

FIELD REPORT: A PRELIMINARY INVESTIGATION OF SOURCES
AND INFORMANTS IN SOUTHEASTERN COLORADO

October 15-18, 1975

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Dates of travel: October 15-18, 1975

Purpose: To investigate potential Germans from Russia sources and informants in Southeastern Colorado. My field work and research would be concentrated in the following counties: Crowley, El Paso, Otero, Prowers, and Pueblo. According to available historical records, these counties once claimed a sizeable number of German emigrants from Russia. The upper valley of the Arkansas River, where sugar refineries were built as early as 1900, attracted hundreds of Volga Germans who had previously settled in Denver and portions of Western Kansas.

Travel Expenses:

Total mileage	865.2 miles
Lodging (3 nights)	29.86
Meals (plus tips)	24.98

Wednesday, October 15, 1975

At 10:00 a.m. I left Fort Collins and headed south on I-25. Approximately two and one-half hours later, I arrived in Colorado Springs and decided to examine the naturalization records at the local courthouse. My reasons for wanting to review these documents at the El Paso County Courthouse stemmed from my interest in two small communities east of Colorado Springs (Kendrick and Yoder) where Germans from Russia had settled. I wanted to learn from what part of Russia these early settlers had originally emigrated. However, I was unable to examine the records because the Clerk to the District Court, Alvina Bruski (in room 105 of the El Paso County Judicial Building), was on her lunch break. I was told that only Ms. Bruski could give the necessary permission to examine any naturalization records. I waited until 2:00 p.m. and since the Clerk had not yet returned, I decided to proceed south while the Pueblo County Courthouse was still open.

At 3:00 p.m. I arrived in Pueblo, Colorado and immediately went to the County Courthouse. Here I encountered a great deal of difficulty in obtaining the early naturalization records. Both the office secretary and clerk to the District Court were reluctant to allow access to any records. Finally, the clerk telephoned the Chief Examiner of Naturalization in the Federal Office Building in Denver, Mr. Arnie Brassert. Mr. Brassert eventually gave his permission and I was allowed to go upstairs to the vault and examine the naturalization records. However, after spending several hours at the courthouse

and examining all records from February 15, 1908 to December 17, 1912 I was able to find only three names of Russian-German emigrants in Pueblo County. This came as a surprise to me, knowing that at one time a sizeable number of Catholic Volga Germans had settled in Pueblo before heading north to the beet fields. Evidently few of these emigrants were interested in formally declaring citizenship, at least in Pueblo County.

After leaving the courthouse, I reserved a room at a nearby motel and then made several telephone calls to prospective contacts in Pueblo. Three names had been given to me earlier by different persons who advised that these prospects might be helpful. These names included: Bertha (Mrs. Carl) Lanza, address 3 Purdue, Pueblo; Mrs. John Schmaltz, address 522 Linda Vista Avenue, Pueblo; Chris Leachman, address 1631 Scranton Avenue, Pueblo. I was unable to contact Mr. Leachman (I later found out he was hospitalized at this time) but did speak with both Mrs. Schmaltz and Mrs. Lanza. Mrs. Schmaltz, who originally came from Delta (on the Western Slope) was unable to tell me very much about the early years in Pueblo. She did remember that there was a German Catholic Church and school (St. Boniface) that served the Volga Germans in the early 1900's. This church later burned down and the parochial school was converted into an apartment house. Mrs. Schmaltz said that the church had been built in West Pueblo, "near the old viaduct." Mrs. Lanza was more helpful, although she knew little about Pueblo, since she was originally from La Junta. She gave me several names of potential informants in the La Junta area and could think of only one elderly

couple in the Pueblo area: the John P. Geringers on 216 Henkle Place. She advised me to call the Geringers and ask if they would like to talk to me. I telephoned this couple, and after explaining my reasons for wishing to see them, Mr. Geringer gave me directions to their home. He told me on the telephone that he and his wife were in their 80's and remembered much about Russia and the early years in this country.

At 8:00 p.m. I arrived at the Geringers' home and a wonderful, inspiring evening followed. Both Mr. and Mrs. Geringer proved to be very hospitable and equally knowledgeable. Mr. Geringer emigrated from the Volga German colony of Lauve in 1891 at the age of nine; Mrs. Geringer emigrated from the same village in 1912 at the age of seventeen. Both settled with their parents in Sugar City, Colorado, and were married there in 1913. As Mr. and Mrs. Geringer talked, I asked them if I could record some of their recollections on tape. They gave me permission to do so and I was able to record about two hours and fifteen minutes of our conversation. The Geringers related many stories about life in Russia; reasons for emigration to the new world; the early years in Sugar City when the Volga Germans lived in tents; attitudes toward the sugar company officials; numerous anecdotes; folklore; traditional folkmedicine, and holiday observances. Mr. and Mrs. Geringer also sang two religious hymns (in German) and a wedding song that were also recorded. Later in the evening, the Geringers' daughter (who lived next door) joined us. Her name and address is: Mollie Wilken, 220 Henkle Place, Pueblo, Colorado, 81004. Before

long, all of us were sitting in the kitchen drinking coffee and eating pastry. We continued to talk until after 1:00 in the morning. We discussed a variety of topics, including the cattle mutilations which were then occurring throughout Eastern Colorado. The Geringers expressed little surprise at these happenings and commented that such phenomena were also known in Russia. In fact, Mrs. Geringer vividly remembered a family cow in Russia that was "behext." She remembered that soon after this the animal died and its body turned black. Mrs. Geringer's frightened parents sent for a woman from another village who was known to effectively counter such Hexerei (witchcraft). The woman used a tiny bottle of black liquid to protect Mrs. Geringer's family. The liquid was applied on all the hinges of the doors to the barns, sheds, and house. After that, Mrs. Geringer said: "We never had no more trouble." The Geringers and their daughter, Mollie, also told me about the early years in Sugar City but they lamented that the town "is nothing like it used to be." After the farmers around Sugar City lost their rights to irrigation water, the community started to die. Mr. Geringer also remembered when five or six sugar company officials from the East (Baltimore) died of consumption while living in Sugar City. Before I left, I asked the Geringers if they knew of any other Germans from Russia in Pueblo who might be of help. They replied that a Mrs. Pfannenstiel was living in a nursing home in Pueblo and this woman was in her late 80's. They also advised that the following persons be contacted: Jake Schmidt (in his 80's) of Sugar City, and Henry Heidt

in the nursing home at Ordway. As I left the Geringers' home, they asked me to return and I assured them that I would. By the time that I returned to my room at the motel and had finished taking notes on that day's activities it was 2:00 a.m.

Thursday, October 16, 1975

After having breakfast in Pueblo, I proceeded east into Crowley County until I reached Ordway, the county seat. At Ordway, I spent several hours at the county courthouse examining all of the available naturalization records. The staff here was very helpful and interested in the work I was doing. Since Sugar City is located in Crowley County, there were many names of Germans from Russia in the county records. Some of the Volga German colonies represented were: Laube, Walter, Norka, Bauer, Rosenberg, Dietel, Alexanderhoff, Laub, Frank, Yost, Stahl, Jablanobka, Kana (Kaneau), Dreispitz, Kraft, Dobrinka, Eckheim, and Moor.

Later in the afternoon, while finishing with the naturalization records, I met Mrs. Ervin Bauman at the Ordway courthouse. I told her that I was planning to see her husband that afternoon, as I had been told to contact him by several people. Mrs. Bauman told me that their home was located only a few blocks away--on 220 Colorado Avenue. After leaving the courthouse, I went to the Bauman residence and met Mr. Bauman. Several hours of pleasant conversation followed. Mr. Bauman told me that he was the son of the late Rev. Bauman, who had served the Germans from Russia in that area for many years. Rev.

Bauman, however, was not a German from Russia--nor were any of his ancestors. The Baumans were German-Americans and Rev. Bauman came from a long line of Lutheran ministers. He did mission work throughout Southeastern Colorado and often rode a horse from Las Animas to Pueblo to serve his parishioners. He was also an accomplished scholar and linguist, having attended a seminary in Springfield, Illinois, and later served as an instructor at Northwestern University.

Rev. Bauman was apparently well-liked by the Germans from Russia and evidently appreciated the "peculiar" ways of his old country parishioners. Because he was not himself a German from Russia, he was quick to notice the distinct qualities that characterized those whom he served. Rev. Bauman was particularly fascinated by the dialect of the Volga Germans, which he said could engender the shock felt by a modern American if he would hear the English of Chaucer's time being spoken. Rev. Bauman continued to preach German to the more conservative elements of his congregation until 1954. He died in 1968 at the age of 82.

Ervin Bauman told me many anecdotes about his father's life and was particularly proud of the collection of books his father left him. Some of these books are undoubtedly collector's items and date to the 18th Century. Mr. Bauman also claimed that there were many boxes of his father's personal papers, letters, and sermons still in storage. The University of Texas at Austin and particularly the Department of Germanic Languages expressed interest in Rev. Bauman's collection. Mr. Bauman told me that he was in the process of cataloging his

father's materials for the University of Texas but would prefer that the collection remain in Colorado. I informed him that one of the immediate goals of our Germans from Russia in Colorado Study Project at CSU was the creation of a special archive and that Rev. Bauman's collection might be housed there. Mr. Bauman was pleased to hear this and I assured him that our project coordinator, Dr. Sidney Heitman, would contact him in the near future about the feasibility of this transfer.

Mr. Bauman told me that his wife is of Bessarabian German ancestry and that her uncle, Dr. C. C. Young (originally Yunk), was an author and traveler. Mr. Bauman showed me a controversial book authored by Dr. Young entitled Abused Russia (New York: The Devin-Adair Co., 1915). The book concerned an extensive journey made to Russia prior to WWI at the request of Theodore Roosevelt. One of the positive contributions of Young's expedition to Asiatic Russia was the purchase and importation of Karkakul lambs to the United States from Russia.

After a lengthy stay at the Bauman's, I left Ordway and headed east to Sugar City. Of special interest to me was the cemetery outside of Sugar City that contains the graves of many of the early Germans from Russia. The town, however, is almost as quiet as its lonely cemetery out on the prairie. I had been given the names of several people in Sugar City as potential informants but, I was unable to locate them due to the late hour of the afternoon and also my unfamiliarity with the town:

Jacob Schmidt	103 Colorado
Jake & Naomi Bauer	511 Colorado
Elizabeth Herman	520 Nebraska
Karl Grassmick, Jr.	119 California

The little town of Sugar City presented an almost tragic spectacle. There were rows and rows of modest white frame houses separated by unpaved streets. On the far southern edge of town, two brick pillars were the sole remnants of what was once the elaborate entrance-way to the sugar factory. No trace of the factory existed, although several large houses that once were the homes of the sugar company officials were still standing a little to the southeast of the pillars. The old German Lutheran Church still stood on the west edge of town, and its steeple could be seen above the trees from a considerable distance away. Except for a few children strolling the streets and an occasional driver stirring up dust, the town appeared uninhabited. I remained in Sugar City until sunset and was surprised at the number of lights coming from what I had suspected were deserted homes. Evidently the place was not the ghost town so many claimed that it had become after the irrigation ditches ran dry. But it was unbelievably quiet. And its silence was perhaps the town's most striking feature. Previous to this I had thought that the phrase "aching silence" was merely a pet term used by beginning writers. But standing on the streets of Sugar City, I remember thinking that the silence there was truly aching, if not incredibly painful.

At 7:00 I arrived in Rocky Ford (about 17 miles southwest of Sugar City) and spent the evening there.

Friday, October 17, 1975

I left Rocky Ford at 8:30 a.m. and drove eleven miles southeast to La Junta, the seat of Otero County. Here I went to the courthouse and requested the county's naturalization records. The cheerful cooperation of Dee Schedlbauer, Clerk of the District Court in La Junta, was invaluable. Due to her kindness I was able to examine all of the naturalization records and take copious notes (these are included with my report).

According to the Otero County records the following Volga German villages were represented in the La Junta area: Laube, Wiesenmiller, Grimm, Kratzka, Tarlyk, Galka, Dietel, Schwope (Schwab?), Huck, and Moor. The Rocky Ford settlement drew emigrants from these colonies: Neu-Norka, Hoffenthal, Gnadenflur, Schilling, Hussenbach, Kukkus, Aehrenfeld, Gussig (?), Lauve, Langenfeld, Kraft, Wiesenmiller, and Katrinenthal. There were also many names of German emigrants from Russia who listed their place of residence in southeastern Colorado as Olney, Sugar City, Swink, Ordway, Manzanola, or North La Junta.

It required several hours to page through all of Otero County's naturalization records and transfer some of these data to my notes. Owing to the large number of names of Germans from Russia, I was unable to record all of the information I would have liked to (such a task would have required days, not hours). Later in the afternoon I drove to North La Junta and then took the old highway east (194). A few miles northeast of La Junta I stopped in at the Alex E. Dorsch farm, which is opposite the present reconstruction of Bent's historic fort on the Arkansas River. Although Mr. Dorsch was away, I did speak with his

wife and she said her husband would be happy to speak to me when he returned. Mrs. Dorsch was not familiar with the local history of the Germans from Russia but she commented that the old highway in that area used to be called the "Rooshun Row" because of the numerous German families from Russia who settled in that part of the Arkansas Valley. She said that many of the emigrants from Russia who had come into that area as beet workers later were able to buy farms of their own. I told Mrs. Dorsch that I would return that evening or the next day, depending on what I found further east. I wanted to reach Lamar, which was the seat of Prowers County, some sixty miles distant in time to examine the naturalization records there. While driving to Lamar, I was fascinated by the countryside which seemed quite similar to that of the South Platte valley up north. I reached Lamar at 4:15 and hurried to the courthouse. However, I was unsuccessful in trying to examine any of the naturalization records. One of the office workers (Dolly Mason ?) told me that, according to Form N-585 (Rev. 10-10-61): "The records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service are by law and regulation confidential, and information from or copies of such records may be furnished only in the discretion of the Attorney General or officers designated by him." (This form is included with my report.) I told the office worker that she should call Arnie Brassert, Chief Examiner in Denver, but she declined, owing to the fact that even if he gave his permission I did not have sufficient time to look at the records. A lengthy discussion followed, in which I mentioned the goals of our

research project at CSU. On hearing of my interest, the office worker remarked: "If you want to find out something about the 'Rooshuns' this fellow can help you." She pointed to a young man in the office who was intently listening to our conversation. The young man introduced himself as Richard Weber and was very excited when I told him about our project. "You should come to Wiley," he said. "The whole town is-made up of Germans from Russia." This news surprised me and I was anxious to learn from what area of Russia the people in Wiley had come. Richard said he did not know but that his grandfather, father, and uncle were all born in Russia and had emigrated to Australia before coming to the United States. This information added to my excitement. I asked him what the religion of the people in Wiley was and he replied, "Church of God." I had never heard of this denomination and asked him to tell me more about it. He could only say that its headquarters were in Anderson, Indiana. Richard Weber also added that there was a Brethren Church in Wiley and the headquarters of this denomination were in McPherson, Kansas. When I asked if any of these churches were affiliated with the Mennonites, Mr. Weber commented that he did not know, but his mother, whose maiden name was Frisson, was of German Mennonite ancestry. All of this was very confusing to me, especially the references to the different religious churches in Wiley and the fact that some of the emigrants had sojourned in Australia. I asked Richard Weber if there was anyone in Wiley whom he would recommend I talk to. He suggested his father, Alex, and his father's stepbrother, Jonah. Richard gave me directions to his father's home in Wiley and after thanking him,

I headed north to find some answers.

I met Richard's father in Wiley while he was outside his home watering the lawn. After introducing myself and telling him about our project, he asked why I'd come. I told him I'd just returned from the courthouse where I met his son. I detected obvious reluctance on Mr. Weber's part to discuss anything. When I asked him where in Russia he was born he excitedly told me he had been born in the U.S.A. and had "absolutely nothing to do with Russia." He continued to evade all of my questions and was becoming noticeably irritated, especially whenever I mentioned Russia. I decided to apologize to Mr. Weber and politely leave but as I did so, his son Richard arrived. This was a touchy situation but somehow it turned out alright. When Richard insisted that his father was born in Russia, Mr. Weber compromised by admitting that "he might have been born on the trip over." And when Richard mentioned Australia, Mr. Weber corrected him and said the country where he and his parents sojourned was actually Argentina. I asked Mr. Weber where in Russia his parents had come from but he shook his head and replied that he simply could not remember. In fact, he thought his parents might have come out of Prussia, rather than Russia. I asked both Mr. Weber and his son if there was anyone in Wiley who could help me. Both agreed that Uncle Jonah (pronounced Yo-nah) might be able to do so. Richard gave me the directions to his uncle's farm house which was located several miles east of Wiley. When I reached the home of Jonah Weber I discovered that no one was there and decided to return to Wiley. I was not about to leave without my curiosity being at least partially satisfied. I drove along the east edge of Wiley and found the Church

of God building. To the south of the church was a large white home that I presumed was the parsonage. I knocked and after introducing myself learned that the middle-aged man before me was Rev. Brunner, pastor of the Church of God in Wiley. Rev. Brunner invited me in and I talked with he and his wife for some time. They were interested in our research project but admitted that they knew very little about the cultural or historical background of the people in Wiley. Mrs. Brunner suspected that some of the Germans in Wiley had come from the Ukraine; this item added still another facet to an increasingly complex picture. The Brunners briefly explained the teachings of their religion to me and remarked that many of the older church-goers in Wiley were very pietistic. Some, they said, were against both movie pictures and dancing. Rev. Brunner gave me a booklet entitled "We Reach Our Hands in Fellowship: An Introduction to the Church of God," by R. Eugene Sterner (included with this report). I asked the Brunners if they found it difficult teaching their religion in Wiley. Mrs. Brunner replied that some of those who attended church were "a little fanatical" in their beliefs and that one old German man always sat in one of the front pews with arms folded and eyes tightly closed. When I asked them who they would recommend as a good informant they agreed that Jonah Weber was perhaps the best. I told them I had been out to his farm and that he was away. Rev. Brunner offered to telephone a son-in-law of Jonah's to see if he was there visiting. After Rev. Brunner located Jonah he told me how to reach the right farm house: go to the main street of Wiley, then head south across the railroad

Page 15 tracks, then two and a half miles west until I saw a mailbox with a hand-painted name, "Oren Chatham." It was dark outside by this time and the Brunners agreed to lead me out to the Chatham farmhouse where Jonah was visiting. I followed the Brunners' automobile and a short time later we were in the farm yard of Oren Chatham. Both Rev. and Mrs. Brunner preceded me into the house and I was introduced to a livingroom full of farm people of all ages. In a chair in the center of the livingroom sat Jonah Weber. He was surrounded by his children and grandchildren to whom he was already telling stories. I told Jonah that I was interested in the background of the German people from Wiley and wanted to hear whatever he wished to tell me. By this time I was uncertain what to expect. He began speaking German and I recognized it as a Volga dialect. This came as a great surprise and I asked him:

"Wu seit ehr geboren?" (Where were you born?) He replied: "Strassburg-on the Wiesenseit."

Rev. Brunner and his wife decided to stay and listen as Jonah Weber began his story. I wanted to record this interesting session but uncertainty on Jonah's part as well as a room full of noisy grandchildren made me decide otherwise. Jonah Weber began with Catherine the Great, telling how this German princess invited hundreds of Germans to follow her into Russia. The first Germans in Russia, according to Jonah, were not farmers and when they were taken to the steppe along the Volga there was great disappointment. "Since they were not farmers, Jonah said, "they knew nothing about farming and when they were given seed to plant they ate it up. As a result there were no crops the first year and many starved." Jonah related many other stories and recalled

that in his native village of Strassburg a pietistic sect called the Tanzbrueder (Dance Brethren) were popular. These pietists would use a fiddle and a dulcimer at their religious meeting and dance late into the evening. Jonah said that his father, Bruder Weber, was a pietist and started the Church of God in Wiley. Although this denomination was new to the Volga Germans, it was evidently similar to the teachings of a pietistic sect in Russia called die Heilie' (the holy ones).

Jonah went on to say that some of the German people in Wiley traced their ancestry to the Volga German colonies of Dreispitz, Galka, and Nei-Weimar. Jonah remembered that the Weimers in Wiley originally settled in Russell County, Kansas, then went to Sugar City, Colorado and eventually to Wiley in 1904-05. Jonah's family, after leaving Strassburg, Russia, worked as laborers in Argentina, Chile, and Mexico before coming to Colorado. I listened to Jonah's stories and vivid recollections until shortly before midnight. By this time, the Brunners had left and the grandchildren were getting sleepy. We drank coffee and ate hot rolls before departing. Jonah and his family invited me back so that I could hear "the rest of the story." Jonah also encouraged me to return so that I could see some small windmills and a "Schnitzelbank" he had constructed.

I left Wiley and arrived back in Lamar at 12:30 a.m.

Saturday, October 18, 1975

After having breakfast in Lamar I drove north in order to reach the old highway back to La Junta. The night before, while talking to

Jonah Weber, I was informed of a tiny group of Dunkard Brethren (a strict German Baptist sect) living near the town of Hasty. I planned to establish a contact with the Dunkards when I reached Hasty. However, a few miles south of Wiley I had a blow-out on a gravel road and thus had to have the front tire repaired. I returned to Lamar and spent most of the morning trying to find someone who could repair the tire. Due to various difficulties, I finally had to purchase a new tire.

Several hours later, I stopped in Hasty, Colorado and found the Dunkard Brethren Church a few miles northeast of town. I was unable to make any personal contacts at this time but plan to do so when I return to the area. According to one informant, a few Russian-Germans in the Hasty area had joined the Dunkards and I was interested in how these individuals were accepted by the Brethren. After leaving Hasty, I proceeded west toward La Junta and stopped in again at the Alex E. Dorsch farm. Mr. Dorsch was home at this time and we talked briefly about the early days and about potential informants. He told me that an old German Lutheran Church once stood a short distance west of his farm and that a small cemetery was located near where the old church was originally constructed. Mr. Dorsch lamented that most of the "old timers" were gone, but recommended that I interview the following elderly persons in La Junta: Henry Wunsch, on 1218 Smithland Avenue; Henry Frank, 122 Seeley; Mollie Ehrlich, east of La Junta. Mr. Dorsch suggested that I stop in and introduce myself to his aunt, Mollie Ehrlich, who lived only a short distance down the road. I did as he suggested and talked to Mrs. Ehrlich briefly.

She was dressed in a long flannel dress and white head-shawl. Mrs. Ehrlich, who was in her seventies, remarked that she likes to reminisce about Russia and said she would be willing to talk when I returned to that area. Before I left La Junta, I visited at the site where the old church once stood and walked to the tiny German cemetery that was overgrown with alkalai weeds and dying trees. Only two tombstones still stood in the cemetery although a number of 3 X 6 foot depressions were noticeable elsewhere. It was not known whether these depressions represented unmarked graves or simply places from which bodies had been moved elsewhere.

After leaving La Junta I drove northeast to Rocky Ford and then proceeded homeward on Highway 71. I returned to Fort Collins via Limon and Denver at 10:00 p.m.