

A TRIP TO THE VOLGA-DEUTSCHE REGION

By Loren Hettinger

A trip to Saratov, Russia may have been conceived many years ago when I asked Grandma Hettinger (Alice Hoffman) from where she and Grandpa had emigrated. She had mentioned, “Saratov” and had rolled the ‘r’ and shortened the ‘o’--a similar pronunciation that I found took a lot of practice. I spent time searching out maps in our old set of encyclopedias to visualize this far-off place. Later, as more information was gleaned from grandparents, uncles, and aunts, I narrowed the area to Frank, Deitle, Walter, and Hussenbach, which are about 60 miles southwest of Saratov. The Germans from Russia refer to this area as the “hill side”, as opposed to the colonies east of the Volga River that occurred on relatively level terrain

I realized an opportunity to visit this area in June 1996 while in Russia on business, and the trip started outside Moscow at the Domodedeva Airport. Traveling in Russia is an adventure in itself, and this aspect to the trip began quickly. Finding the correct gate and the way to the airplane is not as easy as in the west, and I happened to stand in the wrong line for 30 minutes (there often is a different line for natives and non-natives). People were generally helpful though to the lost *Americanitz*. The flight to Saratov took about an hour.

Saratov is a typical Russian city in most respects of concrete slab buildings. However, the area along the Volga River is quite attractive with a series of walkways and terraced gardens that extend in front of the Slovokia Hotel where I stayed. The Volga River is very impressive, being 2 - 3 miles wide in this area. Barges, passenger ships, and small boats commonly crisscross the river, and excursion ferries dock along the shore. The Slovokia Hotel was relatively upscale by Russian standards; there was hot water and the food was at least varied. A typical breakfast included salad (sliced tomatoes and cucumbers) heavily laced with dill and sour cream, light rye bread (*kleb*), meat resembling hamburger on a bed of boiled buckwheat (*greetchga*), and tea (*chai*). Tea is usually much better than coffee (usually instant), and bread that is rye or hefty wheat is the best deal in Russia (although sometimes it can be stale). The room had the typical Russian bed that is about three feet wide, with a pillow as round as Kruschev, or as intimidating as Stalin, and a cover with a square hole in the center of the topmost layer. After years of wondering, I think the function of this opening may be to remove the inner parts for laundering. At first, I thought it might be to use as a sleeping bag in the midst of a cold Russian winter, but could not figure out a suitable breathing arrangement. A towel for showering was the typical thin, dishtowel—nothing fluffy.

One of the hotel managers who spoke a smattering of Russian-accented English spent considerable time helping me arrange for a driver and car. I asked if the driver would speak English and she laughed, so I thought, *this is going to be interesting*. We started the trip to the Frank area the next morning, looking at my map on the hood of a small Lada, a Fiat-like car, with the driver, Sasha, and his son Veloci. I realized that they had never seen a map of this area, as they started to view it upside down, and thought of the old saying about the blind leading the blind, and also about how much adventure I could stand. Well, at least we started out in the right direction to Popovka, the first town west of Saratov. This area quickly becomes rural, and I had my first glimpse of the legendary steppe as we crested the hills leading out of the Volga River valley. A woman driving a

horse-drawn cart and a string of people with buckets on their way to collective gardens furnished a backdrop to the rural, peasant nature of this area.

I thought my first view of the steppe had been long overdue, after hearing of its beauty from the grandparents. I was not disappointed. The steppe consists of rolling hills of grasslands and cropland of corn, spring and winter wheat, sunflowers, and a few fields of rapeseed. Trees of birch, silver-leaf poplar, junipers, box elder, and willows occur on ridge tops and at the borders of many fields. One of the striking characteristics of the steppe is the profusion of flowers along the roads and in the fallow fields as well. I took photos of these areas and gathered a few flowers to press as mementos. Common species included yellows of mustards, and lavenders of vetch, a latticework of red dianthus, and even gaillardia (black-eyed Susans). Among these bright colors, there was an occasional shimmer of silver, caused by the wind in the feather grass (needlegrass). Unexpectedly, I had tears in my eyes as I viewed this picturesque landscape, and silently asked myself, “What’s wrong with you?” Did this landscape serve as a model for the intricate floral designs on tea towels that our grandmothers and cohorts embroidered?

I was also impressed by the black chernozemic soil, not unlike the tall-grass prairie area of the Midwest or the Palouse prairie in eastern Washington. Undoubtedly, the Volga Deutsche had some great harvests in years past, but I saw only one sprinkler system (wheel-type), so most of the area is still farmed as dry land. (I told Dad Steinmetz about the great opportunity of this area, that we could develop some great farms with this fertile soil—just needed irrigation. He had a good laugh about it.)

Our journey was stymied by the myriad of roads that led toward Walter and Frank, so I suggested we travel a more direct route, which went straight west from the main road at Kaminski. The tricky roads and lack of signs caused Sasha to stop and ask directions of nearly every person we encountered, including police at checkpoints. The map showed a fairly direct route to Deitle (Hettinger origin; now called Aleshniki), but for some reason we went cross-country and eventually drove on a two-track, narrow field road. I was becoming skeptical, but finally the small village of Deitle appeared and is located in a gently sloping valley. Nearing Deitle, we came across a herd of whitish-tan cattle (not Charlois) and a herder on a horse with a dog. Sasha told me the herder rode like a Cossack; high on the withers (at least that’s what I think he said). This village had a population of approximately 300 people and some older women knew that it was Deitle in the past. They did not know of any Volga Deutsche in the area. Small houses with fenced yards, probably remnants from German colonists, and a solid brick central building, that was likely the school, characterized the town.

We stopped for lunch in the countryside west of Deitle. I had brought bread, apples, and oranges from Saratov, and Sasha had brought bread and a large bottle of blackberry wine. Looking at the wine, I could feel a headache already, but was glad he had not brought vodka. He only had a single cup, which I used as the honored guest while Sasha and Velocci alternated sipping from the bottle.

The road to Hussenbach (Hoffman origin) west and south of Deitle was paved, and we started to see more traffic. Hussenbach is now known as Lenivo, is fairly large (~2000 people), and had a gas station across from a small soccer stadium. The car needed fuel, so we pulled into a small service station with a dirt surface, a small house with a small barred window in front of a cashier, and several pumps. The pumps were of an ancient type in which gas is pumped into a clear container with graduation marks indicating the

amount. Once filled to the amount wanted, the gas is then drained through a hose into the car. As typical in each town and village, there were roadside stands where people were selling everything from tires to sunflower seeds.

We next traveled to Frank (Lebsack and Walters' origin), which is about 15 miles north of Hussenbach, and similar in size. The town is located on the bluffs on the east side of the Medveditsa (Russian for female bear) River, and for a time the town was known by this name (and on my map as that). We stopped to speak with a group of women and children, who were dressed as if going to church, walking on the main street, and Sasha told them I was looking for my relatives. They were impressed that I came such a long way for a visit, and wanted to know if I came from North America or South America. Apparently, Volga Deutsche people have moved back into this area; Timothy Kloberdanz, in his book "Thunder on the Steppe" mentioned staying with a Volga Deutsche family here in 1992, but these Russian people did not seem to know any. We stopped by a relatively large, two-story red brick building that had been the school in the old days, but since has been used as the communist headquarters, and since as a community center and storage area. The resiliency of the German-built structures, including homes, is quite amazing after 50 years since the deportation. We continued north, looking for Walter (Steinmetz origin) as it was getting to be late in the afternoon. Walter is only about 4 miles north of Frank, but we did not find it, even after asking directions from a number of people. Finally, we gave up, as Sasha had to be back in Saratov to start work yet that evening.

Many of the old-style houses still remain in each of the towns, with innately carved shutters, and even some made of logs. Typically, a tall (5 to 6 ft.) fences and numerous outbuildings, a garden plot with potatoes, red beets, ever-present dill, and flowers (hollyhock) on the edges surround the houses. (Seeing the hollyhocks made me nostalgic for the early days on the farm near Kersey, as these flowers lined the path to our outhouse.) The smaller villages had large herds of sheep and goats, smaller herds of cattle, and some horses. Some of the people have cars, but motorcycles with sidecars are the principal means of transportation, and horse-pulled carts and one-speed bicycles are also common. Horse collars are wooden and rise several feet above the horse's neck. Russia has a helmet law, and both the motorcycle driver and passenger have to wear these, although they are often plastic, Tonka-looking affairs (the helmet law is similar to the Russian seat belt law; it only has to look like it is on, and not buckled).

I discovered there is a "German House" in Saratov, which is helping German people resettle, and in many cases move to Germany. An official said some Lebsack and Steinmetz families may have resettled from Siberia or Kazakhstan in the Engless area east of Saratov. However, he indicated it would take time to search their records. I think he meant that I would be searching through file cabinets. Volga Deutsche people who have moved back into the area from deportations have been placed in compounds in Burni, Stepnoje, and Tchkalowo in this area, and Germany is paying for people to be repatriated. It would be interesting to find out if any of the northern Colorado families have relatives in these compounds.

Later that day I left for Moscow and back to work, a richer person for having seen the old country, imagining what it was like more than 100 years ago as our people developed a thriving agricultural economy. I found the beauty of the steppe to be true and not enhanced by wistful memories of our grandmothers and great aunts as they mournfully

remembered those left behind. Moreover, thinking of how much strength and foresight it took our grandparent's generation to leave roots that must have been deep was quite moving. As it turned out, it was fortunate for us that our grandparents came to the United States. Otherwise, some of us might be in Siberia fighting off the mosquitoes and black flies in the summer, and trying to keep from freezing in the winter--I mean those of us from grandparents and parents who survived the famines in the 1920s and deportation ordeal.