

Bessarabian Emigrants in the Brazil Jungle

Bessarabischer Heimatkalender—1985

W. Rumpeltin, Buchdruckerei und Zeitungsverlag K.G.

[Book Printing and Newspaper Publishing Limited]

Burgdorf, Hannover/Germany

Pages 49-56

Translated by: Allen E. Konrad

October, 2025

P.O. Box 157, Rowley, IA 52329

onamission1939@gmail.com

Note: Information within [brackets] are comments by the translator.

=====

[Translation Begins]

Destinies of Bessarabian German Emigrants in the Brazilian Jungle

Helmut Stapf—São Paulo/Brazil

Preliminary Remark: A letter from Brazil was published in the *Mitteilungsblatt* [Newsletter] of 3 November, 1983, in which our readers were informed that Mrs. Erna Stapf, née Gerstenberger, born in 1907 in Tamurka near Klöstitz in Bessarabia, daughter of Ludwig Wilhelm and Emilie Gerstenberger, who in 1921 emigrated with her six children (three sons, three daughters) from Tarutino to Brazil, passed away on 3 August, 1983, in São Paulo, Brazil. Helmut Stapf, a son of the deceased, briefly described in this letter the extremely difficult beginnings and struggle for existence of his Bessarabian-German grandparents and his parents, who started from nothing in the jungle and, often moving from colony to colony, built a new life through hard, arduous work.

Responding willingly to a written request from us, Helmut Stapf describes below for our readers in a vivid and impressive manner the hard, austere pioneering achievements of his ancestors, based on the diary entries of his deceased mother as well as his own memories. Knowing that many Bessarabian Germans over the past decades have sought their fortune overseas in a similar way, enduring countless hardships in the wilderness of the jungle in their new environment, we would like to let this account by Helmut Stapf about the colonial fate of his parents speak for itself. We thank him for his report.

The Editors

Dear Mr. Kräenbring,

In response to your letter of 22 September, I have now attempted to write a summary of the life of my mother. Her own notes go up to her wedding; from there, I myself will report, partly from the stories of my mother, later from my own experiences. She writes, among other things:

1. Emigration from Bessarabia and Arrival in Brazil

“On 8 October, 1907, I appeared on the earth on the estate of my father in Tamurka. When I was still a very little girl, my parents moved to Tarutino. There, my father bought a house with a yard, but he was not satisfied with it. He bought another estate and built a beautiful, large house on it. I spent a wonderful childhood in this house, up until the First World War. I still had five siblings: three brothers and two sisters. In 1921, my parents decided to emigrate, namely to Brazil. My brother Arthur had already been in the university at Stuttgart for a year and a half.

On 1 August, 1921, we left our homeland. It was a very difficult farewell. By train, we traveled through Romania and Czechoslovakia to Germany. We were on the journey for eight days. On a gloomy, rainy morning, we arrived in Stuttgart at 6 o'clock. We checked in at *Hotel Wörwag*, then father went to get my brother Arthur. We children were very happy when we saw him. While we stayed in this hotel for three weeks waiting for the money father had sent from Bucharest, inflation rose so much that there was just barely enough money left to pay for the ship trip and still have 4 Conto (Brazilian currency). That was on 7 September, 1921. Then, on 12 September, we went to Amsterdam. We stayed in a hostel there for two and a half days, then boarded the ship *Brabantia*. On 7 October, we arrived in Santos, Brazil. It was in the morning, but by the time we had our luggage, it was already 4 in the afternoon. Then the journey continued by train to São Paulo. This train was pulled some kilometers up the mountains using a cable car system, since São Paulo is 800 meters [2,624 feet] above sea level. We finally arrived in São Paulo at eight o'clock in the evening. A German-speaking man from the Colonization Administration was waiting for us and took us to the immigration building. We stayed there for a week and were also provided with food. There was always the same dish: brown beans, rice, dried meat cut into small cubes, and steamed, chopped kale. All of this was cooked together. My parents, especially my mother, barely managed to eat a single bite of it. We children had an appetite, so it did not bother us at all. I remember my first birthday in Brazil, which I spent in the immigration building. I turned 14 and received a beautiful large ‘mango’ (a Brazilian fruit) from a Negro boy (which was quite a rarity for us). Another experience was the first purchase of bananas, also near the immigration building. My mother wanted to buy bananas for 1 mil-reis [one thousand Réis—Brazil currency until 1942] and received a whole bunch, which we were very pleased with; we had a hard time carrying them, but they tasted excellent and were a welcome change in our food.

2. Deeper and Deeper into the Brazilian Tropical Forest

After a week, we continued on. My father had bought a piece of land deep in the rainforest, and we wanted to take possession of it now. —It is not at all possible to describe all the impressions here: the ankle-deep sand, dirt, spiders, and other creatures, as well as the colorful giant parrots (Arara) with their loud screeches, certainly caused noticeable discomfort for the uninitiated. First experiences with unfamiliar fruits, such as *mamão* (papaya), which they mistook for melons but were only green and, therefore, naturally did not taste good, strange customs like drinking coffee from toy cups—it was the small cups from which Portuguese and Brazilians drink their strong,

black, and very sweet coffee, called *cafézinho*—, all of this was certainly interesting and amusing for the children, but for the parents, it must have been difficult.

Then food was purchased for the first period on their own land. Of course, unfamiliar with the language and customs, they were also taken advantage of here. Then it got into the real adventure, the scale of which none of those involved could imagine.

One morning, around ten o'clock, we all got into a small Ford truck/lorry (*Lastwagen*), on which our belongings were already loaded, and the journey began. Two children, about five and seven years old, were traveling with us. My father, Arthur, and my sister Elfriede had already gone ahead to prepare everything. After we had driven for about an hour, the driver signaled to us that we could not go any further because the engine was broken, and we would have to continue on foot. Of course, that was very difficult. We packed a little for each person; we only had bread to eat, which we took with us, and then we started walking. Fortunately, it was through the middle of the jungle, and it was a hot day. To make matters worse, we also had the little children with us, who soon became tired and had to be carried; we could not just leave them there alone in the jungle. So my brother Willi and I took turns carrying them along the exhausting path. In the evening, around six o'clock, we finally arrived at a clearing where a small hut stood. A man was sitting by a fire and told us to spend the night there. We were tired and hungry and accepted everything that came our way, but what awaited us there was something we had never seen before: as soon as we took a single step onto the grass piled up in the hut as a sleeping area, we were all black with fleas. Well, we just collapsed, but sleeping was out of the question. The man by the fire gave us a frying pan full of roasted *mandioca* flour (a root similar to a potato), mixed with brown sugar, and black sweet coffee. That was it. Late at night, our driver arrived with the truck. The next morning, at dawn, around five o'clock, we were given the same meal as the previous evening, then we had to continue; on foot, because the road was not practical for being driven on. Tired from the previous day and now also hungry, as we had nothing left to eat, we dragged ourselves and the two children forward. Time and again we had to rest. Sometime around noon, a rider came toward us and very friendly asked us in German how we had been accommodated and fed. We told him everything, and he rode off immediately in anger, because the man at the hut was supposed to provide us with proper food and decent accommodation, but everything the Colonization Administration had bought and kept there had, in the meantime, been sold by the man to the nearby town. Well, we had to endure it.

It was beautiful sunshine, and chirping and whistling could be heard very loudly in the forest. We did not know what it was; it sounded like factories were whistling. Later we found out that they were crickets and cicadas. Finally, we reached a river, it was the *Aguapei*; we were carried across on a small ferry. That was something different after such a long march. On the other side of the river, we saw for the first time a large forest clearing; the forest was being cleared by burning in preparation for planting. You could only see many stumps and black trunks. But now we had to go right through it in the hot midday sun, and no tree gave us any shade. Then we arrived at a farm, where the people were just having their noon meal. They were German settlers who only had a cup of water for us, and we got nothing to eat. There we waited for a donkey cart that was supposed to carry us and our belongings further. But we preferred to go on foot, because the path had only just been cleared, and the many stumps and holes made driving on this cart without springs impossible. Shortly after the forest, we suddenly saw nothing but light and fire. We

thought that our destination had finally been reached, but it was just another forest burning. Then, finally, after a while, we arrived at the so-called town site, where some clay huts stood. There we met my father and the siblings who had gone ahead to prepare the house. What a disappointment it was when we saw the ‘house’ where we were to live for the time being, until our own house was completed. A clay hut, like all the others, was our substitute for the beautiful house we had left in our homeland. Nevertheless, we all fell onto the sleeping places and slept as if in a palace.”

3. Building a House. A Difficult Start in the Wilderness of the Jungle

With unimaginable effort, they then built their own house using tree trunks as cornerstones, palm leaves as roofing tiles, and split palm trunks as length and cross beams, which were then plastered with clay. They learned to make a small stove, shoot birds and use them for edible food, distinguish edible fruits and roots from poisonous ones, keep away wild animals—mainly tigers—and avoid snakes. They were not spared from diseases either; they contracted malaria {sic} (*Gelbfieber*) and dysentery and had to be treated under the most primitive conditions, not forgetting that the nearest medical help was reachable only after a seven-kilometer [4.4 miles] march and that very often medicine was lacking and the doctor himself was sick.

There were certainly also very beautiful experiences in nature. Experiencing a thunderstorm in the jungle, for example, is something unique; observing nature, the continuous blooming and new sprouting, standing face to face with a tiger at a distance of one meter [3.2 feet]—all of this has its charms.

One day, the clay house was finally finished, and the big move could begin. Naturally, everything had to be carried by foot, seven kilometers there and seven kilometers back, an entire day long. Then they cleared land and planted crops, acquired goats and chickens, and it looked as if things were finally looking up. Unfortunately, monkeys and parrots also got involved with the harvest, and if you wanted to have anything left, you had to keep watch during the day. At night, wildcats came and took eggs and chickens from the enclosure.

The big problem was mainly that no one advised the new colonists or gave them any explanations. So everyone had to gather their own experiences, which were often accompanied by serious misfortune. Many things were planted at the wrong time, what the rain did not wash away was burned by the sun. Many harvests were thus lost, and one had to have a lot of money to buy new seeds. One goat after another was sold to guarantee the bare necessities of life, and one chicken after another met the same fate. The rest were taken by wild animals or died from the epidemic. It was urgently necessary to look for other work. So the only option left was to cut timber for wealthy colonists. This is very hard work, especially with inadequate nutrition. The young men kept going back to the village to look for work at other colonies, but that was very difficult as well. No one needed workers. Occasionally, they could help with breaking up a new road. The young women tried to work for other people as housemaids. But even there, the pay was low, since they were provided with “food and lodging for free”. In addition to these difficulties, they had little contact with the other colonists because they lived so far away. Then, in 1924, more colonists moved to the area, who also had children of the same age, and the village began to come alive. There was singing, playing, dancing, making music, and they even formed a choir that rehearsed regularly. They then always sang at weddings and other celebrations.

“My sister Frieda (Elfriede) married colonist Kurt Langer at the age of 18. After Frieda was married, we began to build our new house. To do this, we cut down thick cedars and split them into shingles for the roof, totaling 4,000 shingles. The boards were also sawed by hand, but we took great joy in it, even though the work was very hard. Who can describe our pride when the new house was finally finished! A real wooden house, with a beautiful veranda and four large rooms, apart from the kitchen.

Since the harvests were not profitable enough, we tried to make sugar. Papa built a sugarcane press, which consisted of three rollers standing upright. Someone had to feed the sugarcane into it, and at the top was a piece of wood that had to be turned. The two of us would always walk around it, and the sugarcane juice was collected and then boiled in a large kettle. The boiling was usually done by Arthur, and the pressing often continued until 11 at night. In the dark, Willi and I would go to cut sugarcane. This was in June, and it was very cold. During this time, the first grandchild of my parents was born (11 June 11 1926), and my mother stayed with my sister Frieda for a week. We hurried a lot with the sugarcane harvest, as the frost had already destroyed part of it. Dad was busy all day: he built the troughs into which the sugar juice flowed, made new teeth for the rollers that interlocked, because they always broke, which was frustrating. They always had to be renewed until someone once gave the advice to nail the whole roller full of large, thick iron nails. That helped. Then Arthur was able to buy a young horse, which was trained to operate the press. In this way time passed. For us young people, despite poverty and hard work, life was nice; youth views the world through different eyes. On 5 May, 1927, Jakob Stapf and I got married. It was not so easy to be legally married. We had to travel from home to the river *Aguapei*, a distance of twelve kilometers [7.5 miles], which we did on horse-back, then we rowed across the river in a boat. From there, we continued by a small truck, which, besides us, also carried three fat pigs and the owner. Since it was a very hot day, the pigs could not endure the ride, and one by one they had to be put to death. By six o'clock in the evening, we finally arrived in the ‘city’ of Araçatuba. The nearest civil registrar was located there from our location. Back the same way, but we had no luck; only a truck going to Alto Pimenta, a place 50 km [31 miles] from our colony. We went there, and then we had to continue on foot. There we met an acquaintance who at least loaded our luggage onto his horse, so that at least we did not have to carry anything. At 12 noon we were at the river, but the boat was on the other side. So Jakob swam across and brought the boat back, then we rowed back. Only at dusk did we get home, dead tired.

4. Marriage, Death, Busy Years in the Jungle, Relocations

The wedding was celebrated the next Saturday, and it was a lot of fun and beautiful. There was much singing, music, and dancing. However, the celebration ended sadly. Mama suffered from severe gallstone colic (*Gallenkoliken*), which she had been experiencing for some time. No doctor could be brought here, and so she endured terrible pain for twelve more days until death finally relieved her.”

Up to this point are her own handwritten records. Now I will continue to report:

After the wedding, they once again faced renewed difficult, labor-intensive years. Six children came from the marriage, which was a great burden given the circumstances at the time. It was

especially difficult when one of us got sick, which happened often, as there were neither resources nor ways to get a doctor. But a stubborn willpower that my mother possessed helped her to endure everything and always remain cheerful.

In 1937, my parents moved to another German colony (Tannenberg). Rural life in Brazil was difficult, especially since there was no mechanical support. I was born in 1938, and my youngest sister in 1943. So my mother had five boys and one girl, who fortunately are all alive and have families. In 1939, my parents considered returning to Germany; however, their plan did not materialize due to the war. So they continued to stay in the colony. In 1946, my father decided that the children had to go to school (there was none in the colony; the German school had been closed by the government), and he sold the property and tried his luck in the city. Once again, the practical nature of my mother appeared, because my father had not the slightest idea of what he should do in the city. So she took the rudder into her own hands, and under her guidance, we were able to get by reasonably well. At that time (1948), my mother was struck hard by fate once again. Since she had not been feeling well for some time, she consulted a doctor in São Paulo (700 km [435 miles] from the place where we lived), who diagnosed her with abdominal cancer. After overcoming many difficulties (mainly financial), it was finally possible to have her operated on, and after five years of treatment with cobalt radiation, she was cured. It was truly a miracle for that time.

At the end of 1948, my father decided to move again, as the situation for the livelihood of the family had simply become unbearable. My father had heard that the government was distributing land, specifically in central Brazil, 200 km [124 miles] from the place where the capital Brasília is today. The decision was quickly followed by action, and now a new adventure awaited. I cannot describe the reaction of my mother, who, freshly operated on, was subjected to new hardships. As a child, one experiences everything as beautiful and adventurous. We traveled for twelve days in an old truck, of course with no mention of pavement. One could write a whole book just about that. Not even once did we hear our mother complain, although the journey was certainly not easy for her. The only thing that surprised us when we finally arrived and were faced with completely wild land, where only tents stood, was that she sat on a tree stump and cried. Today I know why! Two years followed that demanded hard work and brought much sickness. The whole family contracted yellow fever (*Gelbfieber*) [previously identified as malaria], making things unbearable. But do not believe that this took away the courage of my mother! There was singing and music as always; for that reason, we can still enjoy many beautiful German songs today.

In 1950, the city was thriving again, but still near the site of today's capital, Brasília, whose construction only began in 1956. For my mother, it was also a new beginning, one of the hardest ever, because by then the children were older, but there was barely any income. And yet, every weekend there was intense activity. Friends gathered, and there was music and singing. I am proud to be able to say that the spirit of those simple and pleasant evenings and afternoons was my mother.

5. In São Paulo—My Mother as the Creative Center of the Family

In 1956, two of my brothers and I moved to São Paulo to look for better job opportunities. A year later, we had our parents come, and that marked the beginning of a whole new chapter in the life

of my mother. At that time, São Paulo was a city of 2.3 million; today, it has 14 million inhabitants. Anyone who has spent their whole life in the countryside or in small towns finds it difficult to live in a big city, especially one that grows at the pace of São Paulo. Once again, my mother knew how to adapt admirably and make the best of it. Fortunately, the problems of unemployment were now resolved, and a new phase of rebuilding the family began, in which my mother played a very special role. She took care of everything, provided for everyone, and stood ready with advice and help for anyone who needed it.

Immediately after her arrival in São Paulo, she sought out old acquaintances who also enjoyed making music. She knew how to make us boys feel so familiar with the family that shortly afterward we were already making music together, which led to the formation of the “São Paulo Mandolin Group”, now known and popular throughout São Paulo and southern Brazil. In the meantime, it has become a full plucked-string orchestra (*Zupforchester*). My mother remained loyal to this orchestra until 1982. She was even able to participate in the recording of the long-playing record for the 25th anniversary of the orchestra. During the last 27 years of her life, a large circle of friends developed. My father died in 1964. After that, my mother devoted herself entirely to her children, daughters-in-law, and grandchildren. All the daughters-in-law loved her very much because she had understanding for everything and always found the right words. She had the opportunity to travel to Germany twice more, but unfortunately, she could not get to see her beloved and unforgettable Tarutino again.

It would be too much to report on all of her activities and tasks. I can only say this: everyone who knew her was moved by her power of attraction. In her manner, she seemed modest, yet determined to make the best of life.

At the beginning of 1983, she underwent surgery for abdominal cancer again and was cured, but in June, cancer was detected in her lungs. It was a severe suffering until she was released on 3 August. One wish could still be fulfilled for her: her sister Marta, who lives 800 km [497 miles] inland in a colony where she had spent several weeks multiple times, was able to visit her for a few days. All her brothers have died. The two youngest also this year. Her sister Elfriede still lives in the German Democratic Republic.

Addendum

Emigrant **Ludwig Wilhelm Gerstenberger**, born on 31 May, 1877, in Tamurka, died on 30 October, 1947, in Brazil, married Emilie Hansen on 12 November, 1898, born on 30 April, 1878, in Sarata/Bessarabia, died on 25 May, 1927, in Brazil. The two had seven children.

Ludwig Wilhelm Gerstenberger was the youngest of his surviving brothers. He attended the Teacher-Training College “*Wernerschule*” in Sarata. However, since he did not want to become a teacher, he took a year off and went to Courland to become an engineer. His mother, however, wanted him to be in the pulpit as a pastor or to become a doctor. But he also had to quit his engineering studies after a year, because both of his parents died within two days of each other, and as the “youngest”, he, according to Bessarabian colonist custom, had to take over the business of his father; so his life began with disappointments, as nothing went according to his wishes.

Wilhelm had an ambitious, restless nature; he was always only interested in constructing something. As soon as something was finished, he lost interest in it and looked for a new object that matched his ideas. So it was not long before he exchanged properties with his brother Friedrich, whose house had just been roughly completed. Now Wilhelm expanded the house according to his ideas and taste, planted an orchard with carefully selected fruit varieties, planted rare flowering shrubs, built a dam, and stocked the resulting pond with fish—only to sell it shortly afterward. In Klöstitz, he bought a neglected timber business. After he had developed the timber business excellently, he also sold it and acquired a house in Tarutino, which he, having modified it to his taste, left after a few years. He built a new house for himself on a construction site, also sold it, and finally, like so many other fellow-countrymen at that time (in 1921/23), emigrated to Brazil. Having arrived in Hamburg with his whole family, he lost the majority of his wealth due to the inflation raging in Germany at that time. He came upon an emigration company, which sent him to the notorious “Paulista” colony in Brazil, into the jungle, a malaria-infested area, where his children, all of whom he had pulled out of secondary school—the eldest, Artur, from university—found no possibility of the promised schooling or further education. Shopping options or the sale of their production were only possible by covering great distances.

Wilhelm then moved once again to the area of Araçatuba. He died, worn down by hardships and disappointments, in the year 1947. His wife Emilie, who could not settle into the new homeland and suffered greatly from homesickness, died just six years after the emigration, in the year 1927.

Over time, his children largely left the colony and settled, some in Mato Grosso/Tres Lagoas in western Brazil, and some in the province of São Paulo, where they found work and a home in the German settlements. The eldest son, along with his wife and children, settled in Roboré, Bolivia, after a long journey, where he last lived in government service as a topographer until his death in 1972. The eldest daughter, married to a German from the Reich, moved to Germany with her husband. Her husband was killed in battle, and she now lives with her children in the Erzgebirge. The daughter Erna also married a German, and after many years of trying to establish themselves in various colonies, they moved to São Paulo, where she lived with her children and grandchildren until 1983. Her husband died in 1964 in São Paulo. Son Wilhelm also settled in São Paulo; the children Marta and Ernst remained in the colony, and later in Mato Grosso.

After a difficult beginning, all the children of Wilhelm managed to make a good life for themselves.

[Translation Ends]