

# Kerbs

## Six Generations 1725 - 1947

Gottlieb Friedrich Kerbs was born in Saxony in 1725. At the time, the Kingdom of Saxony was an Electorate of Holy Roman Empire and now is the state of Sachsen in Germany. In 1752 he and his wife Eleonora were married and began their family. During this time Europe was embroiled war. First the War of the Austrian Succession (1740–1748) followed by the Seven Years War which lasted from 1765 to 1763. Saxony was involved in both.

After years of war, Saxony and the rest of Europe was left impoverished. Catherine the Great of Russia offered an area of land on the Volga River to Germans willing to settle the region. Gottlieb Friedrich Kerbs along with many other Germans took up the offer and was one of the first to settle in Holstein, a German evangelical colony was founded on the west side of the Volga River on May 26, 1765.

His descendants were born, raised, married, and lived their lives in the German colonies along the Volga River for generations. Gottlieb Friedrich Kerbs was the father of Johann Heinrich Kerbs who was born in 1760 before emigrating to Russia. He was the father of Christian Kerbs born in the settlement of Galka about 1798. He was the father of Wilhelm Kerbs born in 1820 who was the father of Johann Gottfried Kerbs who was born December 5, 1848.

During the lifetime of Johann Gottfried Kerbs, the Tsar of Russia in 1871 revoked the rights promised by Catherine the Great reducing the colonists to Russian peasants. Dismayed by the turn of events and fearing that worse was to come, the Volga Germans were powerless to resist. It was in these circumstances that Johann Gottfried Kerbs, Jr. was born on August 7, 1872 in Galka.

Due to the changing political climate, many of the German colonists began looking for new homes in far off places. Some immigrated to Argentina and other South American countries but the majority set their hope on the United States and Canada. So it was for Johann Gottfried Kerbs Jr. and his father. In late 1904 they set out for the new world. Leaving the Volga River Area behind they traveled most likely by train across the European continent and then by ferry across the English Channel to Liverpool England.

Their party consisted of Johann Gottfried Kerbs, Sr. and his wife Anna Katherine Ruhl, Johann Gottfried Kerbs, Jr. and his wife Catarina Elizabeth Rusch, their two sons, Gottfried (age 6) and Johann Georg (age 4) and a little girl whose name is unknown (under 2). They left behind the graves of two other small children and the rest of their family in Russia. Enroute to England their children became ill which necessitated a delayed departure for America. Johan George died and is buried in Liverpool. In Early February 1905 they finally sailed for America. While at sea the little girl also died and was buried at sea.



*Johan Gottfried Kerbs, Sr. Anna Katherine Ruhl with grandson George Kerbs*



*Johan Gottfried Kerbs, Jr and Catarina Elizabeth Rusch*

They arrived in New York City on February 17, 1905 and were processed through Ellis Island. From New York the first settled in Sugar City, Colorado located in Southeast Colorado where they stayed through 1906. Two more daughters were born and buried in Sugar City. By 1907 they moved to Garden City Kansas where three more children were born (Amalia (Molly) 1907, Emily (Milly) 1908, and

Alexander 1910). Many of the Volga Germans had already settled in Western Kansas beginning in the 1870s.

The family and grandparents moved again to Sugar City, Idaho where Jacob was born in 1912 and again to Paul Idaho where they homesteaded on a dry farm near the Kamima Butte. Here the last two children Johan George and Emanuel were born (1915 and 1916). The family again moved to Burley, Idaho in about 1925 and eventually to Rupert, Idaho

Three of Johann Gottfried Jr.'s brothers also immigrated to America and caught up with the family later. Henry Jacob came over the next year in 1906. George Henry came in 1913 and John George came by way of Argentina in 1915. The family that remained behind were never heard from again. Many of them died during the Bolshevik Revolution which brought the communists to power. Those that survived suffered greatly and were deported to Siberian prison camps where most of the rest died.

Those who made it to America where happy to adopt their new homeland and became productive citizens of the United States. Grandmother Kerbs died in 1921 and Gottfried Sr. died in 1929 and are both buried in the Paul Cemetery. Gottfried and his brothers were all successful farmers. Gottfried was a hard worker and a good manager. He loved horses and always had good teams. He raised sugar beets which was also a principle crop of the Volga

River Valley. They hauled the beets to the sugar factory on Snake River in Burley on iron wheeled wagons drawn by four head of horses.

Johann Gottfried was a religious man and loved to read the Bible. The Kerbs were Lutheran and maintained the religion that Gottlieb brought from Saxony and all through the generations in Russia. He was also a very good singer.

His wife, Catarina Elizabeth was a very kind and considerate person and loved by all who knew her. She was also a very good cook. Of the twelve children she bore, five died as small children. Of those that lived to adulthood, all but Gottfried married and raised families of their own.

Believed to be in her usual health until about a month before her death, she developed a baffling case of diabetes which made necessary the amputation of her left leg at the knee due to gangrene. When apparently making a satisfactory recovery from the surgery, she passed away from a sudden attack of pneumonia on January 15, 1933 in Rupert, Idaho at the age of 53 and is buried at the Paul Cemetery.

Not long after the passing of his wife, Johann Gottfried remarried. His new wife, Alice Kline, the mother of five sons of her own, was an acquaintance in Colorado. They were married on July 12, 1933. He died January 7, 1947 in Rupert and is also buried in the Paul Cemetery.

## **The History of the Volga River German Colonies in Russia**

In 1763, the Russian Empress, Catherine II, (who was by birth a former German) issued a manifesto inviting foreigners to settle in Russia. The Empress found herself in possession of large tracts of virgin land along the lower course of the Volga River in Russia. Catherine was determined to turn this region into productive agricultural land as well as to populate the area as a protective barrier against the nomadic Asiatic tribes that inhabited the region.

Catherine's Manifesto, issued on July 22, 1763, offered attractive rights and privileges to encourage would-be settlers, including free transportation to Russia, the right to settle in segregated colonies, free land and the necessary tax-free loans to establish themselves, religious freedom and the right to build their own churches (and by implication their own schools), local self-government, exemption from military or civil service, and the right to leave Russia at any time. These rights and privileges were guaranteed not only to the incoming settlers but also to their descendents forever.

Catherine's invitation came soon after the end of the Seven Years' War (1756-1763) which one historian has called "the most disastrous of 18th Century conflicts." The war left Europe impoverished and war-weary. Princes of the city-states which at that time constituted Germany believed their subjects owed them for their protection and did little to improve their people's lot or make common cause with them. Some built magnificent castles for themselves while their people starved.

To acquire the capital needed to maintain their lifestyles and armies, the German princes "rented out" their young men as mercenary soldiers. These German soldiers-for-hire were called the Hessian troops and were deployed all over Europe and in the Americas. Hessians played a role in the American Revolutionary War, hired by the British Redcoats to battle the American rebels. Many German families were torn apart as their sons were conscripted by the German princes for their Hessian troops

Religious differences during the Seven Years' War had led to cruel persecution and social tensions. As control of territories changed back and forth between various princes, forced religious conversions followed, keeping in step with the religious sympathies of whichever prince was currently in control. The deep religious discontent was heightened by high taxes, devastation of farmland, and widespread poverty. Thousands of Germans left at this time for other lands both east and west hoping to make a new life for themselves.

The discontent and lack of opportunity for improvement at home, coupled with an aggressive campaign by immigration agents, led thousands of Germans and other Central Europeans to take up Catherine's invitation to immigrate to Russia. Compared to life in post-war Europe, Russia sounded like a paradise.

The first wave of German immigrants to Russia, known as the Great Volga Immigration, took place during a period of four years (1764 -1767) when an estimated 25,000 immigrants, mostly from southwest Germany, colonized 104 villages in a valley situated on either side of the Volga River about 450 miles southeast of Moscow. Once in Russia, the Germans' settlement was restricted to the Volga Valley Region where they were expected to develop and farm the land. Saratov was the major Russian city in the area.

The landscape on either side of the Volga River differed from each other significantly. On the east side stretched a low, level, grassy plain that sloped gently towards the river and was crossed here and there by small sluggish tributaries. This side of the river was called the *Wiesenseite* in German, meaning "meadowside" and corresponded to the Province of Samara. The main area of settlement on the *Wiesenseite* began about 20 miles upstream from Saratov, stretching primarily northeast along the Volga River. Sixty-six of the original 104 German colonies established during 1764-1767 were located on the *Wiesenseite*.

On the west side of the Volga River, the banks rose steeply towards a wooded range of hills that was crossed by deep gorges. The area was covered by bush and tall grass. This area was called the *Bergseite* in German, meaning "hillside". German settlement in this area began about 30 miles south of Saratov, stretching toward Kamyshin and corresponded to the Province of Saratov.

The story of the settling of the first Germans in the Volga region is one full of hardships and disappointments. Before the first German settler arrived in the Volga Valley, the Russian government enacted the Colonization Law of 1764 which laid down regulations for landholding and inheritance and provided for the establishment of local government in the villages. This action by the Russian ministers may be interpreted in some degree as a reaction to Catherine's manifesto. The Colonization ensured the Volga Valley region would remain under strict

Russian control, despite the establishment of hundreds of German villages. There is historical evidence that Catherine was sincerely benevolent towards the Volga Germans and enthusiastic in her support of their settlements. Nevertheless, many of her government ministers and lower-level officials found ample ways behind Catherine's back to personally profit from wave of German immigration to the Volga Valley, making their transition to Russia much more difficult than expected.

The Colonization Law of 1764 described in detail the location of land set aside for foreign settlers. Land was specifically allocated for each colony district based on a maximum of 1000 families. Each immigrating family received 30 dessiatines of land (1 dessiatine = 2.7 acres) of which 15 dessiatines were to be used for cultivation, 5 for hay, 5 for trees, and 5 for farmyard, garden, and grazing. Land was also provided to each village for a church, a school, and other community purposes. Although Catherine authorized funds for the building of churches in the German villages, they were given as loans; the settlers were expected to pay back the government for the construction of their churches.

Originally, use of the land designated for the German settlers was to pass from father to youngest son; the other sons were to be taught a trade. Land could not be subdivided, sold or mortgaged since land ownership rested in the community (not the family). Families were entitled to use the land but not to dispose of it in any way. These original land inheritance provisions, however, were never permanently applied. Relatively quickly, the Volga villages adopted the Russian "mir" system which divided land holdings according to the number of "male souls" in the village. Approximately every 10 years a "Revision" (census) officially determined the number of males (of any age) in a family. Community authorities then assigned to each family its due portion of the community's land based on the number of males in that family. Over the next several decades, land ownership and claims shifted dramatically throughout Russia as a result of the abolishment of serfdom in 1861. The Land Reforms of 1905 officially abolished the mir system. But despite these and other economic factors, it is unlikely that more than a few of the Volga German settlers ever actually owned any land. Technically, it remained property of the Russian government.

Four years after the Great Volga Immigration, Catherine issued a new set of instructions which would regulate in detail the lives of the German settlers. While Catherine may have been motivated initially by good intentions, some historians see her actions after the fact as having been little more than "using" German settlers for her political gain at home. The increased regulation of their lives provided just that many more opportunities for the Volga Germans to be mistreated and abused by local Russian officials.

In 1871, for political reasons of his own, Tsar Alexander II revoked the preferential rights and privileges given to the German settlers by the manifestos of Catherine II and Alexander I. The Volga Germans, as a result, were reduced to the level of Russian peasants and became subject to all the laws and obligations of that lower class. A very troubling development occurred in 1874 when, for the first time since arriving in Russia, Volga Germans were drafted into service in the tsar's army. Freedom from conscripted military service had been a fundamental protection under the initial manifestos inviting German immigration. The military draft of their sons and fathers was interpreted as a breach of contract by the Russian crown.

Dismayed by the turn of events and fearing that worse was to come, the Volga Germans were powerless to resist. Their only recourse seemed to consider leaving Russia. But where to go? There was little if any incentive to return to Germany where they held no land or claims to any since their roots there had been generally severed over the course of a century or more. For many it seemed the only place of hope and opportunity lay to the west, in the New World of the Americas.

Beginning in the 1870s, large groups of Volga Germans emigrated from Russia leaving villages and homes they had known for many generations. The primary destination was the United States and Canada, but there was also immigration of lesser degree to Mexico, Brazil, and Argentina. People of individual villages tended to travel and settle together as groups in their new homelands. It was not uncommon to see scores of Volga Germans, all from a particular village, end up living as neighbors again in their new countries. In spite of large emigration numbers, the Volga German population increased to 345,000 by 1897 and to over 500,000 by 1914.

#### THREATS AND REVOLUTION

In the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Volga Germans lived in a precarious position without any firm governmental protection. They dreaded any kind of war, especially war between Russia and Germany for they could appeal to neither Germany nor Russia for protection. On February 26, 1917, Czar Nicholas II sent out an order demanding of the 2 million Germans living in Russia all the grain, goods, cattle, and horses in their possession. Army officials readied their units to forcibly execute this order throughout the German settlements in the Volga region. The then Bishop of Saratov believed that the order was planned by the Czarist government with the intent of starving and driving German subjects out of the dominion of Russia. He wrote:

"On that same day I had urged the boys in my Seminary at Saratov (because there were no men except old men at home) to pray for a miracle to save us from extinction, and on that same day that the Revolution began in Petrograd, 1800 mounted Cossacks were held in readiness at Saratov, to swoop down on the defenseless villages, to murder, plunder, and scatter the inhabitants. But on account of the revolution the order was never executed."

Having endured persecution as the First World War raged because of their German heritage, the Volga Germans now felt completely betrayed by the Russian government. Many welcomed the Revolution of 1917 believing that the Communists would bring reform and prosperity. This belief was bolstered after the Communists took power in October 1917 when Lenin immediately negated the Czar's decree to dismantle the Volga German colonies. There was even more reason for optimism with the signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918 which made peace with Germany. It contained a provision that placed the Volga Germans under the protection of the German government, permitting them to sell any property in Russia and leave for Germany within 10 years. In the early years of the Revolution, some Volga Germans became devout Communists, welcoming Lenin's plans to establish a Federation of National Socialist Republics and saw communism as a way for redistribution of land ownership in the German colonies that would reinstate rights and prosperity. This view was nurtured when

Lenin approved a request to establish an Autonomous Volga German Workers Commune in October 1918.

The Volga Germans' hopes for peace, freedom, and prosperity under the Communists were short-lived. With the collapse of the German army and the end of World War I marked by the armistice of November 11, 1918, the provisions and promises of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk came to an end. While more prosperous Volga Germans were able to leave Russia during the first years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most did not have the wealth or property needed to get out. Most Volga Germans emigrating out of Russia at this time were able to do so only because of the sponsorship of others that had already left. During this immediate post-war period, the Communists issued a mandate that villagers consolidate their properties into collective communes. Harsh blows were also dealt against churches and the clergy. Public worship was discouraged and religious education in village schools disallowed, replaced by instruction in Communist doctrine. The Volga Germans, most of whom were deeply religious and against collectivization, were stung by these mandates. Feeling betrayed by the Czarist regime, they now felt equally betrayed by the Communists. Whatever optimism they may have had was shattered as the Communists took control of their land and denied them freedom of expression and religion.

The next few years were a time of almost unbelievable instability and chaos as the Volga Germans found themselves caught in the middle of the Russian Civil War. Communists (the Red Army) battled anti-Communists (the White Army) to consolidate political power in Russia. Control of the Volga villages changed hands between the Red Army and the White Army several times and each time brought community devastation. Soldiers from whatever army happened to be in control of the village at the moment confiscated grain and livestock and other goods as needed and desired. What little food supplies that had been stored to keep from starving were taken at will leaving nothing for the villagers. Those resisting or refusing to cooperate were shot on the spot as traitors. Volga Germans were divided over which side they supported, most refraining to take either side for fear of retaliation. Along with the chaos and brutality of the Civil War, armed gangs roamed through the Volga region, robbing and killing villagers and burning their homes. The deteriorating bodies of humans and animals resulted in devastating diseases, including cholera and typhoid, which swept through the Volga region killing thousands. When the Red Army ultimately defeated the White Army in 1920, the Communist Party immediately established ironclad rule throughout the country. What must those who had emigrated just a few years before have felt as they thought about loved ones they had left behind in Russia?

The Volga region was still reeling from the effects of the First World War and the Civil War when the nation was hit by a great famine. The famine, which was fueled by these prolonged conflicts, became catastrophic when one of the worst droughts ever experienced by the USSR caused severe crop failures. The Volga Germans habitually stored large crop reserves to get them through the lean times. But by 1919 there were little food reserves to fall back on. The crop failures did not deter Moscow from draining the last resources from the rural communities. The Communists needed wheat and other farm products to participate in foreign trade and thereby accumulate foreign capital. To squeeze all the reserves out of the farmers, Lenin appointed Red Grain Control Commissars, many of whom found themselves assigned to

the Volga region. The Volga German villages were ravaged by Red Grain Control Commissars who confiscated any remaining private and community food reserves and livestock. With most of the land lying idle, once again villagers fled the Volga region by the thousands. Those who remained behind either because they could not or would not flee faced an even harsher and brutal existence ahead.

The fortunes of the Volga Germans took another blow in 1941 when Hitler's Germany declared war on Russia and began an advance on the city of Stalingrad situated on the Volga River. Not trusting the loyalties of the Volga Germans, Stalin signed an order on August 28 to deport all of them out of the region.

On September 1, 1941 mass evacuation was announced for the approximately 440,000 Volga Germans. Ten days later they began their forced deportation to Kazakhstan and Siberia. Many were forced to work as slave labor in the *Trudarmee* (labor army) in camps such as Kolyma. The Volga Germans were then stripped of their citizenship and did not regain their civil rights until after Stalin's death.

The Volga Germans were now treated as prisoners and transported by rail to the camps. There were 151 train convoys departing from 19 stations. Some 20,000 NKVD troops and the huge quantities of rolling stock and other resources were diverted from the war effort in order to shift vast numbers of old people, women and children to distant lands quite unprepared to receive them. Fifty or 60 people were packed into each freight car and given water only when the train stopped every three or four days. Food, when provided, was generally salted herring which only made the prisoners' thirst that much greater. The journey could take many weeks.

The consequences were devastating. Some families were given as little as five or ten minutes to pack up their belongings and food for the trip. No food was supplied. Tens of thousands are believed to have died during journeys which lasted up to two months. In some cases, bodies were left in the overcrowded cattle wagons for weeks on end. In others, they were thrown out beside the tracks. Most estimates indicate that close to 40 percent of the affected population perished.

Many of the transfers took place in winter. Those who survived the journey often found themselves with inadequate clothing, no shelter, and no means to support themselves in temperatures as low as -40C in Siberia. Their movement was restricted to a limited zone always a few kilometers short of the nearest town.

The penalty for straying was 15-20 years of hard labor in the Gulag camps. People found themselves doing totally unfamiliar work in utterly alien surroundings. Urban people were set to work in the mines and forests of Siberia.

Under Khrushchev, in September 1955, various restrictions were annulled but not fully implemented to Germans until 1964. Under a special arrangement with the German government, Soviet Germans were allowed to emigrate to Germany but this permission to return to their homelands only occurred after the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991. By

the end of 1995, 1.4 million had moved to Germany, and a further 1.2 million are still living in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and the Russian Federation.

In September of 1955, the Soviet Union issued the first decree that revealed publicly the whereabouts of and granted amnesty to more than a million surviving Volga Germans. Upon release, the Volga Germans were asked to sign paperwork agreeing to never return to their original settlements.

In February 1956, Nikita Khrushchev condemned the deportations as a violation of Leninist principles. In his "secret speech" to the Twentieth Party Congress, he stated that the Ukrainians avoided such a fate "only because there were too many of them and there was no place to which to deport them." That year, the Soviet government issued decrees on the restoration of the Chechen-Ingush Autonomous Republic and the Kabardino-Balkar Autonomous Republic, the formation of the Kalmyk Autonomous Oblast', and the reorganization of the Cherkess Autonomous Oblast' into the Karachai-Cherkess Autonomous Oblast'. The Crimean Tatars, Meskhetians, and Volga Germans, however, were only partially rehabilitated and were not, for the most part, permitted to return to their homelands until after the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991.

On August 29, 1964 the U.S.S.R. adopted a second decree which openly admitted the government's guilt in pressing charges against innocent people, and urged the Soviet citizens to give the Russian Germans every assistance possible in support of their "economic and cultural expansion."

On January 5, 1965 an action was declared that made the entire decree of 1941 null and void.

Many Volga-Germans have tried to return to the cities from which they were banished only to find hostility and despair. As of 2001, most Volga Germans remaining in Russia have immigrated to Germany.

Joseph Stalin's forcible resettlement of over 1.5 million people during and after World War II is now viewed by many human rights experts in Russia as one of his most drastic genocidal acts.