

## **The appearance of the website "Geschichte der Wolgadeutschen" on the Internet and the first years of its development**

On January 27, 2005 the website "Geschichte der Wolgadeutschen" dedicated to the history of the Volga Germans appeared on the Internet. How did this resource develop? That's what I'm going to tell you in this 30-minute report. I will dwell on the first three years of operation of the website, namely, from 2005 to 2008.

Over many decades of silence, we, the Germans from Russia, were yearning for our history and felt the need to talk about our past. Our past was hidden behind a veil of obscurity for most of us. It was known that the Volga-Germans were invited by Catherine II; in Soviet times they had their own republic; at the beginning of the war all Germans were exiled, and then all people able to work were sent to the labor army; after the war, the Germans lived in special settlements and were not allowed to return to the Volga region. That was all the information the representatives of the Volga Germans, with whom I had a chance to communicate, knew about. Then I had an idea: each of us had some documents, photos. What if we started collecting them and publishing them on the web? This way, together we could write our history and keep it alive. At the same time I could publish the information I would find in the libraries, newspapers, books on the history of Germans from Russia. At that time the first books on the subject began to appear on the market. The first people to help me were Vladimir Becker from Russia and Ivan Gerber from Germany. One can still read their materials on the website.

Ivan Gerber recommended our website to the historian Dr. Krieger from Germany. I did not know Victor Krieger and I was not yet familiar with his research. In 2005 we started corresponding. Dr. Krieger came up with an idea that I should make a request to the Saratov FSB (Federal Security Service) for copies of archival documents of the criminal case against Georg Dinges, Peter Sinner and Anatoly Synopalov. Dinges was a well-known linguist and ethnographer; Sinner – a teacher, folklorist and poet. In early February 2006, I received a package with certified copies of the documents. The package contained profiles of the arrested, search and arrests warrants, the indictment of 10 October 1931 and the resolution on the withdrawal of the charges in 1964. It was a breakthrough, because no one had yet written about the Dinges case. We got really lucky! Moreover, here, in Russia, I was able to find Georg Dinges' grandson, Alexander Dinges, who provided us with photographs from the family archives. And Viktor Krieger found the daughter of Georg Dinges, Hildegard Dinges-Konkova, who lives in Germany.

Based on the found documents, Dr. Krieger wrote a series of articles about Dinges, which were published in Germany in the "Volk auf dem Weg" magazine. Later our joint work with Dr. Krieger "From the archives of the NKVD: Indictment of 10 October 1931" appeared on the website "Geschichte der Wolgadeutschen".

In 2005 I met Michael Grau from the USA. Michael's ancestors came from Nidermonju village, where my mother was born. Having found this commonality,

we became "virtual" friends and have been keeping in touch all these years. When I was at the AHSGR Convention in July 2016, we were finally able to meet in real life and got to know each other better. In April 2005 Michael asked me to write an article " A Letter from Russia" specifically for members of the Northeast Kansas Chapter of the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia, which was published in the Journal of the Society.

In November 2005, I wrote an essay based on the memoirs of my uncle, which was then posted on the website. In January 2006, an excerpt from this essay was published in Ulyanovsk German newspaper "Rundschau". Through the efforts of Michael Grau the essay was translated into English, and was published twice, in 2006 and 2012, in AHSGR journal. Finally, the essay was published in Russian and German in the anniversary anthology of the Russian Germans "Die Ufer /The Banks of the River".

In 2005 I was actively replenishing the website with the materials that I had collected before the creation of the website. There were not so many of them, and by the beginning of 2006, nearly all of them were posted on the website. But I was not going to stop there. I decided to work on the description of the Volga German settlements. Minch's "Historical and geographical dictionary of the Saratov province" served as a model for me. To my great regret, this project has not been finished yet.

The appearance on the forum of the Volga German historian Igor Plehve was a milestone for our website. This happened in early 2006. In May 2006 his own page appeared on the website and his first article "The beginning of the emigration of the Volga Germans to America" was posted. Gradually, the page was filled with other articles by Igor Pleve. Igor Plehve greatly contributed to the development of the genealogical part of the website. There was a time when forum participants could communicate with Pleve directly discussing the history of the Volga Germans, asking questions and receiving answers from a specialist. It was a boom of communication on the forum. There were lots of discussions! For several reasons Igor Pleve was forced to stop an open and direct communication on the forum. But by this time genealogical topics had already been developed considerably. The number of people interested in their family trees grew every day. Igor Pleve continues to support topics relating to genealogy, and places information on the forum on various issues in the field of genealogical research. The increased interest of Internet users to our forum is explained by the presence of a well-developed genealogical component. And this is due to the participation in the forum of Igor Plehve, who for many years engaged in genealogical research for people whose ancestors were Volga Germans. I have never met Igor Plehve, but all these years, we have been corresponding by email.

I must say that already the first year of the existence of the website produced an unexpected result. From the beginning, I did not hope for some special interest in my site. But in the first two years I acquired a new circle of friends. In general, everything that happened in the early years of the development of the site, remains difficult for me to explain. I wrote to the ordinary people and professional historians. I never persuaded anyone to join the project but the people themselves

wrote and offered me photographs and documents from the family archives, their memories, researchers - their articles, theses, dissertations, books. I think it's just good luck. By this time, having all the prerequisites – people starving for information, the emergence of the Internet, and anyone who would undertake something like that, would get the same result.

In March 2006 Michael Revnivitsev - one of the founders of the Russian Center of vexillology (the study of flags) and heraldry, the author of the article "The flag and coat of arms of the Volga German Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic" wrote to me. The site features his page with a number of articles on the history of the capital of the Volga Germans: Pokrovsk - Engels.

Throughout 2006 I continued to replenish the photo archive of the website.

In July 2006 Alexander Bashkatov from Saratov sent a series of modern views of German villages in the Volga region. They were all new for me, I could recognize only Gnadentau in the pictures. All the visitors to the website including myself saw the rest of the former German colonies for the first time.

In August 2006, Victor Wolf from Germany sent his photographs taken in 2004 during a trip to some of the Volga German villages.

The photographs of Alexander Bashkatov and Victor Wolf formed the basis for the future archives of photos with the views of different places of the Volga German region.

There is one more person who I would like to mention. This is Andreas Müller from Germany. For many years he was an active member of the forum and provided invaluable financial support and assistance to the website in the early years of its development. Thanks to his help the website library has become significantly richer in books. In September 2006, he sent me an atlas of the Republic of the Volga Germans. Being a student, I drew a map of the Republic of the Volga Germans on a large sheet of paper and put the names of German villages on it. Having received this atlas as a gift, I was incredibly happy that such a detailed map was in my possession now.

Since 2007 photographs and documents from the family archives started coming in a continuous stream. In addition to photographs, people sent family chronicles, biographical information, memories. Of course, in these years, my job was not only to post obtained materials on the website. There were interesting encounters, great creative work.

Since February 2007, I established a regular correspondence by e-mail with Andreas Idt. He had been an active a forum member for a year, but our correspondence begins only now. Our tandem simply "blew up" the website. Andreas Idt turned out to be a professional and a great expert on the history, culture, traditions, customs and language of the Volga Germans. I had some ideas and the skills to turn them into the Internet presence. Andreas had specific material. Together we raised such layers of our history, which until then, had been known just to few people. For several years we were working 25 hours a day. Rare and unique materials appeared on the website at such intervals that the visitors did not have enough time to read the latest additions. In 2009, we even decided to publish our own electronic literary collection, which came out in the course of 3

years and had 4 issues. A huge amount of information on the history of the Volga Germans, which appeared on the website in a short time, made people think that behind all this work was a lot of staff. But it was a misconception.

In March 2007, I received a letter from Elena Maurer from Germany. Soon she started her page and photos of household items, sent by her, formed the basis for the future virtual museum of the Volga Germans.

In January 2007, I met Tatiana Schell. We met in Volgograd several times and still keep in touch. Tatiana helps me communicate with AHSGR members.

The year 2008 was particularly rich in symbolic love.

In March 2008, I received a letter from Robert Riedel from Germany with a proposal to publish his memoir "Limitations" on the website. It was done. Four years later the memories were published as a book in both Russian and German. And I have a self-published book, which was produced and sent to me in 2008 by the author Robert Riedel.

Since October 2008, I established a correspondence with the writer Alexander Fitz from Germany. Alexander presented his books to our website, often provided financial support.

In late 2008, I received a letter from Dr. Robert Korn from Germany. His name was familiar to me from the book "In Russia - Germans, in Germany - Russians". As a result, his page is part of the website, and it continues to grow as new articles by Dr. Korn appear on the website.

In 2008 I started communicating with with Henry Reichert from Germany. In spring 2008, Henry arranged the purchase of books for the website library, and in the summer I received a large box with several dozen books from Germany.

In June 2008 historical information science lab of Nizhnii-Tagil State Social-Pedagogical Academy led by Kirillov provided me with the access to Bogoslovlag database. We started answering questions on the forum using Bogoslovlag database (Bogoslovlag – one of the forced labor army camps in Sverdlovsk region). Recently, the site received the book «GEDENKBUCH: Memory book of Germans, who were in the labor army in Bakalstroy-Chelyabmetallurgstroy camps. 1942-1946. - M.: ICSU; Nizhny Tagil: NTGSPA, 2014, volume 4".

In October 2008 Hugo Vormsbeher approached me on the subject of opening of the author's page at "Geschichte der Wolgadeutschen". Exactly at this time I was thinking about creating the literary section of the website. Hugo Vormsbeher, a specialist in the field of Germany from Russia literature, gave very helpful advice.

I would like to wrap up my story about the beginnings of the website "Geschichte der Wolgadeutschen" by mentioning the name of Victor Dizendorf.

Victor Dizendorf compiled a stunning volume of the Encyclopedia of "Germans from Russia" - "Places of settlement. As you already know, Volga German settlements is a particularly interesting topic for me! I still have the map, which I drew being a student back in the 70s.

And so, in February 2008, I start corresponding with Eduard Bernhardt, the author of the book "Sketches to the fate of the people. Boris Rauschenbach". Eduard introduced Victor Dizendorf to me. We published his book «Farewell takeoff».

Could I think at the time that four years later I would be sitting in the German town of Rottenburg am Neckar, in the apartment of Victor Dizendorf, together with him, his wife, Natalia Wardenburg, and my friends and colleagues, Andreas Idt and Eduard Bernhardt, drink wine, and conduct interesting for all of us conversations. A few days later I was in the German town of Gengenbach in a cozy cafe surrounded by the family of Eduard Bernhardt. I felt a little embarrassed, because my friends raised their glasses in honor of the website "Geschichte der Wolgadeutschen" and me as its creator and inspirer.

Creating the site my main idea was to promote the history of the Volga Germans by means of the internet. And I hope that I have managed to do it.

Alexander Spack

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Translated by Mila Koretnikov (Germany)