AHSGR Oregon Chapter Newsletter
Chronicle Unserer Leute

Volume 47, Issue 1
January - March 2026

Mark Your Calendar

Saturday - January 24 2pm
Eric Bauder
Saturday - February 21 2pm
Dr. William Spady
Saturday - March 21 2pm
Wayne Garman

Catherine II, the Great
Empress of Russia

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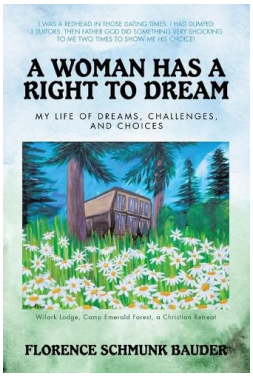
AHSGR Oregon Chapter

Wishing all members a
Happy and Healthy
New Year in 2026.

Michael Frank

Chapter Newsletter Editor



Our January 24th, 2026 presentation will be given by **Eric Bauder**.
The topic will be his mother's book titled:

"A Woman Has A Right To Dream"
by Florence Schmuck Bauder.

Volga German Tours * Drs. Brent Mai, Mila Koretnikov
Argentina, 2026 * January 28 to February 11 (closed)
Germany 2026 * May 23 to June 6

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

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MOBILE RESEARCH LIBRARY AVAILABLE AT ALL OUR CHAPTER MEETINGS. THERE ARE MANY PUBLICATIONS OF GENERAL VOLGA-GERMAN INTEREST FOR OUR MEMBERS.

If you have ideas or articles which you would like to see published or topics you would like to see presented at our monthly meetings, please contact any officer, board member, or me, the newsletter editor: Michael Frank (dm48@comcast.net).

Factoids

Volga Germans were primarily grain farmers who raised several hardy field crops suited to the dry steppe climate of the lower Volga River region.

The main grain crops were wheat, rye, barley, oats, and millet which provided both food and marketable surplus in the Saratov region. Sunflowers and potatoes were also major field crops. Sunflowers were processed for oil, and potatoes were an important food staple. Oats and barley were widely grown as animal fodder to support draft animals needed for tillage and transport.

Common garden vegetables included cabbage, carrots, onions, sugar beets, tomatoes, cucumbers and pumpkins, often grown in house-adjacent plots and communal gardens.

Cabbage was especially important because it was preserved as sauerkraut, a staple winter food for Volga German households.

Apple, pear, and cherry trees were planted in family gardens and larger communal orchards, with fruits often preserved by sun-drying.

Wild pears, strawberries, other berries, mushrooms, and licorice root (used for a drink called Steppetee) were gathered to supplement farm production.

Hemp and flax were cultivated to supply fiber for domestic clothing and household textiles, reducing reliance on outside markets. In some colonies, such as Norka, tobacco was grown commercially until low prices made it uneconomical by the late 18th century.

Beluga Sturgeon (famous for prized caviar) can be found in the lower Volga, Caspian Sea, Black Sea, and Sea of Azov.

A Reminder.

A friendly reminder that 2026 yearly chapter dues of $25 are due. See page 15 or remit to our Treasurer, Jim Holstein. Thank you.

Chapter Dues

American Historical Society of Germans from Russia
Honoring our Past
Embracing the Future

Saturday, February 21 Program Announcement

Speaker, Dr. William Spady

"My Eight Decades of Opening to Vaster Realities"

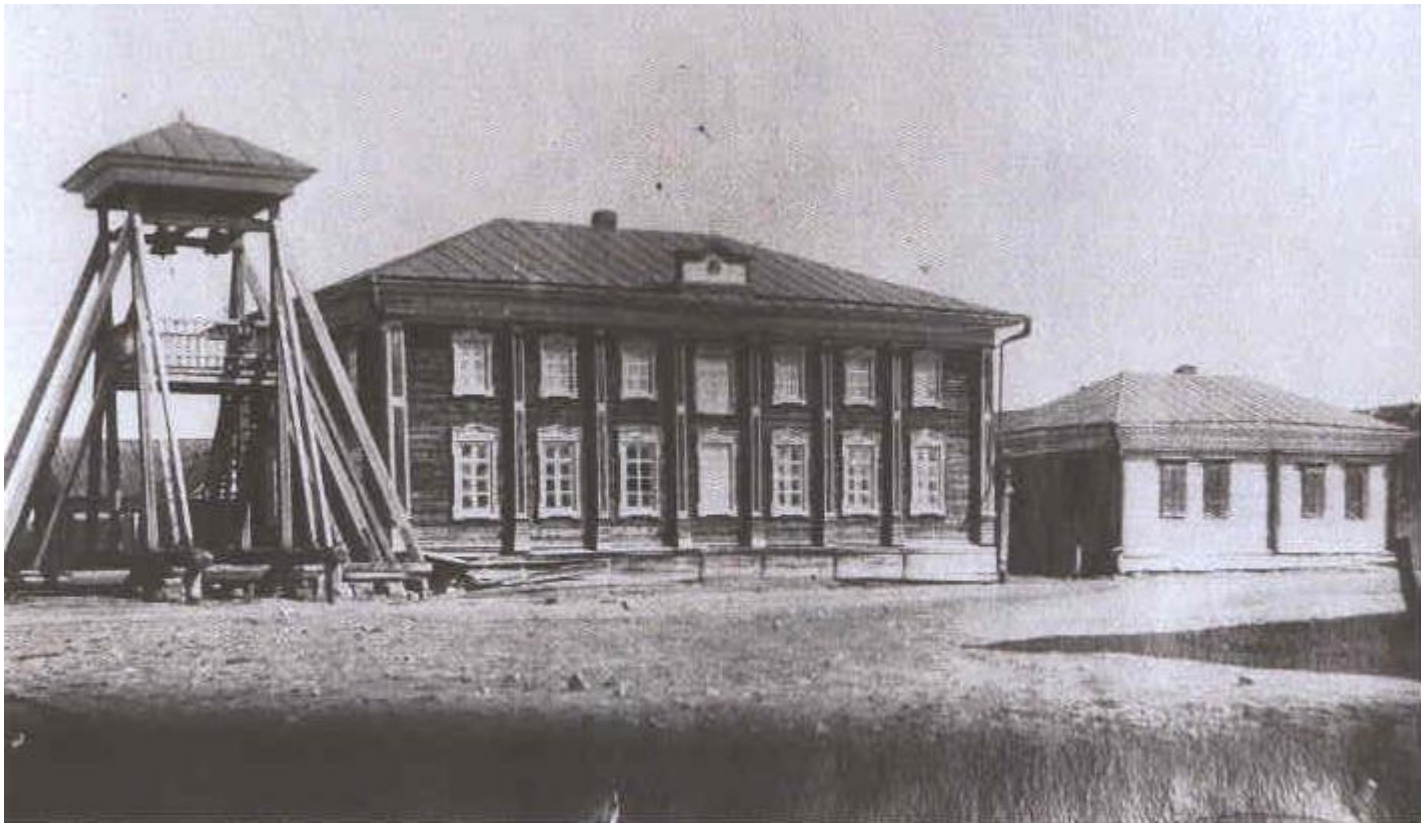
Bill promises a presentation that is off the charts in the range and unique character of the countless experiences, revelations, and breakthroughs he's had since his childhood in northeast Portland. He will focus his 'life adventure' around key opportunities that have given him a truly paradigm-shifting perspective of his upbringing in the Volga-Deutsch culture that shaped both sides of his family and literally defined Zion Congregational Church, where they were mainstays their entire lives. He'll highlight the special aspects of his very extensive education; his rich array of symphony orchestral trumpeting experiences in Portland, Chicago, Toronto, and Boston; his 'first job' teaching at Harvard's Graduate School of Education; the many books he's written and edited; as well as his extensive career and travels as the visionary catalyst and leader of a decades-long international initiative on transforming education.

The 'vaster realities' really began blowing into Bill's life in 1990, sparking decades of revelations in what he describes as his amazing journey of spiritual awakening – a journey that continues to this day. We'll learn just how amazing and extensive that awakening is, how much (and often) it has caused him to question who he is and what he was brought to this lifetime to learn and do, and just how remarkable everyone's innate potentials are if they open their minds and hearts to them. As he often says, "Fasten your seatbelts because this journey has truly been 'amazing' and has caused me to question 'reality' and my true identity countless times."

So, mark your calendars, spread the word, bring your friends, examine the trove of books that changed his life, and be prepared to take a few notes and to ask lots of good questions. See you there.

MERKEL

Russian name: **MAKAROVKA** Saratov Province: Kamyshin District



MERKEL was an Evangelical Lutheran German colony founded where the Karamysh river converged with the Makarovka brook in the Don and Volga river basins, on August 28, 1766. Established by 36 families, Merkel grew to a town of considerable size by the turn of the twentieth century. By 1991 there were barely 20 houses left, of which 19 were occupied. At that time, Jacob and Lydia [Knaub] Rein were the only Merkel born inhabitants, having been exiled to Siberia in the great deportation of German colonists in 1941, returning to their original village in the 1950s. The cemetery consists of windswept mounds of prairie grass overlooking the Karamysh river valley town site.

Families of Merkel:

Adam, Arder, Bauer, Becker, Beckman, Bose, Brandt, Breziger, Brigemann, Brigan, Briman, Brug, Bruch, Bruntz, Butherus, Elbach, Flohr, Vorster, Fortner, Gel, Getse, Gieseke/Giske, Gross, Hasselbach, Hauf, Hossman, von Holstein, Jost, Kaiser, Kastens, Kauz (Kautz), Klein, Knaub, Knaus, Krasong, Krieger, Lampe/Lamb, Lebel, Litzau, Lohmann, Margheim, Markheim, Merkel, Metz/Mertz, Müller, Neuman, Olofson, Petrie/Peters, Pister/Piester, Rein, Retslev?Ratslaff, Riss/Reiss, Saltau, Schillt/Shild, Schlager, Schmidt, Schredo, Schumacher, Siegfried, Specht, Stehle, Vigerg/Walger, Vogt, Wegelin, Wert/Wirth.

Merkel Colony (1766-1941)

Once established, houses were constructed by Russian laborers, and, eventually, schools, and even some churches, were constructed for these villages. Merkel had 36 houses finished by the end of 1769. Occasional raids by Khirgiz mostly affected the settlers on the *Wiesenseite*, or eastern side of the Volga river. The Bergseite was cursed by the Peasant Rebellion of 1774 when Yemelyan Ivanovich Pugachev, claiming to be the late Peter III, who had been assassinated by the Orlov brothers at Catherine's behest, attacked villages along both sides of the Volga, including many of the DeBoffe colonies. His raids affected the villages of Kratzke, where "Pugachev arrived in front of the school in a heavily escorted carriage and promptly had a gallows erected" at which "four bound prisoners" were hung...."; Merkel; Bauer; Dietel; Schuck and various neighboring colonies, including Kutter, Grimm, and Dönhof, where an attempt was made to execute *Vorsteher Count Dönhof*. In each village, Pugachev's men emptied the grain stores, called *magaziny*, for their personal use. It was reported by the *vorsteher* of Merkel to the *Kontora of Oversight of Foreigners* in Saratov, that two men in Merkel had already died of starvation, for which the Kontora threatened to fine the *Vorsteher* for filing a false report. After hearing similar reports from Dietel, Bauer and Kautz in early December, 1774, the Kontora issued full portions of flour to the afflicted villages. In a 1798 report to the *Office of Immigrant Oversight by the Fellow of the Supreme Court, Collegiate Assessor and Cavalier Sixtel* regarding the village of Merkel, it was stated that 'the colonists live in satisfactory conditions." By that time, the houses, with the exception of 12 new ones, were "ramshackled and repaired old". The village had one Dutch-style windmill, a well-located public granary, and two German post-style water mills along the Karamysh brook.

A wooden Lutheran church with a thatched roof was consecrated in 1826, while the old German school had existed since the village's founding. Apparently, in 1767 Merkel was the seat of the Makarovka Parish which consisted of the villages of Merkel, Dietel, Kratzke, and Bauer. Early ministers included Sigmund Israel Begen (1767-1770), Gottlieb Mai (1772-1774), Christian August Tomau (1777), Lauerentius Ahlbaum (1782-1786) and Johann [C.?] Heinrich Buck (Bush?) from 1793-1798. At some point, the parish headquarters moved to Dietel, and in 1804 Bauer split to join with the Reformed church of Grimm. Dietel parish had the following minsters: Karl Jacob Früauf from 1801 to 1815; Andreas Haag from 1819 until 1835; Gotthard Alexis Marpurg from Neuhausen, Germany, from 1835 to 1862; Ernest Gottfried Carrolien from 1864 to 1880; August Julien Tiedemann from 1887 to 1892; and Johann Friedrich Möllmann of Wesel, from 1893 to 1927. Merkel church records, apparently now located in the Engels archives, exist for the years up to 1863. Thus, Pastor Marpurg appears on some Merkel records, as well as a couple of personal confirmation records, while Pastor Möllmann was mentioned in Alexander Bauer's articles of the 1920s. Nothing has surfaced regarding Pastors Tiedemann and Carrolien. In an 1860 census report it was mentioned that Merkel consisted of 106 yards with one mill, a Lutheran church and a school. With the establishment of the daughter colony of Friedenfeld in 1860, the population of Merkel was reduced by 224 persons between 1861 and 1879. Seven persons were recorded as having moved to America in 1876 and 1877 during the very first outward migration instigated in 1872, when Alexander II reneged on the promises of the *Manifesto*, especially the one regarding freedom from military service. Few others would migrate before the next wave of emigration in the early part of the twentieth century, though it was mentioned that two more families from Merkel went to America on passports in 1886. By 1886, there were 134 dwelling places in Merkel: 58 stone, 75 wooden, and 1 adobe hut. Most of these bore thatched roofs with about one fourth baring wooden roofs. At that time there were five industrial establishments and one drinking house.

Merkel owned 159 iron plows, 1 wooden plow, 1 winnowing machine and 1 threshing machine. By 1887, there were two wooden reserve grain stores, roofed with straw. The primary crop was rye, with about half as much of sown oats. Also planted in limited quantities were millet, barley, sunflowers, flax and hemp. Watermelon was sown among the rye fields. A. N. Minkh, in 1898, reported that there was an income producing water mill on the Karamysh and two on Peskovatka creek which emptied into the Karamysh brook, and was owned in cooperation with other villages. As late as the 1930s, Wilhelm Pister remembered on of the German-post water mills on the Peskovatka. By 1894 there was a trade school located in the colony. While most all

male villagers were farmers, about a hundred colonists participate in the cottage industry of sarpinka cloth weaving and production. Wilhelm Pister stated that Merkel households peaked at 280, sometime in the early half of the twentieth century, before the deportation. But this figure seems more likely to have been about 180 households. He and Heinrich Hauf remembered three Dutch-style wind grist mills. A Giske mill was located on the west end of town, while the Specht and Hauf windmills were near the Adams community well, to the east of town. Among the many *Vorstehers* of the village, over the 175 years of Merkel's existence (1766-1941) were Johann Georg Merkel, Johann Christian Beckman, a Gikes(?) in 1774, Henry Bruntz, Frederick Knaub, Johann Friedrich Kautz, Heinrich Klaus, a Gross, and Heinrich Margheim. Teachers included Ludwig Wegelin who, in 1769, resided in Merkel and taught in Kratzke, and Immanuel Rusch, in the 1920s.

Professor George G. Bruntz stated in his *Children of the Volga*, "Merkel was a typical German Dorf (village)", with "low, square, frame houses, with their heavy brown shutters," and a dirt road for main street. Most of the houses had a gate that entered into the courtyard where farm animals (sheep, cows and horses, etc...) were kept, and where a few vegetables were grown, along with sunflowers (*Russian peanuts*) which were roasted as a delicacy. There was no business district as it was a community of peasants and small craftsmen, with one store to supply its many families." "The village bell tower stood in the middle of main street" guarding the church and school behind it." "Like many German villages along the Volga, Merkel had an *Oberdorf* (upper village, or prosperous section) and an *Unterdorf* (lower village)." The village consisted of a *Haptstraße* (main street), *Hinter Strasse* (back street), *Weise Gass* (wise street), and *Rote Hintergass* (Red back street), intersected by at least eight vertical cross roads, including a major thoroughfare known as *Kirchengass* (church street), or *Breite Querstaße* (broad cross section). George J. Walters stated in his book *Wir Wollen Deutsch Bleiben* ['We want to remain German'] that the original log school, built by the first settlers of Merkel, was still standing in 1923! This was later verified by Merkel born Wilhelm Pister. As a boy, Wilhelm had been deported to Siberia, eventually making his way into Germany in the early 1990s. Wilhelm died in June, 2000. The old school was also mentioned by Alexander Bauer, a Merkel born reporter for the international German newspapers *Dakota Freie Presse*, prior to 1924, and *Die Welt Post* from 1924 to mid-1929. Wilhelm Pister stated that this old school house was moved away, sometime before 1940. Reformed church members of Merkel would have attended the church in Dietel, which was replaced by a statue of the godless Lenin after the deportation of the Germans in 1941.[30] Merkel suffered equal to any other Volga village in the *Great Famine* of 1921-1922. Ravages of disease and famine took their toll over the next twenty years until the 1941 Deportation.

In 1924, with the formation of the Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic of the Volga Germans (A.S.S.R.), the villages along the Karamysh were re-classified from the Kamenka Kanton (district) into the Balzar or Goloi-Karamysh Kanton (district). Prior to this, Merkel had been assigned to the Kamyshin district. Dietel and Kratzke had purchased a steam plow (tractor), but Merkel refused such technology until at least the middle of 1929. Merkel received phone service in 1925. In April of 1927, the villages along the Karamysh suffered a flood caused by rapid melting of snow. Water flowed through the streets of Merkel. The following year in June, 1928, another flood hit the region. By August, 1928, Merkel had access to radio by which it could receive reports from Europe, apparently, as a result of a new radio station constructed between Dietel and Kauz. On October 1, 1928, Merkel found itself re-assigned to the Frank Kanton, in a new redistricting of the local villages. In June, 1929, the museum in Pokrowsk sent an archeologist out to excavate some ancient graves found near the old Merkel churchyard. Pottery and skeletons, thought to be 4000 years old, were recovered.

On August 8, 1937, the Communists entered Merkel in the middle of the night and took every third male member of every family, or about 119 men, to a *re-education* (labor) camp in Engels. No explanation was given, and most appear to have ended their lives in that camp. Only 24 of these were ever heard from again. In 1957, Johannes Margheim found records in the Marxstadt library that his father, Heinrich Margheim, had been shot on November 11, 1937, and two of his brothers-in-law, Adam Schmidt and Heinrich Hauf died in Engels that same year also.

Second, but eldest surviving son of Joh. Conrad Kautz, Johann George Kautz was born on January 16, 1826. On January 19, 1848, George married in Merkel to Katherina Ells. Katherina had been born on July 5, 1929 in Walter, Russia. Together, they had five children that grew to adulthood. To assure that this could happen, George chose to leave their home in Russia when Alexander II reneged on the promise of Catherine that the German families would be free from military service for time eternal. His three sons were approaching the draft age. [George] Henry was born May 21, 1855. John George was born on July 20, 1860, and young Adam was born on September 23, 1867. At the age of 51, when most men would begin contemplating some sort of retirement, George Kautz felt compelled to join with a group of emigrants from neighboring Kratzke, Russia, giving up all that he had in Merkel, and take a risk on better life in America. A notation in the Makarovka article of the 1896 publication of A. N. Minkh's *Historical and Geographic Dictionary of the Saratov Province* states "In 1876, six revision souls, and in 1877, one revision soul moved to America, not receiving any payment for their property." There were seven persons in the family, but it was common practice for the Russian officials to omit a family member from the names on the passport to discourage emigration. In his article, The *Russian Imperial Passport* For Traveling Abroad (*Clues*, 1979, pt. 1, pp. 49-55, American Historical Society of Germans From Russia, Lincoln, Nebraska.), Alexander Dupper explained that when questioned, they would sometimes re-issue the passport with another family member's name missing. All in all, obtaining a passport was a very expensive and bureaucratic procedure.

These families, among the first 200 to apply for visas to travel to America, took a train from Saratov to Hamburg, Germany, where they missed their intended ship, and left the following day, August 9, 1876, aboard the S. S. Frisia. After fourteen days at sea, and the loss of at least two young children traveling with the Kratzke group, they arrived at Castle Gardens in New York harbor on August 22. This fabulous old structure, actually the converted Fort Clinton, had just burned out three weeks prior, such that they would have diverted the main structure to be processed. From New York, the group traveled by immigrant train to Kansas, where they set out to explore Kansas and Nebraska for possible settlement sites. The main body of the group settled in the vicinity of Russell, Kansas, where George Kautz filed his Declaration of Intention on October 9. Sometime after this, George Kautz, and his family, chose to part with this group and move to Lincoln, Nebraska, where they resided for a time, and later to York, Nebraska, where his daughter married one of his cousins, the recently arrived Frederick Kautz, in 1879. By the Fall of 1880, the Kautz family had settled on Homesteads in Hitchcock county, Nebraska, in the newly organized railroad settlement of Culbertson. There, George, John and Henry each homesteaded neighboring sites in the river bottom, just south of town. George later secured nearby farm for his youngest son, Adam. In 1881, to supplement his farm, Henry worked as a scrapper on the construction of the Burlington railroad line from Culbertson to Wray, Colorado. Daughter, [Katherine] Elizabeth and her husband, Johann Frederick Kautz, eventually made the first run on Oklahoma lands, in 1889, settling in the area of Stillwater, Kansas. Margaretha married Conrad Wagner, and was given 80 acres east of her father's farm. For some years, George had dairy cows and the sons delivered Milk into Culbertson. Adam and Henry, both, laid claim as the first milkman in Culbertson. George Kautz died on February 16, 1907. Katherina soon followed, on March 28. Both are buried in the Kautz family plot of the Culbertson cemetery. Ironically, disputes over their estate led to a dissolution of the family that stayed together through the trials of immigration. Conrad and Margaretha Wagner departed for California and Washington. Elizabeth lost all contact and her obituary suggested that two of her previously deceased brothers were still living! Henry and John rarely spoke, though neighbors, while Adam centered his life in the neighboring community of Trenton, Nebraska.

More on Merkel in the next issue of this newsletter...

I am AHSGR village coordinator for the villages of Kautz and Merkel. Kautz was founded 20 May 1767. Merkel was founded 28 August 1766. The distance between the two villages (as the crow flies) is 7 miles. Genealogical notes confirm movement of families between Kautz and Merkel, which is consistent with them being neighboring or near-neighbor settlements within the same rural area. A case in point: Georg Jacob Kauz (b. about 1729 in Germany) was the first mayor of Kautz and the person for which the village was named. Before 1788 he and his entire family moved from Kautz to Merkel Colony. His family in Merkel was very large and influential. Both villages were razed by the Russians after WWII, about 1961.

When I (and others) visited Merkel during Brent Mai's tour in 2016, we only spent about 30 minutes along the dirt road there. We had two large vans. The only human activity I saw from the road was a family pitching hay into a large farm truck. They were most likely a local Russian family. We didn't stop to chat. Chapter member Lynn Williams was able to take photos of a very old house similar to those of other villages.

The following is a satellite view of the ruins of old Merkel as it exists currently: You can see where the streets and houses used to exist.

The first emigrants from Merkel to the United States were Johann Georg Kautz (Kauz). He and his wife, Anna Catharina Ills died a month apart in 1907 in Culbertson, Nebraska. All their 11 children were born in Merkel. At least one child made it to the USA.

A Pocket Watch's Journey: Witness to History and Hope

By Rosalind Rockweit

Hello. I am a seven-jeweled pocket watch, manufactured in April 1897, at the American Waltham Watch Co., in Massachusetts. My watch style is an affordable option made popular during the U.S. civil war but was not designed for use in the railroad industry. Over the next many years I worked faithfully for my hard working owner, but eventually I started having trouble keeping accurate time, my crystal was badly damaged, and my back cover wouldn't stay on anymore. My owner decided to take the advice of his friends and trade me in for the new trench wrist watch style, made popular by the GIs during WWI. The watchmaker placed me in a box high on a shelf with other outdated and broken watches to be used for parts.

As I slumbered in the dark box, the WWI conflict ended with the peace treaty finalized June of 1919, allowing leaders to earnestly begin the process of rebuilding Europe. The U.S. Congress officially established the American Relief Administration (ARA), under the leadership of Herbert Hoover. The budget of 100 million dollars in February 1919 was the first financial appropriation for the mission of feeding the children of war-ravaged Europe. Over the next two and a half years, children were fed throughout 21 European countries.

Hoover became aware of the deepening famine in Russia making offers for months to Vladamir Lenin to provide relief. Knowing Hoover's well publicized anti-Bolshevik position, Lenin declined the repeated offers. But increasingly, pressure from his close allies from within, forced Lenin to face that his policies were not stopping the starvation or rebuilding the country. Russia's collapsing infrastructure began during WWI, followed by ongoing internal civil wars, rebellions, severe droughts with massive crop failures and Lenin's own harsh relentless grain requisitioning practices. Eventually, recognizing the growing severity of the crisis, Lenin yielded to accept foreign aid and permitted a public open-letter appeal in newspapers July 1921, to "all honest" people for help in feeding its citizens, which was the catalyst for Hoover to act. An agreement between the two countries was established August 1921 and by September, the ARA was expanding their massive food relief program to include 100 million starving Russian children.

As the ARA soup kitchens were rapidly established throughout Russia, thousands of starving citizens continued their trek in mass, to countries bordering west Russia. Describing savage conditions, especially in southern Ukraine and the Volga basin and validated by the ARA relief workers witnessed accounts. Reports were sent that widespread starvation was decimating whole communities. Congress responded, passing the Russian Famine Relief Act with an additional $20 million, December 1921, permitting the ARA for the first time to include adults in the food mission.

Hoover generated a public support campaign in the United States for donations. U.S. citizen conflict emerged over the core disagreement; would providing aid to the Soviet Union, even for humanitarian purposes, inadvertently support the Bolshevik regime. Ultimately, the suffering won over political fears by the supportive citizens outnumbering the anti-Bolshevik opponents. Two major grassroot organizations emerged from over 110 known foundations and corporate partners. They were ethnic Germans from Russia living in the United States. Their mobilization supported Hoover's ARA with an additional $100 million towards the cause.

The watchmaker was equally moved by the crises and recognized how he could contribute. He removed the box I was in from the high shelf, spreading all of us watches and parts across his worktable. In the warm sunlight filtering through the dust particles from the 15-foot-high transom windows of the old brick building, he inspected and balanced my movements, bringing me back to life. He replaced my damaged back cover with a nickel silver cover featuring a copper inset of boar heads, crafted by the Illinois Watchcase Co.

Finding a screw-on bezel to secure a new crystal proved to be a bit of a challenge. The best he could find didn't have a long enough thread to fully close the seam, leaving a gap between my front and middle covers. But it held the crystal securely, thus keeping the dust out of my movements. He continued building and repairing watches until he ran out of parts. Delighted, the watchmaker carefully boxed us up to send across the Atlantic Ocean through the ARA organization. My journey took me to a storage building at Heimkehrlager (Homecoming) Camp in Frankfurt an der Order, in Eastern Germany. A front-line transition camp for the fleeing refugees supported by the ARA in coordination with the local Red Cross.

As thousands of refugees continued to arrive at eastern European evacuation points, of which Minsk, White Russia and Kiev, Ukraine were considered among the largest gathering points. The starving souls were transporting deadly opportunistic diseases and infections. Typhus being the most serious of all the community diseases, which had been successfully reduced in western Europe over the previous two years. Alarmed by the returning threat to Western Europe, the refugees were held back. Sixteen months after establishing the first soup kitchens in Moscow, the ARA added Minsk and Kiev as new sites of service to their current districts. In January 1922 the first shipments of food supplies were sent to Minsk, with medical support established four months later in April. Bathing and disinfecting stations were set up to combat the unrelenting fleas, lice and chiggers.

In Polotsk, approximately 150 miles north of Minsk, 600 Volga Germans are struggling in far more desperate conditions without any aid. It is not until September, nine months after Minsk, that the ARA arrive in Polotsk, providing bread to the ethnic Germans who come forward to register to work their way to Germany. "Brot", the symbol of hospitality, hope, culture, and traditions. The small rations of bread, the ultimate symbol of life, is gratefully accepted with prayer to have with the watered-down potato soup the refugees have been surviving on.

As the ARA began identifying refugees with confirmed sponsors for immigration, preparations began to move the largest group of people thus far by train out of White Russia. In late November, 222 men, 295 women, and 436 children under the age of 16 left the Belarusian region, traveling through Poland for two weeks arrived at a bordering frontier station where a German train was waiting for them in the late dark hours of December 9th 1922. Among them, is my future owner. During the very early morning hours, the German train stopped at a sanitation camp nearby Homecoming camp. Here, the refugees willingly isolated for three weeks to continue the typhus eradication before moving into the Homecoming camp. As previous refugees left Homecoming camp for their new homes abroad, refugees having completed their isolation treatment take their place, starting the process to immigrate to the Americas.

At last, the box of watches I sat in was moved from the quiet dark storage building into the daylight of the bustling camp and set down beside an administrator helping the refugees get paying jobs that will fund their immigration. My anticipation grew as watches all around me were plucked out of the box and handed to the men standing in line. When I was finally pulled out of the box and unwrapped, I was placed in the large square confident hand of Anton Klobertanz. He gave an approving smile as he recognized some of the printed English letters of "American" printed on my dial. Upon turning my crown, my second hand jumped into action without hesitation. Then I heard, he will work in the train yards keeping the trains on schedule. I could hardly contain my excitement. This was a dream I could never imagine in the United States, because I was not designed according to the rigorous standards for train watches, but I was more than ready to team up with Anton for this important job!

Anton was born in the village of Schuck, 1895, a fifth-generation descendant of Michael Klobertanz, who immigrated from Germany to Rothammel village in the Volga region of Russia at age 8 with his siblings and parents in 1766. 155 years later, during the fall of 1921, Anton is one of a group of seven from Schuck plus one more from Pfiefer for a total of eight that flee their homeland in the middle of the night. The group of three men, four women, and a two-year-old journeyed northwest with what they could carry, through the bitter harsh conditions of the arriving winter weather to the White Russia region. Johannes Weigel from Peifer went to Minsk while the others traveled north to Polotsk. To avoid the risk of arrest while there, Anton and his wife Rosalia adopted the alias surname Preis.

Two of the eight do not make it to Germany. Anton's sister-in-law Cecilia Fesser could no longer cope with the desperate unyielding conditions and left Polotsk to return to Schuck. She did not make it back to her home village nor was she ever heard from again. Seraphina née Schachtel Fesser, mother of now three-year-old John Clements and wife of John Lorenz Fesser, died in Poland after being confirmed for transfer to Homecoming Camp, November 9, 1922. Her son and husband, Anton Klobertanz, with his wife Rosalia née Fesser, sister-in-law Hellena Fesser, and Johannes Jacob Weigel, all arrived together at Homecoming Camp on the same train.

Each day at the camp brought improving health and hope as contacts were made with family members in America. The first of many blessings, was Anton and Rosalia reclaimed their legal surname, Klobertanz. Johannes Jacob Weigel and Hellena Fesser married February 8th, 1923, in the camp. Anton's wife Rosalia gave birth to their fourth and first surviving child, Rose Marie, March 12th, 1923. Rosalia shared with her daughter all her life that she survived because of being delivered and cared for in a hospital. Anton and Rosalia, had lost their first born at 3-4 months of age, and the next two infants, 2-3 days after birth, because Rosalia was unable to lactate due to the malnourishment caused by the famine.

Following his dream, John Lorenz Fesser learned that it was easier to acquire farmland in Canada than it was in the U.S. With the help of the Volga German Society located in Berlin, he and his son's sponsorship was changed from his Uncle John Fesser in Portland Oregon, to his uncle Alexander Rohwein in Saskatchewan. Eight years after arriving in Canada, Johannes Lorenz fulfilled his dream, owning a farm in South Battleford, Saskatchewan, with his second wife and their growing family of an additional seven children.

My train-yard-working days ended when 6 month old infant, Rose Marie had met the quarantine requirements for traveling abroad. Her parents, Anton and Rosalia Klobertanz, and her aunt and uncle, Hellena and Johannes Jacob Weigle, boarded the SS Estonia in Danzig, Poland, Sept 27 1923. Thirteen days later, Oct 9th, 1923, they watched the silhouette of the Statue of Liberty on the horizon grow larger. From New York, they traveled by train across the U.S. to Portland, Oregon, to join their waiting family.

I was kept safely in Anton's pocket over the next 33 years, starting with his first job at the East Side Mill & Lumber Co., in Sellwood, Oregon, sweeping floors for 25 cents a day. Then he hired on as a janitor at Lipman Wolfe & Co. department store in downtown Portland, eventually promoting to foreman of the maintenance department by 1940. In 1925 his son Tony was born as the family's first U.S. citizen. Anton became a naturalized U.S. citizen in 1930 and in 1931 he had the keys as the owner of a brand new home on Lexington Street. He took pride in watching his son and daughter grow up, get married, and have children of their own, whom he embraced with tight hugs of love and joy. All his hopes and dreams were coming true through his hard work, and belief in the American dream.

In April 1956, I was carefully nested between Rosalia's tatted handkerchiefs in her top dresser drawer when Anton died. There, I rested till Rosalia was buried with him in 1969. Daughter Rose Marie took me out of the drawer holding me with warmth, pride, and melancholy, as the stories of the journey from Russia to America flooded her thoughts. She decided I was not going back in the drawer. She wanted me on display in honor of her parent's faith, hope, and unrelenting determination of survival.

Today, over a hundred plus years after being placed in Anton's hand, I am still on display where his second great-grandchildren, help operate model trains with their grandfather, Papa Christopher. As the stories continue to be shared with the ninth generation of Michael Klobertanz, I am treasured with pride, as a symbol and witness to the Germans from Russia legacy.

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German Handwriting and Artificial Intelligence.

Artificial intelligence can already help quite a bit with reading and translating German handwriting, especially for historical documents, but results still need human checking for accuracy.

What AI can do Today

AI systems can recognize old German scripts such as Kurrent, Sütterlin, and Fraktur from about the 15th to 20th centuries and turn them into searchable modern text. Some platforms let you upload scanned pages and automatically produce a line-by-line transcription in German that you can then feed into a separate machine translator.

Typical Workflow

Scan or photograph the handwritten page with as much contrast and sharpness as possible, often using a dark backing sheet for thin paper so writing from the reverse side shows through less.

Run the image through a handwriting-recognition tool to convert the script to typed German, then use a machine translation service (for example, a dedicated translator site) to get an English draft that you lightly edit.

Accuracy and Limitations

Accuracy depends heavily on the handwriting style, ink quality, and training data of the AI model; neat script in common styles works much better than very personal, rushed handwriting. Names, place names, and archaic wording are common error points, so human review is essential if you care about exact meaning in genealogical or legal contexts.

When AI is especially useful

Handling large volumes of church records, letters, or newspapers where manual transcription would be too time-consuming but an approximate reading is still valuable. Creating searchable digital archives so you can look for dates, surnames, and key terms across many pages that were originally in old German script.

Be aware that artificial intelligence in the realm of German Handwriting Recognition is in its infancy. Many challenges remain to perfect the art.

AHSGR Oregon Chapter Membership Renewal Form

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Annual dues for the **AHSGR Oregon Chapter** membership are $25.

Membership Year **2026**

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The American Historical Society of Germans from Russia is an international organization dedicated to the discovery, collection, preservation, and the dissemination of information related to the history, cultural heritage, and genealogy of Germanic settlers in the Russian Empire and their descendants.

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