

“Exploring Volga German Heritage - Family Stories from Russia to Kansas”

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Volga German Family: I grew up in Western Kansas where these framed portraits of my great grandparents hung on our walls. The first one is my great grandfather David when he served in Russian Army, the next ones are my great grandparents David and Marie after they were married, and the last one is Marie’s father Frederick. I learned they were Volga Germans – that is ethnic Germans from Russia. I didn’t know much about my great-grandparents journey to America, but a couple years ago I received a treasure box that would reveal many answers. But before I tell you about the contents, let’s look at a brief history of the Volga Germans.

Volga German Family



David Lundgrin in the Russian Army
David Lundgrin, Marie Herbel Lundgrin and Frederick Herbel (Marie's father)

Who Were the Volga Germans? Europeans (most who spoke low German) moved to Russia at the invitation of Catherine the Great. Catherine was a German-born princess who wanted new subjects to cultivate the nomadic wilderness along the great Volga River. She promised free land and resources to farm, along with no taxes, military service exemption and freedom to keep their language, religion and culture.

Like the westward expansion in America, thousands of German-speaking Europeans flocked to Russia by boat, then crossed the vast Russia frontier by wagon. The Russians established the *Kontora* to govern the colonists and provide them with land to build houses, schools, mills and bridges. The *Kontora* settled conflicts among colonists and the local Russian population and promoted the development of agriculture, cattle breeding and gardening. They kept good records on the colonists which still exist today.

They colonized 106 villages along the great Volga River, where they built their communities from the ground up. They settled on both sides of the river. The west side is the *bergseite*, which translated means the hilly side of the river. The east side is the *weisenseite*, which means plains or meadow side. It was along the longest river in Europe that they prospered for more than 100 years.

Leaving Russia. Life began to change in the 1870s when Tsar Alexander II abolished the *Kontora* and special privileges for German Russians granted by Catherine. As freedoms declined and persecution increased, Volga Germans left by the thousands to U.S, Canada, Brazil and Argentina. In 1921-22, forced starvation killed 25% of the ethnic Germans in the Volga region. As a result, the Volga Relief Society was formed in the U.S.

Those Who Stayed Behind. Oppression continued through the great wars and under the governments of Nicholas, Lenin and Stalin. Conditions declined and letters to relatives describe horrific conditions. In 1941, Stalin signed liquidation of all Volga German villages, deporting German Russians to forced labor camps (the Gulag) or remote areas in Siberia and Khazakstan where so many perished. Villages were razed and renamed.

Dreisnitz – My Ancestral Village. My great grandparents were born and raised in the Dreispitz, and were descendants of the colonists who founded the village in 1767. Some of the founding family surnames that are listed here appear within my extended family tree. Dreispitz means “three points” and is named for its location at three streams. It was on the west side of the river and part of the Lutheran Parish of Galka, which included the villages of Galka, Dreispitz, Holstein and Dobrinka. Parishes usually had one priest or pastor who traveled in the area and served all of the villages. My grandparents were married in Holstein by Pastor Liborius Behning, who was later arrested by the Russian government and died in prison.

Dreisnitz - My Ancestral Village



- Founded September 16, 1767 by 107 colonists -- Lundgrin, Herbel, Hefele, Steinle, Meier, Wollet to name a few. By 1894, its population was just over 3,000 residents.
- Dreispitz means “three points” named for its locations at the intersection of three streams.
- It was on the *bergseite* and part of the Lutheran parish of Galka which included the villages of Galka, Dreispitz, Holstein and Dobrinka.
- After WWII, Russians renamed Verkhnyaya Dobrinka.

Documenting Family History: Before computers, my dad documented our family tree on paper, drawing boxes and connecting lines to who was related to who, and taping pages together as his information grew. During the cold war and before the internet and emails, family information from Russia was hard to come by. But he was able to find birth, death and marriage dates listed on his charts. His grandfather David was born in 1874, and grandmother Marie was born in 1880. David was a shoemaker and farmer. They met at Marie’s father’s grain mill.

Moving to Western Kansas. David and Marie immigrated to the United States in 1901. About 45 family members followed, but many did not. They received letters from family members describing deteriorating conditions. They lost many family members in Russia under oppression or during mass deportation in 1941. In 1944, David and Marie’s son Bill was killed in France during WWII and their other son Godfrey was seriously wounded there.

Trip to Russia. In 1995, my dad and brother traveled to Russia as part of a historic tour that cruised down the Volga River. They visited in the old village sites and walked the paths where our ancestors once lived. My brother videotaped the trip and they brought back stories and family information.

Dad’s Documents. Dr. Igor Pleve is a Russian historian who has extensively researched and published many books on Germans from Russia. Dr. Pleve served for ten years as the head of the International Association for Russian German history. As part of their trip, my dad was able to get information about our family members who immigrated from Hesse, Germany and Sweden. For the rest of his life, my dad searched for information on Ionas Lundgrin and the missing generations between the first colonists and his great grandparents.

Treasure Box: After my dad and brother had passed away, I received a box with genealogy charts, notes and photos. Most of the items I had seen before, but I found two items that were new to me: audio CDs marked “interviews” and a 10-page memoir from a manual typewriter. As a writer, I was thrilled to find first-hand accounts of my relative’s stories. I listened to the recordings of my grandparents talking about their lives and my great-grandma Marie telling about her life in Russia and journey to America. The typed memoir was from my great-great uncle George detailing his experiences from Dreispitz to the Oklahoma panhandle.

Research and Writing. I confirmed historic events and details through sites like volgagermans.org, American Historical Society of Germans from Russia and ancestry.com. Douglas Hale's book about Germans from Russia in Oklahoma echoed uncle George's stories. In the front of Hale's book, he acknowledged my great aunt for providing family stories and information. Based on research and the recollections from the audio tapes and memoir, I was inspired to share their experiences in a short story.

Short Story. Last year, my story "Voices from the Past" was published in the AHSGR journal. I'd like to share part of it with you.

"You bet your life!" Marie replied in a thick German accent when asked if her journey from Russia was difficult. It was 1967 and she spoke into a reel-to-reel tape recorder. "I was born in Dreispitz," she said. "In Russia. David was from there too." Carrying all of their possessions, they traveled in cattle cars and endured cramped conditions crossing the Atlantic as third-class passengers. As Marie recalled the trip, she never revealed that she was six months pregnant with their first child.

"In New York, we had to take a train," Marie continued. "David said 'nay' and would not get on as the train looked too fancy." The conductor looked at their tickets and convinced them to board. Just as they were settling in, they heard the news that President McKinley had been shot.

"We were scared," Marie said. "We thought they would make us go back home." But the news did not hold up the train and they arrived in Kansas.

Marie and David received letters from family in Russia about starvation and persecution. In 1922, David and his brother George sent money to their mother Katherine to bring her to America. Katherine and her grandson Reinhart were among 133 villagers who escaped from Dreispitz on a freezing winter night. Along the way, 19 people died including Katherine, after she fell off a wagon into a river and caught pneumonia.

David's brother Gottfried and his family were not able to leave Dreispitz. In 1941, armed Russian soldiers came into town for deportation. Gottfried's son Andrew resisted and was shot in front of their home. They were told their families would remain together, but it was not true as men and older boys were separated from their families. Uncle George recalled those times:

"The men were loaded into cattle cars, standing with their arms tied back to back," Gottfried was sent to Siberia where thousands, including his son Alexander died along the way." Gottfried's wife, children and grandchildren most likely died as no one ever heard from them again. The letter the family received from their brother was heartbreaking:

Dear Family,

It is very hard here at the labor camps. We have little to eat and the cold is unbearable. Our beds are boards placed on soap and lard kettles. We manage to heat the kettles for some warmth at night. Do not send any more money. We do not receive it and our captors make food packages impossible to afford. Bloat has set in and we are starving. You will probably never hear from me again.

Your loving brother, Gottfried

After deportation, Russians bulldozed the villages to the ground and Marie said that her hometown of Dreispitz was wiped off the map. "They left no houses, no buildings, no nothing," she said. "There was so much violence, so much dying."

It was difficult for them to comprehend the betrayal by their Russian homeland. Many men in their community had served in the Russian Army. Now ethnic German soldiers were banned from the Soviet military and tens of thousands were sent to the Gulag.

In 1963, several years after David died, Marie received a letter from Russia. It was from David's brother Gottfried, long thought to have perished during the Volga German purge. Gottfried's letter said he was alive in Siberia and was now in his 80s. He wrote that times had been hard during their banishment and there were not enough words to tell of the suffering they had endured. While Gottfried never saw his family members in person, he was able to reunite with them by phone.

Deportation Lists – ASHGR. In 2006, Russia declassified deportation lists of Volga German villages in 1941. The American Historic Society of Germans from Russia houses a digital list of more than 22,000 names with villages, ages and destinations. Many are women and children. Pages note the departing train station where 576 families with 2,727 people were deported. The original records were in 68 double pages of fading pencil.

The file contains 740 pages of names with an index of surnames to find relatives. There were many Lundgrin and Herbel family members from Dreispitz as well as most of the known surnames in the village.

Census Records. As more records were released from Russia, genealogists including Dr. Brent Mai and Ed Hoak were able to obtain Volga village census records from 1787-1851 and translate them into English. These records contain names, ages, relationships and house numbers (addresses).

Connecting the Dots. Last year, my sister and I researched the Dreispitz censuses. From our dad's research, we knew the family names of the first settlers' in Dreispitz and the names of our great, great grandparents. We discovered the missing generations that our dad had searched for all those years. It was an exciting and emotional time as we connected names and stories of the people who are part of our past.

What's in a Photo? On the right are the portraits that in my youth I passed by every day. I always thought they were taken in Russia. But after receiving the photo on the left from a relative, based on their clothing I realized that it was taken at the same time as the portraits. So they only brought over the picture of David in his military uniform. That was still quite a feat considering they carried all of their possessions from Russia to Kansas.

The photo revealed more about Marie's father Frederick, who I learned was visiting from Russia. Frederick had two daughters, Margaret and Marie, from his first wife who died in her twenties. Both daughters immigrated to Durham, Kansas with help from Frederick's brother. Margaret died in childbirth in March 1905, so Frederick never saw her again after she left Russia in 1902.

The baby on Frederick's lap is my grandfather and the girls are my great aunts. My grandfather was born in November 1905, so it's safe to say the photos were taken in early 1906. Frederick would have been 60 years old at this time. Living under oppression, it's surprising that Frederick returned to Russia. But he was married, had children and other family and still ran a mill in Dreispitz. Frederick died in Dreispitz at 69 years old, six years before the horrible forced famine along the Volga.

What's in a Photo?



What's in a Name. While researching surnames, it's important to note that there will always be variations on the spelling. This is especially true during language translations. Most of the times, names were spelled phonetically. In past generations, not everyone was literate and spelling was not a priority. In many immigration, census and church records, there are variations of name spellings for the same person. Lundgrin has many different spellings, I've even seen it spelled Lingrin.

As I researched my great Uncle George's manuscript, I figured out that the pages were typed by his son. George probably dictated the information and his son spelled names phonetically. In researching the surnames of Dreispitz, I realized that Peter Hines HINES was actually Peter "Heinz" HEINZE. Adam Hepply HEPPLY was actually Adam HEFFELE. Once I figured that out, it became much easier to find information.

Another lightbulb moment came when I realized that "Jonas," the ancestor that my dad had found on his trip, was really a misspelling of "Jonas." It made sense as J's and I's can be lost in translation like P's and F's look alike in English writing. It was an important correction as I found Jonas on the census records who was a missing piece in our family puzzle.

What's in a Name?

Surnames / Lundgrün (Dreispitz)

Lundgrün (Dreispitz)

Spelling Variations:
 Lindgren (Dreispitz)
 Lundgren (Dreispitz)
 Lundgrin (Dreispitz)
 Lundgrün (Dreispitz)
 Lungrin (Dreispitz)
 Лунгринь (Dreispitz)
 Лундгринь (Dreispitz)

from conscription to the Army for all males for the first 100 years. When dad was about 14 or 15 years old, Peter Hines, after the 100 years were up, was one of the first men called into the Army from the Dreispitz community. He later came to America with his family and farmed some farming land in Kansas. Adam Hepply, nicknamed "Verisim", was called shortly after Hines. He too with his family later came to America and they lived in Ellinwood, Kansas. Dad visited with them a lot when he too had moved to Ellinwood and was engaged in farming there. When these first boys were called, the whole town of Dreispitz gave them a farewell.

Информация для Georg Lundgrin

7 августа 1766 г. в колонии Крацке (Починное) прибыл Иово Лундгрин, 38 лет, лютеранин из Верисимовы, сапожник из швейцарского города Сент-Иммер. Его жена Кристина Уиллиам — 30 лет, католического происхождения из датского города Копенгагена. У них две дочери: Мария Барбара 1 год и два сына: Якоб и Иоганн — 8 лет и 6 лет. В последствии они переехали в колонию Dreispitz. (в по документу списки первых поселенцев колонии Крацке 31)

Jonas/ Jonas

Information for george Lundgrin

Jonas Lundgrin, 38 years old, lutherian, shoemaker from Sackholz, came to the colony Kratzke (Pochinnoe) on the 7.08.1766. His wife Christiane William — 30 years old, catholic from Spenhagen. Their daughter Maria Barbara 1 y. o., and her 2 sons from her first husband — Iohann, 8 y. o. and Iohann, 6 y. o. — then colony first settlers. They had 31).

Jacob Werbel, 27 y. o., unmarried, reformer, britian from Hessen, to the colony Balzer on the 4.06.1767. In 1768 he moved to the colony Dreispitz. (His N in documents was 39).

Continuing the Story. I still dig for clues and buried stories. At times, genealogy can be tedious and stagnate but you never know when you might find a clue or even treasure that opens new doors. Some ways to move forward are: Research, Network, Preserve, Digitize, Write.

Continuing the Story

- **Research** – join historic organizations, take webinars or join online groups.
- **Network** – talk with older family members or get in touch with relatives who might have new information.
- **Preserve** – keep notes, photos, scrapbooks or memorabilia in dry areas. Carefully notate who is who on the back of old photos.
- **Digitize** – convert photos, documents and newspapers to flash drives or computers by scanning or taking pictures with your phone.
- **Write** – notes, memoirs, short stories or books.