

Gottlieb Hansen, First German to Build a Steam Mill in Bessarabia

Bessarabischer Heimatkalender—1965

W. Rumpelstin, Buchdruckerei und Zeitungsverlag K.G.

[Book Printing and Newspaper Publishing Limited]

Burgdorf, Hannover/Germany

Pages 57-61

Translated by: Allen E. Konrad

August, 2025

P.O. Box 157, Rowley, IA 52329

onamission1939@gmail.com

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

=====

[Translation Begins]

Gottlieb Hansen first German builder of a steam mill in Bessarabia

A Cultural-Historical Study

by F.W.

Gottlieb Hansen was born in Sarata in 1840. His ancestor did not come, like the other Sarata residents, from Württemberg or Bavaria-Swabia, but, according to the research of Dr. Karl Stumpp, emigrated from Wüssmar (Wismar?) in Mecklenburg to Sarata in 1822. To ensure that the life's work of this outstanding pioneer and his influence on our economic development in Bessarabia do not completely fade into oblivion, I have traced his life and would like to attempt to position the person of Hansen in his time. To clarify the connections that had a beneficial impact on our economic life at that time, I need to go back a bit further, as a whole series of inescapable conditions play a role in this.

Gottlieb Hansen lived and worked in the second half of the previous century, during the groundbreaking time when the steam engine made its entrance in Western Europe and modern industry was born, but also when human society shifted in its social classification. We German colonists in Bessarabia vegetated, far away from the motherland and the great world, in our corner of the steppe, in Budjak by the Black Sea, calmly following traditional customs. However, a man like Hansen showed us through his work new economic paths that we had to take if we wanted to fulfill our cultural mission regarding our homeland.

Odessa played a dominant role in the economy of the then Southern Russia (New Russia). This youthful, rapidly increasing port city on the Black Sea developed into a center of trade and industry of global significance, especially as the railway network reached the port through a branch of the Southwest Railway. The increase in trade turnover, mostly in Greek and Jewish hands, can be characterized by the following figures:

Year	Imports—Rubles	Export—Rubles
1874	42,500,000	52,200,000
1894	50,000,000	127,900,000

As is well known, during the immigration of Germans to the Black Sea region at the beginning of the last century, alongside the colonies in the steppe, a craftsman colony was also established in Odessa. These German craftsmen later formed a craftsmen's association and brought their trades to great heights, and some workshops developed into industrial enterprises. Here, I would like to mention only the plow factory of Johann Höhn, whose plows were in high demand far and wide for breaking the virgin steppe. (See *Heimatbuch* of the Germans from Russia, 1960, page 127). Wheat farming, as well as grain cultivation in general, rose to unprecedented levels. Southern Russia became the granary of Europe. Here are some figures regarding grain exports through the port of Odessa (in millions of metric hundredweight):

Year	Wheat	Rye	Barley	Corn
1890	8.1	1.8	2.3	1.3
1894	7.5	4.0	5.4	5.0

So there was a completely natural interrelationship between the active city and its hinterland, which was increasingly populated by diligent farmers. Along with other factories of various kinds for the refinement of agricultural products, the number of steam mills in the city increased to nineteen.

Among the German colonists in the steppe, the Mennonites always led in terms of cultural aspects, particularly in agriculture. (See the writing by A. Mauch on Johann Cornies.) But even in remote Bessarabia, things began to awaken, mainly inspired by Gottlieb Hansen from Sarata. The German craftsmen once brought their skills and many practical tips from Germany, but without new impulses, the development of craftsmanship would stagnate. Now the attraction of Odessa lured many young Germans to learn a trade here or to engage as agents in trade. Especially from Sarata, a number of young men moved to Odessa, as Sarata was one of the old villages closest to Odessa. Gottlieb Hansen was one of them. He learned the trade of a locksmith and carpenter and looked at the world with open eyes. Having returned to his hometown after his years of wandering, he brought new insights and a new spirit with him.

I take some information from the records of Artur Schöch, as his father August Schöch, who was related to Hansen and himself a skilled craftsman, communicated to him from his memories: “....One must assume that he received thorough training there (in Odessa), and may well have worked there until he became a master craftsman. Apparently, he did not start in Sarata with

empty hands, but could fall back on savings. One can also conclude that he stayed in Odessa for a longer period because, at the beginning of his activities in Sarata, he already possessed the ability to oversee larger areas of craftsmanship. In a few years, he built an extensive workshop operation according to his own plans.... The expansion and management of his workshops, forge, locksmith, carpentry, painting, and burnishing workshop testify to a purposeful path that he was determined to follow. He himself was hardly physically involved in the work, but left the execution of manual tasks to a good journeyman in each department. So Christian Schmied was known in the carpentry shop, August Baisch in the blacksmith facility, and Eduard Elholm in the locksmith workshop as competent assistants. In his workshops, wagons (mainly iron-clad), plows, artistic metalwork such as garden fences and fences for monuments, door fittings, and finally, good furniture, doors, and windows were produced in the carpentry shop. In his residence, Hansen had a well-equipped work room (study) with a small library. Here, his plans presumably matured.” So far from the records of Schöch. Hansen built a house that deviated from the usual construction style of the colonists. It was designed in the style of the houses built by the wealthy middleclass in Russian cities and was not covered with the usual thatch but with sheet metal. In terms of its craftsmanship, it was said to be the best house in the whole area. The interior, it was said, was quite “fashionable”, but this will be addressed in more detail later in this report.

Hansen was also active in public life. He was elected as the senior mayor of the Sarata *Wolost* for two successive terms. The beautiful cemetery road with the stately acacia avenue in Sarata can be attributed to his initiative. The founding of the first Co-operative Society in Sarata is thanks to his suggestion. He wanted to hire a female staff member as a salesperson for textile goods, but the conservative attitudes of the capable girls of that time frustrated this intention.

On the slope of the hill behind his courtyard, he had a well-kept vineyard with several thousand vines. The large wine harvests in the 1880s led him to think about building a big wine cellar here, which coincided in time with the construction of a similar cellar by the Gnadental wine cooperative. The Gnadental folks became afraid of their own courage (*Courage Angst*), the members dissolved the cooperative and the cellar remained unused. However, Hansen’s cellar collapsed after his death. Old Georg Benninger in Ghandental once told me that the cellar of Hansen was built with poor stones. When the Bulgarians drove from their quarries through Gnadental, the best stones for the construction of their wine cellar were bought from them, and with the soft and inferior ones, the Bulgarians continued to Sarata. Meanwhile, large wine cellars were built in Odessa, from where blended wines were bottled and shipped in all directions of Great Russia.

However, Hansen's most distinguished life work was the establishment of a steam-powered grain mill, which opened up an industry for the Germans in Bessarabia that later found many imitators. I could not determine exactly in which year this mill was built, probably in the 1870s; some claim it was even earlier.

As we saw above, grain cultivation took on massive proportions, and agriculture faced the problem of how to utilize the straw produced. Livestock farming was geared towards meat production, and the animals were kept in the barn for only a short time, so only little straw was used as bedding. Due to a lack of wood and coal, straw was also used to heat the stoves, but the

huge straw stacks in the steppe and in the backyards of the farmers remained unused. Now, the milling industry began to burn straw as heating material for energy generation.

Since ancient times, humans have used a grinding stone to mill grains. In later times, two stones were placed on top of each other, connected by an axis, with the upper stone being set into circular motion by a rotary process to save strength. However, the Romans are said to have already used water power for milling grains, and today, water turbines are used to drive mills in all civilized countries.

When our ancestors came to the Black Sea steppes, they found windmills there. It was the Ukrainian four-blade windmill, which could be turned towards the wind by means of a pole resting on a support. The entire inner workings of such a mill were assembled without a single iron nail, but only with wooden dowels, and during operation the whole structure creaked and groaned in a very rustic manner. Since strong winds blew in the steppe, a mill owner, who was usually also a miller, had his troubles during calm periods or when storms shook and tugged at the blades with great force. Some immigrants tried to establish watermills with either water over the top (*oberschlichtigem*) or water beneath (*unterschlichtigem*) the wheels on a flowing stream, as they knew from their homeland. But due to the often occurring drought, the stream dried up, and the miller sometimes waited for months for rain. They also built mills powered by horses, by placing horses, usually blind ones, with their front hooves on a sinking (*absinkendes*) board, whereby the weight of the horse moved a wheel that set the mill in motion. The horse, believing it had to keep walking, would step onto the next sinking board and so on. This was actually a form of animal cruelty. More appealing was the mechanical drive (*Göpelantrieb*) powered by horses. Then came the era of steam mills. To generate steam by burning straw, appropriate stoves had to be developed that could accommodate large quantities of this loose fuel, creating large flames that would quickly burn out. The stoker had his hands full with the operation of such a furnace.

Hansen probably saw a mill like this before he built a steam mill in Sarata. It would be interesting to determine what was used to heat the steam mills in Odessa at that time. Hansen



Mill in Borodino

found three partners for his venture who risked their money with him: Johannes Lager, Christian Schöch, and Johannes Steinwand. The mill had four double stones installed on the second floor. Based on the model of this first steam mill, a second was established in Arzis, and over time, almost every larger German village in Bessarabia had a steam mill, which was constantly surrounded by wagons of all nationalities. It would not be difficult to determine how many German steam mills we left behind in

Bessarabia during the Resettlement and how many of them were already equipped with roller mills (*Walzenstühlen*).

Through the aforementioned design of his house, Hansen broke with the common building system of the German colonists, which consisted of a front and back room (*Hinterstube*), front and back chamber (*Hinterkammer*), and a central hallway and a kitchen. He also maintained a more refined living culture that was widely admired by those around him. Regarding this, as well as Hansen's character, Miss Marie Mutschall, who frequently visited Hansen's house in her younger years, wrote to me the following: "Gottlieb Hansen lived a very reclusive life. Although

his wife and my mother socialized a lot, I cannot recall a single instance of him being at our house. Moreover, he was extremely reserved; he never spoke with us children, and there was always silence when I visited his daughter.'

On Sunday afternoons, his friend Hansjörg Hommel usually visited him. Then the two would silently smoke their pipes while moving back and forth across the room for hours. Sometimes the humorous Mrs. Gertrud would open the door and call into the room, 'Don't shout so much in there, you two!' (*Schreiat doch net so arg da dren, ihr zwoi!*) Even as a child, I was amazed by the various furnishings and objects one could see at Hansen's that were found nowhere else in the village. For example, the kitchen had a water line. Under the floor, there was a cistern that was filled from the yard. In the kitchen, water was pumped by means of a pump. A marble washbasin with a faucet, which stood in the bedroom, was also something special for that time. Then I recall a velvet carpet on the floor. If I am not mistaken, the fabric had a rococo pattern. Even the toys of the children were usually different from those of others. Mr. Hansen probably brought all these items back from his travels."

August Schöch further reports about Hansen: "It is quite understandable that Gottlieb Hansen, a man of such rich talent, such determined nature, and great life experience, was met with great respect wherever he went, whether he was driven through the village street in a carriage by his hired man or making his daily journey to the mill on foot in his black, natural fur overcoat in the winter. This respect is also reflected in the fact that as a punctual churchgoer, the first seat at the second pillar in the gallery (*Empore*) was always made available or kept free for him."

From August Baisch in Korntel near Stuttgart, a son of Hansen's foreman in the forge, I received the following anecdote that his father had told him: Hansen is said to have received a three-day detention (*Arrest*) from the Russian authorities, during which he had to serve only two hours each day. He had himself driven by his coachman to the "little house" in a "spring wagon" pulled by two proud black horses in their best attire, almost in defiance, and picked up again.

As a schoolboy, I had an experience the only time I saw Hansen. I really wanted to listen to a community meeting, so one evening I stood at the back of the large school hall. The four rows of four-seater benches were filled with men and the mayor stood at the podium. I can no longer remember what was being discussed very lively. Then, a stout man stood in the middle of the aisle and gave a speech, the content of which I also cannot recall, I only remember that he spoke High German. As soon as he finished, a large murmur arose and excited voices could soon be heard here and there, overpowering each other in favor or against. When a brief silence set in, a man known in the village for being quick-witted and funny shouted: "I believe we could also handle this matter without Hanson, even if we could not talk as good as he does." (*I moi die Sach kenna mer au ohne da Hansn macha, wenn mer au net so sche schwätza kenne, wea er.*) A true laughter storm erupted, and the matter was settled. Envious and overly smart Bessarabians were present in Sarata at that time, who could not counter a certain Hansen with arguments and were therefore forced to hit him with toxic jokes. Finally, an excerpt from Schöch's statements: "The report on the cause of death is characteristic of the essence of this man. Gottlieb Hansen died from the highly contagious and severe infectious disease, smallpox. Brave as Hansen was in all situations of life, he visited his friend Alois Eckert, who was suffering from smallpox, without

fear of infection. After returning to his residence, a fever struck him, and within a few days he fell victim to this dangerous disease. He died at the age of sixty.”

Perhaps a brief note about his family life. He was married in his first marriage to Margarete, née Schöch, and in his second to Gertrud, née Baisch. He had little luck with his descendants, as they died early. One of his daughters is said to still be living in America.

[Translation Ends]