in, we are travelling to them and rest up there.

[End Translation]