

Wolost

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

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[Translation Begins]

Wolost

From the memories of A. Krämer

Government Chief Inspector I.R.

After several reports have already been published in earlier Calendars about the former administration of the German colonies in Bessarabia, which were abandoned in 1940, some information about the district office, called *Wolost*, should now also be reported.

First of all, it should be noted that originally, since about 1824—so far as I know—there was only one district in Alt-Posttal, with which the Welfare Committee was in contact and from which it forwarded its decisions for all seventeen colonies founded at that time. Another seven colonies were established from 1825 to 1842. After a few years, several district offices were formed because it was very difficult for the colonists to maintain communication in administrative matters due to the great distances.

I am not aware of the order in which additional district offices became independent later; however, I would like to point out here that at the collapse of the Tsarist Russian state in 1918, the following existed:

01. **Alt-Posttal** with colonies Wittenberg and Katzbach
02. **Klöstitz** with colonies Borodino, Beresina, Hoffnungstal and estate yards Bodamer, Hoffman and Gerstenberger
03. **Sarata** with colonies Gnadental and Lichtental
04. **Tarutino**
05. **Teplitz** with colonies Alt-Elft, Neu-Elft, Dennewitz, Plotzk, Friedenstal and some estate yards

06. **Arzis** with municipalities Brienne and Neu-Arzis
07. **Paris** with daughter colony Neu-Paris
08. **Krasna**
09. **Kulm**
10. **Leipzig**
11. **Neu-Posstal** with daughter colonies Benkendorf, Pawlowka, Sofiental, Eigenheim, Andrejewka, Schabolat, estate yards Mannsburg, Alisowka and several small places and estate yards
12. **Eigenfeld** with colonies Gnadenfeld, Freudenfeld, Friedensfeld, Tschemtschelly, Jakobstal, Korntal and several settlements and estate yards

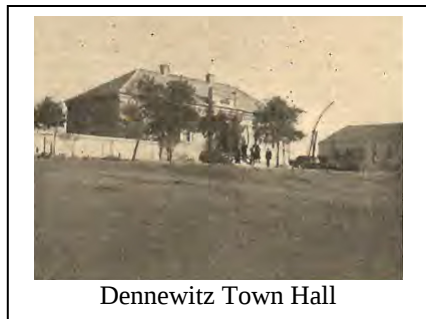
All these *Wolost* or district offices were located in the Akkerman District. The German municipalities in the Bender, Ismail, Kahul, Kishineff, Soroca, Balti, and Orhei Districts were all connected to foreign ethnic administrative units because they were too dispersed to manage themselves independently.

An exception was made in the Bender region by the district office of Josefsdorf being with the German villages of Neu-Tarutino and Mintschuna.

The word *Wolost* (district office) is not a German word, but it was a fixed term for our colonists until the annexation of Bessarabia by Romania in 1918, as it was also associated with the *Wolost* or the District Court (*Amtsgericht*) along with other specialized areas of administration.

The *Wolost* was the first supervisory authority for the municipalities, from which approval had to be obtained for all decisions and concerns, whether regarding the construction of public buildings, appointment of officials, budget plans, taxation, and so on. The less significant decisions of the municipalities, which were made by a majority vote, were directly confirmed by the *Wolost*, while decisions regarding monetary or financial matters, which were passed by a three-quarters majority, also had to be submitted originally to the Welfare Committee and later to the Provincial Governor (*Landvogt*). As a rule, the municipal resolutions were completely approved, unless the mayor's office could not always assert itself with the municipalities, as when the village administration proposed the construction of a school and the municipality decided to build a community stallion stable instead. Although the municipality was autonomous in its actions, this did not mean that the leading men did not take such resistance lightly and subtly hinted to the Provincial Governor, who then intervened accordingly. Afterwards, the mayor could inform the municipality like a little lamb of innocence that the decision to build the stall for the stallion had been rejected because a school was more necessary, and "whoever was against it should be shown the inside of the jail (*Arrest*) for two days." Well, no eligible voter was interested in such "inside [a jail] opinions" (*Innenansichten*), and thus the construction of the school was decided and carried out.

Our young generation of today may be surprised by so many rights that were transferred to the village elder; but let someone today try to bring together a community of several thousand people under one roof and voluntarily raise a construction project worth several hundred thousand Marks without holding any police authority. One can compare this to the voluntary contributions for the Bessarabian home, about which much will surely be written later.



However, it must be said for the sake of truth that in the German colonies, the officials never abused their rights. Only when it contributed to the promotion and maintenance of the German order was the rod of discipline occasionally applied, but this was only in very rare cases. It was considered that immediate punishment was more beneficial and economical than lengthy court proceedings followed by punishments. In honor of the then district and *Wolost* clerks, it should be noted that the Provincial Governor, who was Russian, had absolute trust in them and, as far as they were Germans, could also rely on them.

The staff of the *Wolost* consisted of the district clerk (*Gebietsschreiber*) with one or two assistants and the senior mayor (*Oberschulzen*), called “Starschina”, a respected person elected by the community for three years.

The district clerk with his assistants directed and managed all administrative tasks.

Where the *Wolost* consisted of only one community, the senior mayor was elected directly and immediately by all eligible voters of the municipality, without any fuss or bother. On the eve of the election, the municipal servant, called *Schütz*, walked through the colony with a bell and announced the place and time of the election and that the reading (*abgelesen*) would take place. The “reading” meant a fine of one ruble for anyone who did not appear at the election without good reason. At the beginning of the meeting, the senior mayor gave a short speech, thanking everyone for their trust and also asking for forgiveness if he had to resort to punishment to maintain German order. With that, the opening was concluded, and candidates were requested to be named for the new senior mayor and his deputy. The men mentioned now from among the municipality members were voted for by ballot, whereby the one who had the most votes was considered elected; the next one was considered his deputy. Where several municipalities formed the *Wolost*, the election of the senior mayor of the village and his representative was carried out by delegates. These delegates were brought to the election site by compulsory transport (*Fronfahren*), which caused no expenses for the municipalities. For the colonists of that time, it was taken for granted to perform such honorary services.

Nothing was known about parties in the sense that it is the case today, at least not as long as we were under Russian rule. After the election of the senior mayor and his representative, the resolutions were submitted to the Provincial Governor for confirmation, who then also determined when the oath-taking and the assumption of office were to take place.-

The budget of the *Wolost* was drawn up either by the entire community or by the delegates of the communities that belonged to the *Wolost*, and it was also confirmed by the Provincial Governor. Usually, the total expenses were allocated to the municipalities according to their land quota. However, where there was an Orphan Fund, which was the case in almost every *Wolost*, a large portion of the expenses was covered by this fund since the Orphan Fund was a part of the *Wolost*. The Orphan Fund lent its money with one percent more than it paid for the deposits, thereby always providing the municipalities with a small reserve.

The senior mayor along with his village mayor had the oversight to ensure that order was maintained in the municipality. Also at their disposal were the Ten Men (*Zehntelmänner*), known as “Desjaski”, particularly for the supervision of the Night Watch, which was carried out by the population in order of succession, as well as for other police purposes in the community. (During his time, Mr. Bierer reported about the Night Watch).

Additionally, the senior mayor and the village mayor were responsible for settling disputes in minor criminal offenses. If necessary, the guilty parties could spend up to two days in the village jail (*Dorfkittchen*) or pay a fine of up to one ruble, depending on the offense. In particularly serious cases, the offenders were handed over to the *Wolost* Court for punishment, which could impose penalties of up to one month. However, the senior mayor or the village mayor always found ways to ensure that their disagreeable (*unbedingt*) people were improved. Naturally, not to show his authority, but to maintain order. I have also never heard of a senior mayor or mayor who was hated by his community members because he sometimes imposed spiteful punishments. Everyone saw the official as the one called to maintain order, except for those who frequently became acquainted with the senior mayor and were always dissatisfied with his judgments.

As for the district clerk, he was the mother of the *Wolost* office and the population. He was responsible for all written and periodic work of the *Wolost* office and was solely accountable to the Provincial Governor, known as “Semsky Natschalnik”, for any irregularities. He was in charge of conducting the *Wolost* court, whose judgments he had to reframe in the Russian language; he was the accountant of the Orphan Fund associated with each *Wolost*; he maintained the cash books of the *Wolost*, the Family Register of the colony, called “posemeinyi spisok”, from which he also had to annually prepare the Recruitment Lists and was responsible for their accuracy; he was also tasked with issuing passports for the colonists who belonged to the colony and were recorded in the Family Register.

In addition to all these and other multipurpose tasks, the district clerk was at the same time a lawyer and the first advisor to his population in all legal matters. Anyone could seek advice from him free of charge, and everyone also knew that his advice was the right one. Only in very rare cases did those who knew better take their complaints to a lawyer in the district city (there were no practicing lawyers in the colonies until 1918), but generally, it remained with the district clerk's foresight (*Prophezeiung*). The difference was only that the cheerful complainant emerged from the lawsuit a little wiser, but in return his wallet was considerably damaged. But this kind of people, who have learned nothing from experiences, always comes back, which ultimately worked to the advantage of the district clerks in our former colonies. It should be noted that there were Provincial Governors who were indeed legal experts but sought advice from their district clerks. One thinks of A. Widmer, J. Schaible, A. Erdmann. These men did not imagine themselves to be great but even in their later lives worked unnoticeably for the benefit of their communities.

In order to provide our younger generation with an insight into what is meant by the terms “*Wolost* Court”, “Family Register”, and other designations, please allow me to elaborate on this.

The ***Wolost* Court**, called “*wolostnoi sud*”, was not a German institution, but it probably already existed when our ancestors settled Bessarabia in 1814, as mentioned at the beginning of this

report. This court was attached to the *Wolost* office and over the course of its hundred years of existence, it had transformed into a German court where order and due diligence prevailed. It consisted of a chairman and three judges. Additionally, there was the district clerk, who was actually the soul of the court. The election of judges, including the president, was conducted directly by majority vote of the colonists for a term of three years. There were no formalities for the election. Just like the election of the senior mayor and the mayor, the judges were also elected directly by the eligible colonists by ballot. The one who received the most votes was considered the president, followed by the judges who sat on the right side of the president during court proceedings, according to the number of votes received. However, before the elected judges took office, they were sworn in by the local pastor in the presence of the Provincial Governor.

The complaints, depending on their nature (civil or criminal cases), were recorded by the district clerk in the relevant registers in the order that they were received, and when there were enough complaints for a court day, the invitations, called “powestki”, were issued and delivered by the *Schütz*, as well as for the witnesses. Since the judges knew their people and were, so to speak, already informed about the complaint, the court proceedings did not take long. After the summons, both parties appeared and the district clerk read the complaint. The statements of the complainants and defendants were also immediately recorded by the district clerk in the court register, and everyone had to sign their statements immediately, and so it went also for the witnesses. There was then a brief pause during which the judges were informed of the statutory paragraphs by the district clerk and subsequently rendered their verdict. Afterwards, the parties were notified, and the matter was initially resolved. Anyone who did not like the verdict could file a complaint with the District Court, known as “Ujesdnyi sjesd”, within a certain time period. This right was rarely used, as the costs to travel to the district city along with attorney fees had to be considered, and because the District Court would ultimately pass the case to a neighboring *Wolost* Court for a new trial, which was also a German court and usually left the verdict unchanged in most cases.

The *Wolost* Court was authorized to impose up to one month of imprisonment (*Haft*) or detention (*Arrest*) for criminal offenses and to pass a sentence for civil matters up to a value of 600 rubles. However, this limitation did not have any further significance for the settlers in inheritance matters, as the distribution of the inheritance was carried out in kind and did not need to be estimated. The *Wolost* Court made its judgments according to the general provision on peasants and on German colonists, called “Obschtscheje poloshenie o krestjanach i o njemzach kolonistach”. These provisions corresponded somewhat to the German Civil Code, although not in such detailed form. However, such gaps had no further impact on the self-governance of the colonists, as they also had their “local customs” for their inheritance matters. Furthermore, the Russian government hardly concerned itself about the Germans. It was known that they were loyal people, capable of running their affairs, and owed nothing to anyone. What did a Provincial Governor care if a German colony, as I have occasionally mentioned, referred to a paragraph of the Württemberg Legal Code when drawing up a marriage contract in the 1890s?

To probe a little deeper into the earlier mentioned **Family Register** one must be acquainted with the original conditions of the settlers. The settlers came from various areas and formed a community from then on. Each settled family received an estate of land, allocated according to

the lottery drawn by each settler. Accordingly, families were entered into the Family Register, indicating their first and last names as well as their date of birth. This book had to be newly compiled every ten years, with the originally assigned number added to each descendant, provided they had formed their own family in the meantime, as proof of revision. Thus, in addition to their current number, they also had that of their ancestors, through which kinship and belonging were always proven. All changes in families, such as births, deaths, marriages, had to be recorded accurately in the registry, and when community members moved to inner Russia, to the Caucasus, Siberia, Crimea, and so on, the relevant authorities were required every year to submit accurate data about the family status of the individual, so that no gaps would appear in the Family Register. Consequently, the colony had a permanent overview of its members, especially since every emigrant had to request his passport from his mother municipality each year. This made it completely impossible for a member of the municipality to leave without paying his small fee of about one ruble annually. For this small fee, the community was also obliged to take care of the individual in case of need and if he required assistance. Although the registration system was not as developed in Russia at that time as it is here, no one could just



New School in Alt-Elft
Left side: Town Hall - Right side: Sexton Residence

easily settle down in a place or city without showing his passport and being registered. If the passport had expired, it would be confiscated and sent to the colony for renewal. The issuance of passports was exclusively the responsibility of the district clerk, as this was linked to maintaining the Family Register. Whoever was not registered in the Family Register could also not receive a passport. Even if someone had lived in the area for years, whether he had married into the community or moved for other

reasons, he was considered to be an “outsider” (*Auswärtige*) as long as the municipality had not officially recognized him as a full member through a municipality decree that had to be confirmed by the authorities. For example, in many municipalities, there were old district and village clerks who had served the community their whole lives but were still regarded as “outsiders”. If the individual intended to stay in the area, he would naturally be accepted as a full member, and his name would be removed from his home community. The newly married men were also accepted in the same way, provided that they were decent and honorable men. It was different for the women, who, by marrying, had fulfilled all formalities. However, neither these women nor the domestics were eligible to vote, because at that time it was still assumed that women should manage the children and the household, and not deal with politics.

For the sake of completeness, it should also be mentioned that a Recruit List was to be prepared from the Family Register. Every year, around the pleasant month of May, the district clerks had to go to the District Military Office, called “Woinski Natschalnik”, with the already prepared Lists and the Family Register to verify that all recruits were also registered. It was of course also permitted that a recruit who lived in the Caucasus but belonged to the colony could be recruited at his location. However, this matter had to be arranged in writing until the verification. The trip of the district clerk to the district city naturally had its ups and downs, because at that time the

car was still an unknown vehicle and the *Wolost* offices were often far more than a hundred kilometers [62 miles] away from the district city, requiring the journey to be made with horse and wagon. People were used to these conditions, perhaps because they did not know anything better. On the way to Akkerman, one passed through many German colonies, where there was always the possibility of finding accommodation with good people if any bad weather caught them by surprise. Such visits often led to good friendships.

Such journeys often lasted a week for the remote municipalities. And how wonderful it was when the district clerks could express and complement each other on various administrative issues at such meetings! One returned to his municipality with many new ideas. However, there were also occasional small disappointments during such trips to Akkerman when one or another district clerk allowed himself an additional vacation to quickly take a ship from Akkerman to Odessa for two days, where many purchases could be made that were still unavailable in the province. So it happened that when he entered the hotel in Odessa, he encountered his superior, the Provincial Governor. He addressed him abruptly: "Your Highness, please allow me to go to Odessa." The Provincial Governor appeared benevolent, smiled at this jest, and commanded: "Go ahead", in this way fulfilling the formalities. This small pause in the action was only meant to demonstrate how humanely and tolerantly the czarist superior treated his subordinates when they occasionally did something other than (*schwänzte*) their service work. However, this did not then mean that one could become negligent in other administration duties. Furthermore, it was part of the order that German officials should not expose any weaknesses in their service. While we have only spoken of the *Wolost* office and the immediate supervisory authority, the district administration, I would like to briefly mention the District Landscape Administration, called ***Semstwo***, which, although not a supervising authority, looked after the German colonies just as it did the other municipalities in the district. The tasks that the *Semstwo* set itself were quite varied, but purely of a cultural and economic nature. It built schools in the district and provided them with teaching materials, managed and supervised the district hospitals, and monitored the sanitation services. It maintained seed fields and thus provided pure seed; seed cleaning machines were set up in various locations of the district where every farmer could clean his seed free of charge and obtain treatment agents against seed diseases at reduced prices. But also livestock farming, especially sheep breeding, was strongly promoted by making breeding bulls and karakul rams accessible to the communities and breeders at moderate prices; it entertained travelers who had to give lectures on-site about beekeeping, fruit cultivation, and other fields of knowledge.

It can be said that the *Semstwo* was very committed to promoting agriculture and the related industries. Unfortunately, it lacked the means to do so, as it relied only on a proportional grant from taxes. Although the *Semstwo* was connected to the *Gouvernements Semstwo* for Bessarabia in Kischineff, it did not receive any revenues from there, at least not as far as I am informed. The *Semstwo* of the Akkerman District was probably the richest, as the majority of the German colonies were located in the Akkerman District, which were far superior to all other districts in economic matters.

The *Semstwo* was under the supervision of a Russian noble marshall, but was led by a board consisting of a chairman and four members, who were elected for four years by the district delegates. The district delegates to the *Semstwo* were proposed by the *Wolost* offices and had to

demonstrate a certain level of education as well as ownership of more than 100 hectares [147 acres] of land. Exceptions to be elected were permissible for outstanding and progressive-minded men. The noble marshal decided on this. Starting in 1905, immediately after the Russo-Japanese War, a form of popular representation, called the “Gosudarstvennaya Duma” [State Duma], was established by the Russian Tsar through an *Ukas* (decree), although with limited rights. These representatives were not elected by the people, but emerged from the boards of the *Semstvov* according to a specific electoral system. Our older generation will still vividly remember a Mr. Purishkevich, who was a particularly fierce enemy of the Germans and wanted to destroy them economically. After the war from 1914 to 1918, he likely would have succeeded, along with other like-minded individuals, in further developing his hatred to the detriment of the Germans in Russia. The beginning of their destruction was probably the Expropriation Laws of 2 February and 15 December, 1915, whose implementation had only been suspended for practical reasons until the end of the war. Afterwards, all colonists who were located at least two hundred kilometers [124 miles] from the Border Zone of the Russian Empire were to be transported to Siberia, which meant that all Germans from Bessarabia and Kherson, including Crimea and the Caucasus, were to be expelled from their property. However, this did not happen, as all the Germany-haters along with the legislators were swept away by the Russian Revolution of 1918.

With this, I would like to conclude my records on the administration from 1812 to 1918. I know that they still contain many gaps and that many things, such as self-defense, night watch, mail, and others, have not been mentioned. The detail has also suffered somewhat, and therefore errors may have occurred. The above article should not be understood as a treatment of the Russian administration as such, but only insofar as we were a part of it.

[Translation Ends]