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# The AHSGR Yesterday and Today

*about a special, active group*

By Delbert Amen

## The Germans From Russia

Beginning in the 1760's and continuing for more than a century, German farmers and artisans migrated to Russia in numbers totaling more than 100,000. These people longed to escape from the economic difficulties of the disastrous Seven Years' War and from sometime religious persecution. Catherine the Great issued a manifesto in 1763 that made alluring promises to all foreigners "regardless of nationality and religion" who would settle the uninhabited regions of Russia.

The earliest migrants went mainly to the Volga regions. Then, for many years, the main movement was to the Black Sea region, where colonies were founded on the banks of the Dnieper, in the Odessa district, in the Crimea, on the northern shores of the Sea of Azov, in Bessarabia, and in the South Caucasus. Finally, in the 1860's, there came a major movement into Volhynia, where small numbers had settled earlier in the century.

For the first generation on the Russian steppes, carving out the new farms and villages was a harsh, often bitter, experience. But hard work was a fact of life for them, and they were a persevering people, industrious much beyond the ordinary. Within a short time, they had established thriving, agriculture-based colonies. Season after season, granaries were filled, fruits and vegetables were harvested, and meats were smoked and cured. Parents and children began to feel at home and content in their new villages. The Russian steppe, with its rich black soil, was now home.

What makes the history of these people unique is that in each new settlement they totally retained their German culture and way of life. Hattie Plum Williams has described this phenomenon in *THE CZAR'S GERMANS*: "These people are Germans, not Russians; they are Teutons, not Slavs; they never spoke the Russian language, never embraced the Greek religion, never intermarried with the Russians, and many of their children never saw a Russian until they left their native village for a new home in America."

Ultimately, the insistence on retaining their strong ethnic identity within a larger, unsympathetic nation left the Russian Germans vulnerable to new troubles. Promises made in the original Russian manifestoes were withdrawn; harassment and persecution from native Russians became widespread.

Once again, emigration was the response. From the 1870's into the early twentieth century, thousands of these Germans in Russia left for a new promised land. For most of them, this meant starting again on the plains of the Americas where, like their forefathers, they began the hard task of being pioneers in a strange new country. And, once again, agriculture was the way of life for the majority, although many of them also settled in cities.

The hard, backbreaking work was still accepted; the sense of being different was still everpresent, and the dream of building a better life was still the strong motivator at home, in church, and at work. This time, however, there was a difference. This time, these families were finally able to realize their dream. Most of them were able to establish a comfortable way of life for themselves far beyond their basic hopes for freedom from hunger, from persecution, and from fear. Today, even though their descendants have become amalgamated into the cultures of their own countries, they can still look back in admiration at the accomplishments of their forefathers who were the Germans from Russia.

Two area families are descendants of Germans from Russia--the Brehms and the Schnells. Both families emigrated from the village of Norka, Russia, on the Volga River and settled in Lincoln, Nebraska--the Schnells in 1900 and the Brehms in 1904.

John George Brehm and Katherine Elizabeth Schnell were united in marriage in Lincoln, Nebraska. They moved to Washita County in 1915 and then to a farm south of Weatherford, where they lived until 1943. At that time, they moved into Weatherford and operated a grocery store on State Street; the building is now occupied by the Rusty Nail. Their



*The Brehm family about 1900*

children are Mrs. Audry Amen (Marie Brehm), Herbert Brehm, Mrs. Glen Utley (Mae Brehm), Mrs. Vernon Payne (Sophia Brehm), Mrs. Earl Smith (Elnora Brehm), Phillip Brehm, Mrs. Leslie Harris (Irene Brehm), Nathan Brehm, Mrs. Marion Haggan (Alice Brehm), and Mrs. Gene Laubach (Clara Brehm).

## The Story Of AHSGR

After some months of correspondence among a few people interested in the history of their forefathers, a group of 42 descendants of Germans from Russia met in Denver, Colorado, on September 8, 1968. This was the informal beginning of AHSGR. Eventually, on December 20, 1968, the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia was formally incorporated.

The early founders of the Society had certain basic goals for AHSGR--to establish a repository where historical materials would be preserved and made available to members and historical researchers and to publish a yearbook with information of significance about the Germans from Russia.

In retrospect, these goals were modest. The early organizers were soon to find that there would be an overwhelming response to AHSGR. For example, in November, 1969, a small group of people planned the initial meeting of Russian German descendants in Lincoln, Nebraska. They told themselves that they



*The Schnell family circa 1908.*

would be happy if just thirty-five people came. To everyone's amazement, over 125 people appeared, eager to share reminiscences of their common heritage. Thus, AHSGR'S first chapter was born. New chapters soon began forming throughout the United States and Canada, all reflecting the same enthusiastic response. There was no doubt about it--AHSGR was an idea whose time had come.

As the Society grew, the scope of its activities expanded far beyond the founders' dreams. Members have been able to participate in several broad areas. First, there is the area generally referred to as research. Information is collected from a wide range of historical sources--such as genealogies, biographies, documents, maps, newspapers, photographs, and material objects. Second, the Society has become actively involved in publishing much of this research through its Work Papers and Journals and through a series of fiction and non-fiction books. Third, there is the management of the actual business of the Society itself, from staffing the headquarters office to organizing chapters to maintaining the library now located in the Heritage Center. Fourth, there is the important work of the International Foundation, the fund-raising sister organization of AHSGR. All of this has been possible only because so many hundreds of volunteers have been eager to give of their time and thoughts and efforts.

As all these activities expand each year, AHSGR continues to grow at a rapid rate. There is something for anyone of Russian German heritage or for anyone interested in these people. Whether it be sharing their mothers' recipes for blini and grebel and watermelon syrup, whether it be careful documenting of the specifics of life on the Russian steppes, or whether it be sharing memories of life in the new country, members of AHSGR all have one thing in common--they have assured that the history of the Germans from Russia will be permanently preserved.

## The AHSGR Heritage Center

In June, 1983, AHSGR formally dedicated its wonderful new headquarters building. The structure was built with loving care by a group of members who volunteered their time and skills. The funds to pay for the building were given by members from all over the United States and Canada. At last there is sufficient office and display space to house the wide range of Society activities.

Once the headquarters building was complete, the Society began work on the other areas of the complete Heritage Center. Plans call for making this into a center of "living history," with a restored summer kitchen, barn, sausage shop, and shoe shop. And, especially important to a majority of members, a chapel is being built to house furnishings from an old Russian German church in the Globeville area of Denver, Colorado. Once the heritage center is complete, visitors will be able to experience firsthand the history and culture of the Germans from Russia.

AHSGR is a fast-growing society with more than 6,000 memberships which include families, educational institutions, and libraries. More than 15,000 individuals participate in our activities and use our publications.

Members are encouraged and helped in compiling their own family histories through comprehensive genealogy programs. Available is an extensive field of family group charts and other pertinent information. The society also has a growing collection of library materials available through interlibrary loan from AHSGR headquarters.

Sixteen international conventions have been held, with as many as 1,400 in attendance. The seventeenth convention was held in Oklahoma City on July 14-20, 1986.

## Goals of AHSGR

1. To discover and collect information which relates to the culture of Germans from Russia, such as histories, genealogies, biographies, documents, maps, newspapers, journals, photographs, and material objects.

2. To establish repositories and provide for the preservation of these materials so they may always be accessible to students and historians.

3. To disseminate historical information and arouse interest in the past by publishing information that relates to all groups of Germans from Russia.

4. To encourage and assist with research among members and in colleges and universities.

5. To hold meetings, local and international, where lectures, papers, pageants, and discussions increase knowledge about Germans from Russia among all who attend.

## Benefits to Members

1. Opportunity to study the history and culture of Germans from Russia.

2. Discount on all related books and maps.

3. Privilege to attend annual AHSGR conventions.

4. Services of an active Genealogy Committee and headquarter's staff researchers, and the opportunity to correspond with others researching the same family lines.

5. Publications sent regularly at no extra cost to all active members (four journals annually, three newsletters annually, two CLUES--our genealogical journal).

6. The use of more than 2,000 books, manuscripts, journals, maps, and other publications in the AHSGR Archives through interlibrary loan.

*In Memory of  
John W. Ivester  
Family*

*Sayre, Oklahoma*