

# **The Guardianships**

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

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[Translation Begins]

## **The Guardianships**

From the memories of A. Kramer / District Inspector I.R.

Only a few of our fellow countrymen remain who can remember the administration of Guardianships in the former German colonies of Bessarabia before the First World War. So far, very little or nothing has been reported about this in our press. Therefore, it seems appropriate to provide our descendants with a brief report on how the communities cared for their orphans at that time. In my opinion, this report is all the more necessary because the ranks of our former administrative officials are increasingly thinning, along with them a vital part of the colonists' life in Bessarabia is being lost.

Therefore, may I be allowed to record some things about the administration of guardianships in our *Heimatkalender*.

A Guardianship Court, like the one that exists here [in Germany], did not exist in our time, and therefore guardianship matters, like many other self-administrations, were under the supervision and control of the municipalities through their administrative authorities.

As soon as a member of the community died and underage children were left behind, a reliable guardian was chosen for them by the Municipal Council (*Gemeinderat*), known as the tithe men (*Zehntelmänner*), who, together with the closest relatives of the deceased, determined whether the agricultural operation could be continued by the surviving widow and her children, or whether the existing movable assets, as far as they could not be preserved until the children reached adulthood, had to be sold. Usually, in the case of underage orphans, the agricultural implements/tools, as well as horses, livestock, and so on, were publicly auctioned, and the money was placed in the Orphan Fund, unless there were debts that had to be settled first. Due

to the stable currency at the time, the orphans were not exposed to any danger and could repeatedly rebuild their agriculture without loss using the money in the Orphan Fund.

The existing land of the orphans was annually leased to the highest bidding residents in the community hall under the supervision of the office by the guardian for one year. The only exception was the land that fell under the zone that had to be planted with corn (three-field crop rotation), which was considered to be leased for two years, as this promised a greater yield in the following year. The list of agricultural tenants for each individual guardianship was attached to the respective guardianships by the municipal office, allowing the income of the guardian to be checked at the end of the year.

Full orphans and children of widows, who had no opportunity to be raised by themselves, were sent to relatives or villagers until their confirmation [ceremony at church], where they were sometimes subjected to hard labor in their early youth, and occasionally the authorities had to intervene to provide relief. However, these were only isolated cases. After confirmation, the children were, as a rule, provided with a new suit, a clothing box, the necessary work clothes and underclothing, as well as a church hymn book and twenty-five rubles in cash from their guardians, and could then choose to enter an apprenticeship to learn a trade or continue working in agriculture. However, there were often guardians with a nobler heart who compensated their orphaned children far better than was generally customary or contractually stipulated.

In all cases, the guardian was to exercise oversight over the orphans entrusted to him until they reached adulthood. He was also required to submit his accounts of the income and expenditures of the guardianship annually upon the first request of the municipal office, which would then be attached to the guardianship records after examination. Once the accounts were collected and checked by the municipal office each year, the municipal auditors were called in to verify the accounts once again. If necessary, they had the right to summon the guardian to provide clarifications on individual items of the presented account. In cases of doubt, which were rare, the guardian had to justify his account clearly. After this twofold examination, the guardianship accounts were presented for final reading at the municipal assembly, which was convened specifically for this purpose. This was a control for the guardians that could not have been conceived better. At the same time, it may also have been an education towards honesty, which was highly valued. If, for example, a mistake in the invoices could occur with the gentlemen auditors, who already knew their people well, this was no longer possible with the entire community assembly, as anyone could raise their hand and declare this or that item in the invoice as incorrect. In such cases, it was not just an embarrassment for the guardian, but he also had to reimburse the concealed or misappropriated amount or account for the consequences thereof. Therefore, it has never happened that the orphans could be visibly harmed by their guardians.

It was said that at that time a village mayor lost his cap while performing his duties, which he had charged to the community treasury. At the end of the year, the auditors of the community rejected this expense and instructed the village mayor to resubmit his bill. When the auditors were called for the second time, the village mayor is said to have remarked: "Well, now the cap is included again, but look for it!"

Now, including such a “cap” in the guardianship accounts was not possible in the German colonies, as far as I knew, because discipline and order were considered the foremost command and had penetrated the leading men in flesh and blood. The next supervisory authority of the colonies was the District Office (district chief and district clerk), which, in the final stage, forwarded its reports on inspections that had taken place to the Provincial Governor (*Semskij Natschaljnik*). Although a government administration still existed, the governor had such an extensive territory to oversee that he had no opportunity to inspect the colonies more closely. He had to rely entirely on the reports of the Provincial Governor. However, the Provincial Governor also had a quite large district to manage and therefore came at most once a year to inspect the financial management of the colony. Of course, the guardianship files were then subject to a thorough revision. Woe to anyone if the office allowed itself any wrongdoing.

After Bessarabia was occupied by Romania in 1918, the guardianship records had to be handed over to the Justice of Peace for supervision. This released the community from any control by the guardians. Instead of the previous guardian, the guardianship was assigned a Guardianship Council of seven men. The accounts of the guardianship had to be submitted by the first guardian at the end of the year, after which the judge summoned the seven men to approve the guardianship accounts. However, if there were any objections, the guardian was given a new deadline to correct his accounts, followed by a repeated summons of the Guardianship Council. Under such circumstances, the seven men always approved the bill, as they had to pay for the trips to the court themselves, which was not so easy in bad weather or during working hours, especially when the court was twenty kilometers away. So if one of the seven men wanted to advocate for a possible correction of the guardianship account, he punished himself by being repeatedly subjected to summonses from the District Court.

Fortunately, such cases were very rare in the German communities because people would come together beforehand and review the account. The proceedings in court thus became merely a formality and held no practical value in the eyes of the population. Furthermore, the review in court was handled so carelessly that one would not expect such actions from it.

From now on, the community was also relieved of the responsibility for managing the Orphan Funds, as the latter had to be handed over to the Romanian state treasury for “security reasons”. Later, the guardians had a lot of trouble when they wanted to retrieve the deposited money for the orphans who had reached adulthood. Due to the reoccupation of Bessarabia by the Russians in 1940 and our subsequent Resettlement, the orphan money that had been recorded in the Romanian state treasury has been lost. At least, I am not aware that this was successfully or even attempted to be requested after the Resettlement.

The above report does not claim to be comprehensive at all, especially as it has, as the heading states, been created from memory. Records related to the former district offices of Teplitz, Arzis, Sarata, and so on, could certainly provide significant additions. I am also completely unaware of the Guardianships and the management of the Orphan Funds in the later established daughter colonies of Eigenheim, Benkendorf, Neu-Posttal, Albota, and so on. What if colleagues, teachers, or the former village heads would contribute their accounts to our history in Bessarabia? Or should that period be concluded with our passing?

[Translation Ends]