

Our Stonemasons

Bessarabischer Heimatkalender—1968

W. Rumpelstin, Buchdruckerei und Zeitungsverlag K.G.

[Book Printing and Newspaper Publishing Limited]

Burgdorf, Hannover/Germany

Pages 61-64

Translated by: Allen E. Konrad

March, 2025

P.O. Box 157, Rowley, IA 52329

onamission1939@gmail.com

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

=====

[Translation Begins]

Our Stonemasons

by Immanuel Oswald

One of the most beautiful and interesting professions in Bessarabia was the stonemason's profession. The stonemasons were simply called "gravestone makers" by our people. Although the number of these artisans was very small—there may have been fifteen or eighteen of them—this was quite sufficient for the fulfillment of the orders in our communities. The workshops were distributed among the villages in such a way that everyone not only had a good livelihood, but was also able to achieve a modest prosperity.

As far as I can remember, there were workshops for gravestones in **Tarutino, Alt-Arzis, Brienne, Teplitz, Alt-Elft, Neu-Elft, Borodino** and **Lichtental**.

The number of apprentices and journeymen usually depended on the orders that an entrepreneur could bring in. In recent years, competition had developed, which my father, B. Oswald, was not acquainted with at the beginning of his activity.

The masters usually obtained the raw material from *Dewlet-Agatsch*. The raw blocks and slabs (*Platten*), cut to measure, were brought to our yard by the Bulgarians. The *Dewlet-Agatsch* stone was a soft shell limestone that could be worked well with saws and planes. The tools used to work the stone were almost the same as those used by our carpenters. You could buy all of them in any major hardware store. Ingredients such as varnish oil, varnishes, paints, gold leaf and other utensils were purchased in the *Konsom* or in the village shop.

If an apprentice had worked successfully in the company for years, he was declared a journeyman by the master craftsman, received a certificate and a journeyman garment. Then he was able to become self-employed.

It would have been better for some of them if they had worked as a journeyman in the company for another three to four years and learned even more. Whether an apprentice or journeyman later made it to the rank of master craftsman depended on their eagerness to learn.

An Example:

A young man at the age of fifteen wanted to become a stonemason. He was a slim fellow. Master Oswald had no great desire to employ him, for the old journeymen said that if he was to lift a lump, his underpants would have to be washed afterwards. However, the apprentice did not let himself be turned away.

After three years of good food at the Masters' tables, he was not only physically well developed, but also the best journeyman. Instead of going out in the evening, he stayed in his room, drawing, learning, doing mathematics.

When he had come to Odessa for military service, where we visited him, we were met by a handsome, tall sergeant. Later, he became a capable Master. This apprentice had also only attended the village school like all the others. I just want to say that every stonemason's apprentice carried the marshal's baton in his own backpack.

In the first decades, the stonemasons made very simple gravestones. In later times, our better-off people were often no longer satisfied with a gravestone made of soft stone. They wanted something better, more stable, more elegant. The master stonemason had to acquire new skills that were unknown to the first generations of stonemasons. It was the working of man-made-marble or man-made-granite stone, provided with a marble tablet, into which the writing was first carved and then usually gold-plated. If someone wanted a grave memorial made of an even better type of stone, the master went to Odessa in the years before the World War and bought the necessary marble or granite stones there. The example of an artistically crafted grave memorial may be that of Chr. Fr. Werner in the cemetery in Sarata.

When Bessarabia was separated from Russia in 1918, our eyes turned to Galatz and Bucharest. From these cities, we stonemasons received finished marble slabs and marble monuments much more easily and quickly. When the daughter of the financial controller living in Arzis died (she was a high school student at the Akkerman Girls' Secondary School), I had to order an angel about 80 centimeters [31.5 inches] high from Lucerne (Switzerland) according to the catalog. It was made of the best Italian Bianco marble and cost "only" 40,000 lei at the time. In addition, I had to get a pedestal with a marble plate on which the angel stood. The inscription was carved into the plate and gilded. This beauty was set up in the Akkerman Orthodox Cemetery close to the chapel.

I just wanted to mention that for our Bessarabian German stonemasons the time had come when one had not only to work on Dewlet-Agatsch stones, but also to understand the processing of other hard stones.

The Resettlement in 1940 put an abrupt end to our stonemasonry work, as in many other trades.

In the east, the stonemasons were mostly settled in the countryside, where it was hardly possible to work in the profession. The Flight in 1945 finally sealed the fate of this professional branch, as at first none of them could become independent. Those who were still employed as journeymen in a stonemason's business had to start all over again and could be happy to be able to earn a living and learn something new. Today, there will probably only be two companies left that, after a lot of effort and work, have overcome and have a place in the sun again: Edmund Hiller and Co., formerly Tarutino, now in Bavaria, and Oswald & Sohn KG., formerly Arzis, now Holstein [Germany].

A great deal could be written about the beginning and development of such an enterprise in our new homeland. It would perhaps lead on too far if one wanted to report on it in detail. And yet I think it is necessary to describe the difficult path. When I found my wife in Krummsee, three kilometers [1.9 miles] from Malente, in April of 1945, my landlady told me to try to inscribe the remaining stones by Widow "X" in Neukirchen, since she had no expert. This advice failed; the commodity was supposed to bring in currency money. So I began to rework old worn sandstones on the cemeteries. However, this was only possible in the summer months. After I had become a member of the guild, but my Master Craftsman's Certificate was required, I could only present to the board the Master Craftsman's Certificate translated from Romanian into German, and after the verification there were the words "Heil Hitler" and the stamp with the swastika.

Then it was over with my *Kunst* [previous certification status], I was given a year, could continue working, but in the course of the year I had to take another exam in Kiel. I sweat the most over the dear "Geometry". Since the time when Professor Gunsch made an honest effort to translate this science from Russian into German, and to convey it to me, I had never seen a geometry book again. After all, that was forty-six years ago. But even this hurdle could be overcome. But what good is a Master Craftsman's title if you do not have a workshop. Only after the Currency Reform was it possible to lease a chicken outlet (*Hühnerauslauf*) in the size of sixty square meters [645.6 sq ft] at the cemetery in Malente, where I built a gravestone workshop. That was the beginning. The order of magnitude still existed when my son returned home from Russia after four years of captivity. A good education at the Königslutter Technical School, where he graduated with distinction, soon led to our "Business" in Malente gaining a good reputation.

When the opportunity arose in 1953 to acquire a plot of land of about five hundred square meters [5,380 sq ft] in Neustadt/Baltic Sea, we took the opportunity and were able to gradually increase the area to five thousand square meters [53,800 sq ft]. What it took in effort and work to build up a business out of nothing, which can and must compete with others who had lost nothing, only those who have experienced all this first-hand know. With my almost seventy years of age, I have only one wish: to be allowed to drive from Malente to Neustadt for a long time, to draw

my inscriptions and to be able to make sure that the mice do not dance on the table in the factory. It is difficult to set up a business; but it is even more difficult to preserve it.



Granite works for Gravestones of the Company Oswald and Son KG. in Neustadt/Holstein, Cemetery Lane 5. Released by the Lower Saxon Economic and Business Ministry Hannover, Release No. 1233/81160.

[Translation Ends]