

# Swabians in Bessarabia

*Bessarabischer Heimatkalender—1986*

W. Rumpelstin, Buchdruckerei und Zeitungsverlag K.G.

[Book Printing and Newspaper Publishing Limited]

Burgdorf, Hannover/Germany

Pages 39-42

Translated by: Allen E. Konrad

November, 2025

P.O. Box 157, Rowley, IA 52329

onamission1939@gmail.com

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

---

---

[Translation Begins]

## About the Swabians in Bessarabia

by Dr. E. Ottmar

### Preface:

This remarkable report by Dr. E. Ottmar appeared in the evening edition of the “Sunday Supplement to the *Schwäbischer Merkur*,” Saturday, 6 August, 1927, No. 362. — I would like to thank Professor Dr. Ernst Schüz for sending and providing it. It can be considered a stroke of luck that this *Reichsdeutscher* [citizen of Germany] recorded his “travel impressions” of the Bessarabian Germans during World War I in such a vivid manner. While reading these highly informative lines, we experience how others have seen and experienced us. The author is a Swabian and does not hide his sympathy for his fellow countrymen in South Bessarabia; on the other hand, he correctly emphasizes the good, even harmonious, relationship of the Swabians of “Southern Germany” with the “Kashubians” (Low Germans) of “Northern Germany.” In other respects as well, he strives to depict a factual and affectionate picture of the Bessarabian Germans. —Erwin Heer

Who among us knew anything before the World War that there were thousands of Swabians living in southern Russia? After all, back home, one often did not even recognize one’s own fellow-countrymen as such: repeatedly, German-Russian prisoners of war were assured to their great pain, “You are just a Russian, too!” No one wanted to understand that one could be German even as a Russian citizen.

The World War ultimately opened the eyes of us Germans of the Reich and Austrian Reich. Even today, a telling incident is often recounted throughout Bessarabia: how during the war the first German lieutenant, ahead of his troops, drove into the German colony of Hoffnungsfeld, and when he asked an old farmer, “Do you speak German?” he received the astonishing reply: “Ha, I do not speak any other language at all!” (*Ha, i schwätz überhaupt koi andere Sprôch!*).

Meanwhile, the relations between the homeland and the Bessarabians, who have now become Romanians, have grown closer and closer. Young Bessarabians of German descent are coming to German universities and colleges in ever greater numbers, in order to make what they have gained and experienced fruitful for their homeland. Through shared marriages, some new family ties have emerged. Germans from the Reich are participating in the scientific study of Bessarabia.

But as long as, in Germany, Bessarabia is confused with Arabia by many educated and uneducated people, as one can experience at every turn, it must be said that there is still something wrong in our relations with the Bessarabian Germans. The following lines are intended to contribute to the dissemination of better knowledge about the much talked about country of the present time.

The approximately 80,000 Germans in Bessarabia make up just over 2.5 percent of the population of the country. They live mostly in the south of the country, primarily in the Akkerman District. Even here, the German area is not entirely isolated: interspersed from time to time between the German villages are the Russian, Bulgarian, and Moldovan villages. Even today, many of the roughly 120 German colonies remain almost entirely German; in others, foreign ethnic groups have moved in, notably Jews in market towns such as Tarutino and Arzis; since 1918, the risk of foreign influence has been very strong in some places.

The Germans in Bessarabia are mostly of **Swabian** origin, coming from Württemberg or Bavarian Swabia. But the rest of Germany is also represented. There are Low Germans (*Plattdeutsche*) from Pomerania, Mecklenburg, and West Prussia, who are referred to here with a sort of nickname as *Kashubians* and are clearly recognizable by their family names and language; Swabian and Kashubian villages are differentiated. People get along very well; this is already evident from the many mutual teasing and delightful verbal sparring. “Only after 40 years did the phrase You Swabians become sensible.” Spoken on one side; promptly comes the reply: “But then we clearly see You [to be] Kashubians.” Yet no strict boundary is drawn here; mixing through moving and especially through marriage is common. Oddly enough, there is also a special name for the “cross breeds,” ***Patschker***; this can be somewhat explained as “someone who is neither fish nor flesh,” since *Patschka* is a type of Russian footwear, which apparently represents something like a cross between a boot and a sandal. “We mix together everything” (*Mir verpatschkera no älle*) said an alert Swabian, who himself is married to a “*Kabuschin*,” almost regretfully. After all, the Swabians are so numerous that Swabian spreads, affecting Kashubian children, and sometimes even young Russians or Romanians. Purely Swabian are, for example, [the villages of] Lichtental, Gnadental, Alt-Posttal, and Wittenberg—which itself is a corrupted form for Württemberg. Here one hears unadulterated Swabian: “My aunt/cousin did not let me go” (*mei Bäsle hôt me net gau lau*). Here people grow *Grommbira* [potatoes] and *Kukumer* [cucumbers]. A dialect researcher could surely draw interesting conclusions from local differences, such as between “*virzg*” [40] (Alt-Posttal) and “*vierzg*” [40] (Wittenberg). Some terms are only understandable to the old Swabians. The people of Lichtental are called *Kibberger*, more than likely because many originated from Kibberg – Kirchberg near Marbach; the Bessarabian folk etymology interprets the word incorrectly as *Kühberger*. Naturally, the Russian language, which our Swabians speak fluently except for a few older people, has also had

some influence on German; Russian loanwords are not uncommon, and Russian units of measurement and weight, as well as some first names, are used. Generally speaking, the Germans remained among themselves, as did most of the other ethnic groups. Marriages between Germans and Russians are very rare and attract attention. There were cases of Germans becoming “Russified”; it was particularly regrettable that some highly gifted individuals had to attend Russian higher schools and universities, thereby being drawn into the Russian cultural sphere. The danger of Russification is over; attempts to culturally Romanianize the country are resisted much more strongly by the German population than by the Russians, who, certainly before 1914, hardly displayed any ambitions for cultural conquest.

What the Russian government accomplished for the country must remain unforgettable. It was Tsar Alexander I who called settlers—Germans, Bulgarians, and others—to the land taken from the Turks in 1812. The colonies often received their names from battle sites of the Wars of Liberation, that is, from Russian, German, and French towns: Beresina, Kulm, Dennewitz, Leipzig, Brienne, and Paris. Names such as Gnadental and Hoffnungsfeld indicate that it was often religious motives—alongside political and economic circumstances—that led the emigrants to southern Russia. The German communities, except for two Catholic and one Reformed, are Lutheran (*evangelisch*).

What does a German colony in Bessarabia look like? Usually, there is a straight main street, which is very wide by our standards; on the right and left, the farmyards are lined up one after the other. The almost exclusively single-story houses turn their narrow side toward the street; the main facade faces the courtyard, which is usually not particularly wide, but very deep. — The “old” colonies soon became enough [in numbers of people], because the roughly 9,000 colonists multiplied rapidly, despite the initially very unfavorable situation, less through reinforcements from the homeland than through having many children. In expansive Russia, where there is more than enough room for everyone, our fellow-countrymen became very eager for land; our domestic conditions, the tiny farms in Württemberg, would have been unbearably cramped for them. Many moved further, to other regions of southern Russia or even to America; some were able to satisfy their hunger for land in Bessarabia itself. “New” colonies emerged, often recognizable as such by their names, such as Neu-Posttal; the most recent one, “Queen Maria,” was established in 1925. Since the land could be acquired cheaply from Russian large estate owners, the new colonies are even more spacious than the old ones. In Basyrjamka, for example, the village street was so wide that extensive gardens could be laid out in the middle of it; there was also room here and there for two new rows of houses in the middle of the street. These new settlements show that space is already becoming overcrowded again. The Romanian Agrarian Reform took away completely large parts of the property of many Germans, so no final judgment can be made about the Reform as long as everything is still in flux.

The “new” colonies are mostly located in the lowlands, in the flat steppe by the Black Sea, while the “old” ones are in the hilly highlands to the north. On average, the lowlanders are probably more affluent than the highlanders. Even outwardly, “poor” and “rich” colonies can be clearly distinguished. Compared with the conditions with Reich Germans, the population is fairly homogeneous; a farmer people that produces their own intellectual leaders, pastors, and teachers. Yet, the differences inevitably grow larger, particularly since our colonists have also started industrial enterprises.

The steppe soil here is extraordinarily fertile; the size of the fruits, grapes, apples, corn cobs, and the abundance of ears of cereal grain attracts the attention of visitors. The greatest enemy of the farmer is drought, which, for example, in 1924 and 1925 led to crop failures and economic hardship; the year 1926 was much better. Mainly wheat, barley, oats, and corn are cultivated; viticulture is also widespread and produces a robust, good wine, of which the people of Bessarabia are rightly proud. Large parts of the steppe are pastureland, which sustains enormous herds of livestock. Poultry is also extraordinarily numerous. — The Black Sea, with its strange coastal lakes, called *Limans*, also offers important sources of income through its fish and salt resources. On the beach, there are a number of bathhouses, including a very young German establishment, Bad Burnas, which is flourishing rapidly. — In terms of landscape, Württemberg is much more varied than Bessarabia with its monotonous steppe. Yet it does not lack scenic charm: some places, with their white houses and gentle, vine-covered hills, are reminiscent of southern France or Italy; the steppe, treeless and endless, a relative of the sea, sometimes appears gloomy, sometimes friendly, but always magnificent; and anyone who has seen the Black Sea from a high cliff, brightly illuminated by the sun or quietly revealed by the moon, will never forget this sight.

A few more words about the urgent tasks of the Bessarabian Germans! In a number of economic tasks, the solution of which is very important to the Romanian government, the cooperation of the Germans, who have provided exemplary work from the very beginning, is indispensable; the cultural tasks must be solved by our fellow-countrymen themselves, often in opposition to the government. Only good economic organization is able to somewhat offset the severe consequences of poor years; and self-help is naturally more effective than state measures. There are also consumer cooperatives that, since 1926, want to establish an agricultural association, credit institutions, insurance, and model farms. The German People's Council (*Volksrat*) in Tarutino takes care of the cultural and political tasks. Much has already been accomplished: there are kindergartens, higher schools, hospitals, retirement homes; very much is reserved for future work. Especially for the academically educated, a rich field of activity is offered: for doctors, clergy, teachers, lawyers, especially also for engineers: transportation conditions are underdeveloped, there is a lack of railways and paved roads. — Essential is ethnic cohesion, close solidarity, and willing readiness to make sacrifices. The dangers that threaten the German community of Bessarabia from the outside are great, and many struggles, both externally and internally, must be endured. The people outside would now like to have strong support from their homeland; they expect more from it than just the technical and scientific achievements it can provide. "You are the vine, we are the branches," said a Bessarabian to a visitor from Germany. For many emigrants, Germany is the land of longing. The image of the old homeland has faded significantly over a hundred years; many know that they originate from Kornwestheim or Grunbach or elsewhere, but they can no longer associate any specific concept with these names. "Is Württemberg far from East Prussia?" asks one, and another: "What is the name of your colony in Württemberg?" It must be doubly difficult to form a proper image of post-war Germany. Loyal attachment to the homeland and steadfast trust in it characterize the German Bessarabian. If we reciprocate in kind, if we unite in faith in the future of Germany, it can only be beneficial for both sides.

[Translation Ends]