

# *Conquering*

*the*

**WIND**

*Amy Brungardt Toepfer  
and Agnes Dreiling*

An Epic Migration from  
the Rhine to  
the Volga to  
the Plains of Kansas

*Conquering*  
the **WIND**

by  
Amy Brungardt Toepfer  
and  
Agnes C. Dreiling

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## *Foreword*

The great English historian Arnold Toynbee has been able to study and trace the history of mankind with singular effectiveness with the aid of a technique of telescoping time to make long periods appear as just a passing moment.

The authors of this book accomplish much the same thing. They tell a story of more than 200 years as though it had but happened yesterday. It is this living history which makes their contribution worthwhile as well as interesting.

The story of the settlers who conquered the wild winds of the plains of two continents is a story that needed to be told. It needed to be told, moreover, by "one of our own" people who is intimately familiar with the lives and times of the settlers. This is the first time that this story has been told by one of the native sons and daughters of this hardy breed of immigrants. As a descendant of this same stock, I take distinct pleasure in having a part in publishing this book.

The story is not unusual in some aspects. For this story is the story of America, more specifically, the story of the United States. It is different from many similar stories because it is a success story for a whole group of people, rather than of an individual or an individual family.

The German-Russians who settled on the plains of Kansas are inaptly called German-Russians. Despite their sojourn of over 100 years in Russia, there was nothing Russian about them when they came to Kansas. Only accidentally did they adopt some Russian customs, words, and clothes, but they ate and prepared food in the same way as they had in Germany and always considered themselves German rather than Russian.

While these people began in a similar isolation in the United States, the Republic was soon able to swallow them as it did thousands before and after them. Their background had peculiarly fitted them for the climate and the difficulties they would experience on the Kansas plains. Their family social structure, too, fitted the needs of the agrarian economy of the vast acreage available to them on the plains of the central region

of the United States; their frugality and love of work fitted them for the challenges this new land would hurl in their face.

There was much and remains much in the characteristic of these people which deserves admiration and even envy. Their family loyalty was an important factor. While it may be defined as clannishness it was, nevertheless, a characteristic upon which success could be built in the face of overwhelming odds. The patriarchal system did much to preserve this strong family unit, often extending into the third and even fourth generation.

With this family pride there also came the social pressure of exemplary conduct. There was, and is today, minimal juvenile delinquency among these people. The very thought of bringing shame to the parents or grandparents acted as a powerful force in the individual's conduct. From this also stemmed the honesty for which these settlers were noted. Their word was as good as their bond, and mortgages were made, money loaned, and farms and animals sold with no need for legal documents.

Perhaps one of the most outstanding of the characteristics of these settlers and their descendants, even into the fourth and fifth generation, was their deep and abiding faith. There was never anything half-hearted about the performance of religious duties, nor was religion ever anything other than the most important factor in their lives. They lived and practiced their faith with a devotion that was marked and notable.

In this group of settlers we have America in microcosm. These people felt and knew the mid-20th century articulation of integration, of the ghetto, of discrimination during the first half century they lived in Kansas. Largely because of their clannishness they were slow to integrate. The language difficulties similarly were marked. Since the old people stuck to their native dialect with such tenacity, it was many years until the unmistakable brogue or accent disappeared. While they were an outgoing and friendly people, they also valued their isolation which had served them and their ancestors so well in the 100 years and more in Russia.

There was, almost from the start, a great joy in the freedom of the new country. While the departure from Russia was caused primarily by the military service law, there was no anti-militarism sentiment among the new Americans. As the authors relate the young men marched off to war without any hesitation. The freedom from military service their ancestors had sought was quickly forgotten. They fully appreciated the democracy of America and were quick to exercise their franchise. There was no hesitation to register and vote, and a tradition that it was

"sinful" not to vote holds true among their descendants to this day.

There was little pleasure, as we know it today, in these people's lives. Their lives consisted of work from dawn until dusk. The hard economic facts of life and the need for more and more hands on the farms interfered to a great degree in the education of the young. While in all the settlements schools were begun right from the start, for many formal education consisted of only a few years, just enough to learn to read and write. This had been the custom in Russia and the newcomers to America saw no good reason for departing from the ways of their ancestors.

Due to this lack of education their cultural interests were limited. There were no painters among them, no writers, no composers and no lecturers, although the native art of story telling had been developed to a fine degree. Contributing to this lack of cultural interests, of course, was their faith. With an austere Roman Catholicity many young people with talent were prevented from pursuing interests which would have led them "out into the world" which was pictured as sinful and which would place the souls of the young people in jeopardy. A particular incident of my own childhood illustrates this. In Munjor there was a girl from a musical family who held all the promise of becoming one of the finest singers in the world. She had a soprano voice that professors and visitors averred was the finest they had ever heard. It was upon the advice of the pastor that the girl was kept at home and not sent to school.

While there were other talents, these were seldom developed. There was a great deal of jealousy among individuals and families as well as between the various settlements. This kept the new settlers from becoming an effective political force. The majority of the newcomers embraced the Democratic party. The English and their descendants, as well as the majority of the "real" Germans, were Republicans. Despite the fact that from the early twenties the German-Russians had the largest percentage of the votes not a one of their descendants was elected mayor of Hays until the 1940's. Similarly, the county court house offices were held by non-Germans for the most part until the 30's and 40's with an occasional exception.

Just as the settlers were quick to master the farming techniques in the new country, so too, their descendants were quick to take advantage of the opportunities of the new land. Almost immediately some of these people went into business and into the professions. While the isolation, of which the authors

speak, lasted about one generation (30 years), once this isolation was broken the descendants ranged the remaining parts of the United States, and sought challenges even greater than those their ancestors had mastered on the Kansas sod.

In World War II a large number of the descendants of these people reached the highest ranks in the armed forces, the Navy, the Army, and the Marines. Many returned to Germany to fight the Wehrmacht, perhaps often on the same ground from whence their forebears had come 170 years earlier. Many still spoke or were able to understand German, but there was no longer any trace of German loyalty or sympathy. They were Americans and acted and fought that way.

While the authors' story may have special appeal to those who are descendants of the 1875-78 immigrants, I believe the story will also appeal to many others. It is a proud story, and as such, it merits attention. It is from this type of stock that America was built, and of this particular group's contribution we have every right to be especially proud.

Victor C. Leiker

## *Introduction*

The people whose story is told in this book migrated from Germany to Russia in the 1760's. To understand the causes of the migration one must know something about the conditions in both countries in the eighteenth century.

Germany at that time was a conglomeration of diverse sovereign principalities, kingdoms, archduchies, duchies, margraviates, dioceses, free cities — some 300 of them — and another 1500 or so imperial knights and other entities with some sovereign powers. Nominally, all of these were part of the Holy Roman Empire, of medieval origin, headed by an Emperor elected by the seven or eight most powerful princes, called Electors. In the course of time this position of honor had become hereditary in the House of Hapsburg, the rulers of Austria.

The powers of the emperor were almost a fiction. All the hundreds of princelings nominally subject to him did pretty well as they pleased. Their quarrels often led to wars against each other and occasionally even against the emperor himself. They imposed oppressive taxes on their subjects to keep up expensive royal courts, in which they and their courtiers lived in a grand style. Their peasants in the countryside and artisans in the towns generally lived in poverty. Economic and social conditions were deplorable.

As the eighteenth century advanced, Austria's leadership in the Empire was challenged more and more by a growing Prussia. In 1701 Frederick III, Elector of Brandenburg and Duke of Prussia, with the consent of the emperor, had changed his title to the more prestigious Frederick I, King of Prussia. His son, the parsimonious Frederick William I, who ruled from 1713 to 1740, strengthened Prussia by careful management of his economic resources and by building up an efficient army. The weapons forged by him were used by his son Frederick II, later the Great, to wrest territory and prestige from Austria.

In 1740 the Emperor Charles VI died, leaving as ruler in his Austrian dominions his daughter Maria Theresa. Taking advantage of the inexperienced ruler, who turned out to be a

more formidable opponent than he expected, Frederick of Prussia seized the Austrian province of Silesia, precipitating a war, commonly called the War of the Austrian Succession, which lasted till 1748. This became a general European war, in which other German states, as well as France and Great Britain, became involved. The war confirmed Prussia's possession of Silesia, but settled nothing else. It was but the prelude to another war. In 1756 the conflict was renewed in the much more destructive and more widespread Seven Years War, in which several nations came to Austria's aid and almost defeated the redoubtable Frederick. Among Austria's allies in this war was Russia, then for the first time actively interfering in the affairs of western Europe.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century Russia was still a primitive agricultural land, in which the vast majority of the population were ignorant, illiterate peasants, living in serfdom on the estates of an old nobility, who generally treated them like cattle. The throne just then, however, was occupied by a masterful, far-seeing ruler, Peter the Great, who was determined to change his backward land. He had visited western Europe and was enamored of the skills exhibited by the workers there. After his visit he invited a variety of tradesmen and technicians to Russia to teach these skills to his ignorant countrymen. He tried by cajolment and by force to prevail on his people to adopt the ways of western Europe, but encountered much passive resistance. To obtain a "window" to the west he conquered from Sweden the Baltic provinces of Ingria, Estonia and Livonia. There, on the coast of the Baltic, he built the new city of St. Petersburg (now Leningrad) to serve as the capital of his empire. To establish more personal contacts with the rulers of western Europe, he initiated intermarriage of Russian royalty with the princely houses of Germany; his son Alexis married a princess of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel; his daughter Anne, the Duke of Holstein. All of Peter's efforts, however, had little permanent effect. When he died in 1725, Russia was essentially unchanged.

Peter's immediate successors had neither the foresight nor the interest or ability to continue to pursue the progressive policies that he had initiated. The most able of them was the phlegmatic Empress Elizabeth, daughter of Peter but lacking his initiative and drive, who ruled from 1741 to 1762. She renewed contacts with the west. Soon after her accession, because she was childless, she brought to Russia from the Duchy of Holstein her nephew Peter, son of her sister Anne, to be heir to the

throne. In 1744 she found a wife for him in Germany in the person of Sophia Augusta Frederica, a princess of Anhalt-Zerbst, who was re-named Catherine at her baptism into the Orthodox Church, soon after her arrival in Russia. When Elizabeth died in 1762, Peter ascended the throne as Peter III, but within a few months he was dethroned by his wife, who became Catherine II, later called the Great.

The Empress Elizabeth in her last years had initiated a policy of Russian involvement in the affairs of western Europe, by coming to the aid of Austria against Prussia in the Seven Years War. When she died in 1762, one of the first actions of her nephew, Peter III, a fervent admirer of Frederick the Great, was to withdraw Russian troops from the war, saving Frederick from defeat, which then appeared imminent. By the following year, Frederick's other enemies were also tired of the war and signed peace treaties which effectively made Prussia a leading power in western Europe.

The wars of Frederick the Great, in which most other German states were involved directly or indirectly, left the whole of Germany in a depressed state. Agriculture, industry and trade had been severely disrupted by the long years of war, causing widespread unemployment and much extreme poverty. In Prussia itself Frederick took active measures to heal the wounds of war and to re-invigorate economic life. Elsewhere little was done to restore a normal life. Particularly neglectful were the rulers of the little principalities in southwest Germany. It was from this area mainly that emigrants went to Russia in the years immediately after the end of the Seven Years War.

Adam Giesinger