Scholtoi Municipality

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by Heinrich Layh

The history of the German settlers in Northern Bessarabia was quite different from that of the settlers in Southern Bessarabia. Only the small northernmost community of Naslawtscha is an exception. A group of twelve families (Lutherans and Catholics) emigrated from the then Duchy of Warsaw to Bessarabia in 1816 and were directed by the governor, Prince Krupensky, to his numerous estates in the northernmost corner. Settled as colonists on the banks of the Dniester, they enjoyed the same privileges as the colonists on the Black Sea coast. Confined by the large adjacent Russian village of Naslawtscha, they gradually left the place. During World War I, the remaining ones, as the hostile front approached threateningly, were sent to Siberia. Returning in 1917, they found their homesteads destroyed or occupied by strangers and withdrew to the southern municipalities. The remaining German settlements in Northern Bessarabia were established in the middle of the previous century. They were all leasing communities: Alt-Gudia and Neu-Gudia, Alt-Scholtoi and Neu-Scholtoi, Rischkanowka and Neu-Strymba. All located in the Belzy District. Due to unfavorable leasing conditions, the communities of Alt-Gudia and Neu-Gudia dissolved. At the beginning of the First World War, after the settlers, as Austrian citizens, were expelled to Siberia, Neu-Scholtoi was demolished by the landlord.

Alt-Scholtoi was founded in 1865. It is interesting how the ancient German community came to its foreign-sounding name. In the history of Moldova by Rebreanu, the following fact is mentioned. Approximately where Scholtoi is located today, a Turkish castle named Scholtan stood on a hill. Its commander kidnapped the beautiful daughter of a Moldovan cattleman (*Bojaren*) and imprisoned the stubborn girl in the tower of the castle, where she hanged herself. For decades, the beauty was said to have roamed the area, mourning and weeping. The Moldovans avoided this place for a long time and called it *Scholtoae*.

The majority of the settlers come from Ueckertsthal in Galicia. Their ancestors were settled in Galicia by Joseph II as model farmers from Germany (Pfalz), such as the families of **Frick** (Frankenthal), **Layh** (Wachenheim), **Heichert** (Abzei) and others. The remaining settlers were recruited from the dissolved communities of Alt-Gudia and Neu-Gudia (Bukovina), Neu-Scholtoi, and Naslawtscha (**Groß**, **Presser**, **Müller**). As tenants of the landowner Jermolinsky (a Pole), who received the large estate from the Tsar for his bravery in the Russo-Turkish War, they were granted not only as much land as they could cultivate but also free timber from his forests. While they were erecting their first primitive houses, they found lodging in the neighboring villages. Later, they built themselves nice houses with thatched roofs made of crude clay bricks. The only goods they brought with them from Galicia were the Bible, a hymn book, and a catechism. Everything else they had to and could produce themselves, as there were indeed various craftsmen among them. The wife of the lord of the manor—allegedly a Volga German from Poland—visited the nice settlement several times, delighted by the systematically laid out little village, the clean, whitewashed houses, and especially the splendor of the flower gardens. She wanted to name the settlement Blumenthal, but the lord of the estate insisted on the name Scholtoae (later Scholtoi). Since the rent was cheap, reportedly five rubles per *Deßjatin* [1 Deß. = 2.7 acres / 1.09 hectares], the settlers soon achieved considerable prosperity.

The layout of the settlement is reminiscent of the southern Bessarabian colonies. A wide, straight street, lined with houses featuring high gables facing the street, and in front of each house a flower garden. The street is bordered by acacias. Barns, sheds, and stables are located opposite the residential building. Five wells with crankshafts along the street provided the settlers with the precious water. An additional four wells for the livestock were located outside of the community.

Like every German Bessarabian community, right at the founding, the people of Scholtoi also erected their nice schoolhouse and house of prayer in the center. It was somewhat primitive, but in 1908 they built a new, nice schoolhouse and house of prayer with their own resources. The building consisted of a spacious classroom with an adjoining sexton residence (*Küsterwohnung*) and a prayer hall. In 1937, the community began the construction of a church, in which the settlers not only contributed their last penny but also provided compulsory labor (*Fronarbeit*). Unfortunately, the nice building could not be completed due to the Resettlement. The Scholtoi folks were very religious; there were neither Pietists nor Sectarians among them, and certainly no Atheists. The sexton-teacher (*Küsterlehrer*) was employed and paid by the community. Since the remote and now impoverished community could only offer a meager salary, only inadequately trained teachers were available. If they were family men, they had to farm on the side. Only in the 1930s did the Consistory in Tarutino temporarily employ graduates from the Werner Training College (*Seminar*s) and the high school (*Gymnasiums*) and support them. Through the young teachers, a national-cultural life flourished


Scholtoi Prayer House

in Scholtoi. Unfortunately, at that time, the Romanian school authority intervened, filled the teaching position of the purely confessional school with a Romanian, and then simply declared the school a Romanian state school, granting only a few hours per week for religion and German instruction.

The community belonged to the Kishinew Parish and was initially served only once and from 1920 twice a year. It is interesting how the isolated community welcomed its pastor. Young men, whose hats and horses were adorned with colorful ribbons, rode out to meet the pastor and accompanied him to the village, where the entire community received him in front of the prayer house with a song from the hymnal. The pastor conducted a liturgical service, distributed the Holy Communion, confirmed the school-leaving youth, and blessed the children baptized by the sexton. This day was a great feast day for the community.

Until the First World War, the settlers rented twenty or more *Deßjatinen* [135 acres / 54.5 hectares or more] from the estate owner, although he raised the rent to fifty rubles per *Deßjatin*. Although they were occasionally severely affected by poor harvests, a moderate maize harvest still kept them afloat. Dairy farming was particularly productive, and the settlers could sell its products well in the surrounding market towns, as German butter enjoyed a good reputation and the demand often exceeded the supply. It became worse when Bessarabia was joined to the Kingdom of Romania. The new Agrarian Reform hit them quite hard. Every landless farmer—and that included the people of Scholtoi—was allocated six hectares [14.8 acres] by the state. Only in rare cases did it succeed in leasing some hectares from lazy Russian or Moldovan farmers. Thus, they intensively turned to livestock, pig, and poultry farming. They also planted fruit orchards and vineyards. The little village literally sank into the green of its gardens and offered a wonderfully beautiful sight from a distance.

Nevertheless, although the forefathers of the Scholtoi folks lived for almost a century in Galicia among Ruthenians, Poles, and Jews, and were also dispersed in Northern Bessarabia among Russians, Moldovans, and Jews, they not only preserved their mother tongue and the faith of their fathers, but also their customs and traditions originating from their homeland. They had no lack of opportunities to practice these traditions. After all, they were a warm-hearted, cheerful, and hospitable people who loved their festivals and celebrated them extensively. For at that place, they were among themselves, could speak German, sing German songs, practice their old customs, and no one disturbed them. There they formed a closed, deeply rooted community of destiny. The following is a brief, in succession, description of them.

New Year's Eve (*Silvester*) began with a church service. Until midnight, there was a prayerful silence in the village. It was a thanksgiving to the Almighty for the past year and a plea for His blessing for the coming year. At midnight, a bell rang from the church tower, signaling the end of the old year and the beginning of the new one. And then the New Year's shooting and well-wishing began. People went from one to another, mostly in pairs—married couples or a young fellow with his girl. While the male fired his gun at the entrance area, the females recited their New Year's greeting, which went as follows:

"Good morning,
we wish you happiness and joy today at this New Year's time!

Because the New Year has come, we have resolved
to wish you peace and good fortune at this time.
As many droplets as are in the rain, may God so give you blessings!"

The man of the house then entertains his early guests with drinks and a cold platter.

On New Year's Day, after the church service, people visited each other and spent the day in harmony and joy. The children went from house to house and recited their New Year's verse:

"Good morning, Father and Mother,
we wish you a feather bed, adorned all around with roses,
in the middle the Holy Spirit, who shows you the way to heaven.
Whatever you wish for yourselves, we wish for you as well."

They were gifted with apples, nuts, and candy. The youth spent their time until midnight dancing, singing, and joyful games.

Shrove Tuesday (*Fastnacht*) was celebrated according to old tradition mostly by the youth in the "dance house", while the adults spent it with a jug of wine and the irresistible "Fasting Night Cakes" (*Fastnachtsküchle*). Lent time passed quietly with passion devotions and the repentant introspection.

On Easter morning, the entire congregation went to the cemetery at the crack of dawn, where the sexton held a service with prayers and songs at sunrise. Meanwhile, the diligent Easter Bunny had laid his elaborately colored eggs in the prepared nests at home. The "egg packing" (*Eierpacken*) was an old tradition.

At Pentecost, the houses were decorated on the outside with green branches and strewn inside with a lot of *Quendel* (thyme). An old Pentecost custom, which could still have originated from the motherland, should be mentioned. The cows were milked before sunrise and driven to the pasture. The last cow was given a garland around its neck by a young fellow, and because of its lingering action was mocked and it received the name "Pentecost Lamb".

The Church Dedication Festival (*Kirchweihfest*) was celebrated particularly joyfully and extensively on 21 October. In the week prior, the women had to clean, bake, and roast. The young fellows had to arrange the music, while the young gals had to take care of the hungry stomachs of the musicians. In front of the church dedication house (dance hall), the young men erected a five-meter [16.4 feet] tall spruce tree, whose top was adorned with a wide wreath of colorful ribbons. On the first evening of dancing, the young fellows were inducted into [the circle of the] youth (*Jugend*), buying their way in with several liters of wine. The church festival lasted two days and two nights. The Scholtoi folks were not know for any riots, brawls, or other unwelcome disruptions. There were also no drunkards among them. And before their teacher, mayor, and church trustees, they always showed proper respect.

On Christmas Eve (*Heiligen Abend*), the prayer hall was overcrowded. The students gathered around the glimmering Christmas tree, each reciting their little verse. Nativity plays were also

performed. Afterward, *Pelzmärtel* (hired man Ruprecht) went from house to house with a stick (*Rute*). He was accompanied by the "Christchild" (*Christkindl*). The children had to recite prayers and promise obedience and diligence. Only then did they receive sweets (*Naschzeug*) from the sack of *Pelzmärtel*. Only then did the Christmas trees in all houses light up, and the children received their gifts from parents and godparents.

If a young couple decided to get married, they would send two "marriage messengers" (*Freiersmänner*) to the parents to arrange the dowry (*Mitgift*) and wedding celebration (*Hochzeitsfeier*). Then the "hand strike" (*Handstreich*) (engagement) was celebrated, which was initiated with prayer and song. The entire community was usually invited to the wedding feast. The "wedding bidders" (*Hochzeitsbitter*) went from house to house inviting guests with an old saying, and each host tied a colored ribbon to the "wedding staff" (*Hochzeitsstab*) as a sign of agreement. The father of the bride and the mother of the bride, the best men and bridesmaids assumed all the burdens and concerns of the celebration. A music band provided entertainment. Old customs such as the "stolen bridal shoe", the "cook with the burned hand", and the ceremony of "bride abduction" came to light. People danced, sang, and joked heartily. In the end, the guests presented their gifts to the wedding couple, the value of which often covered the costs of the celebration. Usually, such a celebration lasted two days.

The "child baptism" (*Kindtaufe*) was also appropriately celebrated.

The people of Scholtoi were particularly hard hit by the First World War. In the spring of 1915, they suddenly received the tragic news that they were all to be deported to Siberia. And already, the Russian and Moldovan peasants from the neighboring villages came to choose the best houses and bought agricultural equipment and livestock for very cheap prices (*Pappenstiel*). The determined community then decided to make a plea to the all-powerful "officer" (*Pristav*). The village elders went to him with some buckets of butter, ham, and sausages, and the *Pristav* promised them that if he could not cancel the deportation, he would at least postpone it. But the men and women were forced to dig trenches from the Pruth [River] to the Dniester [River], while all able-bodied men fought on the Turkish Front for the Tsar and the fatherland. Only the Austrian citizens were sent to Siberia. Strangers moved into their houses or they were demolished by the landlord. During the war, the German school was closed and the German language was strictly forbidden outside the four walls. The Germans were monitored by people on the look-out (*Spähern*). They had to endure all kinds of harassment. They were called the "cursed germanzi", the "internal enemies of Russia", "spies" and other insults were found. Their cattle were requisitioned until the stables were empty. They never received the legal compensation. Often their houses were searched for weapons or a "Berlin transmitter". Some men were arrested, hauled off to Belzy and released after a few days.

The Revolution of 1917 to 1918 hit them even more terribly. The plundering began as early as the autumn of 1917. First, the estate manor was plundered and burned down. Then unbridled masses also came to Scholtoi, to the "cursed germanzi". All requests and protests of the settlers were answered with scornful laughter: "You came to us with the wheelbarrow and with the wheelbarrow we will drive you away again." No one was concerned about the homeless (*Schutzlosen*) and defenseless (*Wehrlosen*). Only the Jews took pity on them, helped them, but not to the disadvantage of the Jews.

With the Resettlement into the Reich came their salvation. At the end of 1940, a German Commission appeared among them, which carried out all the work for the Resettlement. From Belzy station, they were deported via Austria to Germany. They were all settled in Polish villages in the Lublin District, from which the local population had been "evacuated". The Poles gathered as partisans in the forests, attacked the "invaders", set entire villages on fire, and shot at the fleeing individuals. Eventually, women and children were sent to Litzmannstadt [Łódź], and the remaining men—those eligible for military service were conscripted into the SS or Wehrmacht—had to defend themselves against the partisans who were called "Werewolves". As the Soviet Offensive Operation (*Walze*) came dangerously close, they had to flee in the convoy and leave behind everything they had brought from home and acquired here. In Litzmannstadt, they took their wives and children with them. Along the way, they were frequently attacked by planes, and there were seriously wounded and people killed. The author of this chronicle was also seriously wounded and must now live his life as an eighty-percent disabled person. So they first arrived in Thuringia, where they had to endure the misery of the refugee camp for years. Finally, they were settled in Nürtingen. There was barely half of them left, those of the chaos.

Now they are safely at home in their German homeland, from which their ancestors had emigrated one hundred sixty years ago.

(Edited by Rudolf Zeller)

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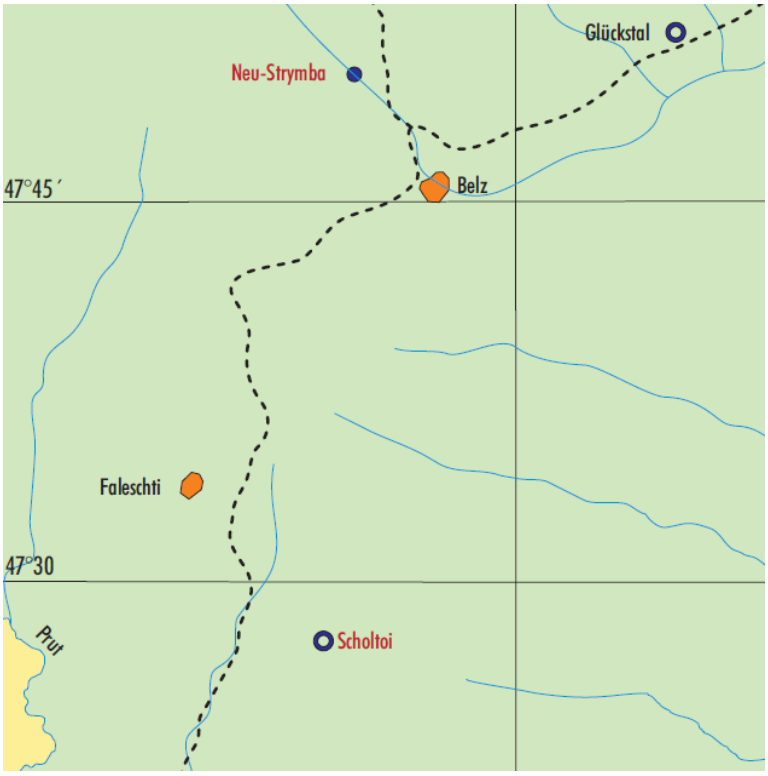

Stumpp Map of Northwest Bessarabia reworked by Rolf Jethon
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