



AHSGR 56TH ANNUAL CONVENTION

***Unsere Leute,
Unsere Heimat***

OUR PEOPLE, OUR HOME

CONVENTION REGISTRATION BOOKLET

HAYS, KANSAS AUG 5-7, 2026

Hilton Garden Inn

221 W 43rd St, Hays, KS

WEDNESDAY SPEAKERS

Jennifer Garza

10 -11 am

The Tsar Liberator? How Alexander II of Russia's policies determined the future of both the Russian and American Empires

When Alexander II (1818-1881) became emperor in 1855, he inherited an empire humiliated by the recent loss in the Crimean War. He recognized that Russia had to modernize quickly in order to keep up with the rest of Europe. He made numerous changes to Russia's political, military, and economic systems, freeing the serfs and reorganizing Russia's local political system. He earned the nickname "Tsar Liberator" for freeing the serfs, but in other ways, he was repressive. Many of his policies drove German and other non-Russian subjects out of Russia in search of better lives elsewhere. This presentation will focus on Alexander's policies and emphasize their effect on many Germans' decision to leave Russia for the United States and beyond.

Sandra Wagner

1:30-2:15 pm

Chemistry of Sauerkraut

Sauerkraut, or "sour cabbage" in German, has a long history dating back over 2,000 years. While it's closely associated with German cuisine, its origins actually lie in China, where fermented cabbage dishes were prepared as early as 220 BCE. The highly nutritious and portable food traveled with explorers to Europe, where it gained popularity in Germany and other Eastern European countries. Rich in probiotics, vitamins, fiber, and antioxidants, this tangy food was recognized as essential for good health. German-Russian settlers continued preparing sauerkraut from their homeland into the remote wilds of Russia, making it a crucial supplement to their often-limited diets. This presentation will discuss the various physical and chemical processes that turn cabbage into sauerkraut.

Jonas Löffler

2:30-2:45 pm

German Cultural Heritage in the United States: Volga Germans, Black Sea Germans, and Mennonites

The presentation introduces a project by Stiftung Verbundenheit (Germany), which includes the publication of a book and the creation of a traveling exhibition. The project is implemented in cooperation with the Bayerisches Kulturzentrum der Deutschen aus Russland (Germany) and AHSGR and is aimed at documenting, preserving, and presenting the cultural heritage of Germans from Russia in the United States. The publication and the exhibition are produced in German and English and are intended for a broad international audience.

The publication provides a brief overview of the formation of three groups of Germans from Russia in the United States. Special attention is given to institutions engaged in preserving cultural heritage: the publication presents more than 50 organizations, museums, research centers, and archives. The book is edited by Dr. Olga Litzenger with contributions from Dr. Michael Brown, Wayne Garman, and Dr. Eric J. Schmaltz.

WEDNESDAY SPEAKERS

Joan & Lisa Mueller

2:45-3:30 pm

A Family's Journey from Ukraine, Russia to the Dakota Territory through a child's eye!

In 1874, Joan and Lisa Mueller's great-great-grandfather, Christian Mueller, immigrated from Volhynia to the Dakota Territory. The story of Mennonite immigration has shaped their family's history. They will share their research process and how they wove it into a narrative that tells the journey through a child's eyes.

In 1873, Little Katy's uncle, Andreas Schrag, was selected as one of twelve scouts from Mennonite villages in Volynia. In May 1874, Katy's family and three Waldner families left their villages, becoming the 'Dakota 11,' the first group to emigrate. We will discuss the family's struggles as they crossed Europe, sailed the Atlantic, and traveled from New York to Yankton on May 24, 1874.

Ann Marie Stewart

3:45 - 4:30 pm

The Remnants: Finding Heimat

The word heimat is precious to German speakers. The English definition cannot fully capture what it means: a place you can call home; it includes a sense of belonging, acceptance, safety, and connection to the homeland.

When I was in third grade, my grandfather Nikolai Siemens told me a strange story about being imprisoned in Russia, escaping, and leaving behind his firstborn, Kolja. I was shocked. I didn't want to be Russian. And what did he do to be jailed? Worse yet, how could he leave a child behind? While in college, my father paid me to interview, research, and write the story about my German Mennonite grandparents. The book *The Remnants* is complete and will be published in 2026.

THURSDAY SPEAKERS

Felix Reifer

9 -9:45 am

Russia's revisionist foreign policy and the flawed diaspora discourse in Germany

This presentation explores the contemporary situation of Germans from Russia who migrated to Germany under the Aussiedler and Spätaussiedler programs. While they share ancestry with the Germans from Russia who settled in North America, their Soviet and post-Soviet experience has unfolded within an entirely different political and societal framework. The presentation examines the Kremlin's construction of a unified "Russian-speaking diaspora" and its appropriation of these communities within the ideology of the Russkiy Mir ("Russian World"). This narrative oversimplifies multiple migration trajectories and obscures the history of ethnic German repatriates (Russlanddeutsche). Recent Russian state strategies seek to combine Russophone communities under a single diasporic identity aligned with Moscow's revisionist objectives. Through historical, political, and demographic analysis, it advocates for a differentiated understanding of the Russlanddeutsche within the broader landscape of post-Soviet migration to Germany.

Arailym Mussagaliyeva & Roza Mussabekova

10 -10:45 am

Germans of Kazakhstan in 1950-1970: the use of special settlers in the Kazakh virgin lands, repression against religion, problems of German language development.

An important aspect in the study of Germans is their labor contribution to the development of the economy of Northern Kazakhstan. The fate of the Germans was influenced by the large-scale agricultural project known as the "Virgin Lands". The Soviet authorities intended to use cheap labor to develop virgin and fallow lands. Their attention was directed to the deported people who were well-versed in agriculture. These were primarily Germans. Thus, the Germans were not released from special settlement, and after the lifting of administrative supervision, they were not returned to the Volga region.

The Virgin Lands project brought to Kazakhstan not only a large influx of people from all over the Soviet Union, but also religious movements. Northern Kazakhstan was filled with religious figures as never before. This was especially common among the Germans of the republic. Religion became a kind of protest against Soviet power. The discontent of these people, whose rights were violated, manifested itself in the expression of their religious views. Among the Germans, representatives of such religious movements as Lutherans, Mennonites, and Evangelical Baptists stood out. Despite the state's repressive policies, Germans performed religious rites and prayers and observed religious holidays.

Tatiana Zabolotneva

11 -11:30 am

Our People, Our Home: Exploring My German Russian Heritage in Today's Volga Region

Tatiana Zabolotneva of Saratov, Russia shares her journey of discovering her Volga German heritage as a young woman with ancestral roots in the former Frank Kanton of today's Volgograd region. She reflects on growing up within a Volga German family and community, exploring how traditions continue to thrive—through food preparation, communal gardening and harvest, holiday customs, and storytelling—even as her family now spans two countries, Germany and Russia. Tatiana's presentation offers a vivid, personal perspective on how heritage is actively lived and preserved, showing the enduring connection between "our people" and "our home" across generations and borders.

THURSDAY SPEAKERS

Brent Mai

1:30-2:15 pm

Napoleonic Soldiers Join the Volga Germans

In 1814, approximately 180 soldiers that had been captured by the Russians during Napoleon's invasion were settled among the German colonies along the Russian Volga River. These former soldiers joined a very vibrant and unique Volga German culture. Descendants of many of these soldiers later migrated to the Plains of Kansas. This presentation will delve into this topic with a discussion about who these soldiers were and how they came to be a part of the Volga German diaspora.

TBA

2:30-3:15 pm

TBA

Bridget Crosby

3:15 -4:30 am

Creative Roots: Carrying Forward Volga German Art, Music, and Writing

This session offers a creative and interactive complement to traditional historical and genealogical presentations. As an artist, photographer, and award-winning writer and poet, I explore how Volga German artistic traditions, such as music, poetry, storytelling, and visual expression, have been carried across generations and continue to thrive today. The presentation blends personal family writings, original poetry and photography, and a kurzes Mitmachprojekt with a short journal and sketch activity. This approach encourages participants to connect personally with heritage while offering practical ways to engage younger generations and sustain cultural traditions. Attendees will leave inspired, with tangible ideas for preserving and sharing the stories, art, and creativity of our people and our land.

FRIDAY SPEAKERS

Russ Gunther

9 -9:45 am

First Voyage of the Scouts to America, the Volga Scout Explorers of 1874

Description to come

Wayne Garman

10 -10:45 am

The Moses of the Mennonites: Carl Bernhard Schmidt and German Mennonite Immigration to Kansas in the 1870s

“The 1870s were a very turbulent time for our German ancestors living in the Russian Empire. Czar Alexander II introduced many reforms, including the abolition of serfdom. However, he also ended the Codex of the Colonists, abolishing privileges & rights promised a century earlier to German immigrants. At the same time in the New World, countries were anxious to attract immigrants to develop their vast plains into farmlands.

In the US, there was rivalry among states over immigration, such as between Kansas and Nebraska, as well as the Dakota Territory. Railroad agents played a major role. The railroads had been granted land by the government as payment for constructing new rail lines. They were anxious to sell this land to immigrants. This presentation will center on the role of one of the railway immigration agents, Carl Bernhard Schmidt. Working for the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe railroad, Schmidt was instrumental in the immigration of an estimated 5,000 German Mennonites from Russia to Kansas during the 1870s. His efforts earned him the nickname of the “Moses of Mennonites”.”

Kim Phillips

11 -11:45 am

Germans from Russia: Food and Culinary Traditions

From apples to wheat, this presentation will explore German-Russian food traditions, production methods and explain how food was tied to their culture. Find out how Germans from Russia were instrumental in bringing food crops to the United States and how this shaped our modern-day agriculture. Learn about recipes that have been passed down through generations and see how dishes varied by region, religion and family tradition.

Neil Unrein

1 -1:45 pm

Quarry To Glory / Unser Luete 150

In this presentation of Quarry to Glory, it is our goal to showcase the communities of Ellis County Kansas founded by Volga German wheat farmers and their discovery and use of post rock limestone in a chronological order beginning in 1876 up to the Modern Era designation of 1945. The presentation covers in depth the individuals, events, customs and traditions that shaped Ellis County, Kansas into The German Capitol of Kansas.

FRIDAY SPEAKERS

John Schukman

2 -2:45 pm

The history and geography of our Ellis County Kansas German Russian Families and their land plats

With the theme “Our People, Our Home,” I share the ancestry of three of my family’s journeys from Russia to Kansas. My presentation starts with the photo announcement for this convention with my great-grandfather and his sons working the fields in Ellis County. I will show on vintage 1905 and 1922 plat maps where our families established their farms in villages surrounding Hays, as well as more photos of other family members and landscapes. These village origins go back to similar Russian place names like Katharinenstadt, Ober-Monjour, Liebental, Herzog, Wittman, and Schoenchen. This talk will be interactive, exploring shared experiences and relationships with the audience and demonstrating these community connections to the broader audience.

Waldemar Masson

3 -3:45 pm

A Torn Heart – An Alien Between Two Worlds?

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, around 1.5 to 2 million Germans from Russia arrived in Germany. My own family returned to our historical homeland from Kazakhstan in 1992. What does it mean to grow up in Germany as the child of a German from Russia family? The Germans from Russia faced their degrees not being recognized, having to start over professionally, and encountered prejudice on a daily basis. Caught between external labels and personal identity, many children of Germans from Russia families grow up feeling like “aliens” between two worlds. These aspects are what I would like to explore through the lens of my own family’s story.

Jerry Braun

4 -4:45 pm

Across the Ocean in Ink: Reimagining a Volga German Family Through Letters

“This presentation introduces the Journey to America / Letters from Russia project, a multi-year creative and historical endeavor based on my own Braun family lineage. The series centers on imagined letters between my ancestor Joseph Braun, a Volga German settler in Herzog, Kansas (1876), and his daughter Anna Spies, who remained in Liebental, Russia. Rooted in documented genealogy, colony history, migration records, and Catholic devotional life, the letters reconstruct a deeply personal narrative within a carefully researched historical framework.

The session explores the research process behind the letters and the balance between historical fiction and archival integrity. It examines themes of separation, faith, land, and identity, demonstrating how creative storytelling can engage both descendants and new generations in preserving Volga German heritage. Participants will view selected artwork from the project and hear excerpts from the letters. This presentation illustrates how historical imagination, when grounded in careful research, can preserve cultural memory and make Volga German history accessible, personal, and enduring.”

MEET THE SPEAKERS



Jerry Braun

Jerry Braun is an educator, genealogical researcher, and descendant of the Volga German families of Katherinenstadt, Herzog, and Liebental. A life member of AHSGR since age 18, he previously served as Treasurer of the Sunflower Chapter of AHSGR in Hays and currently serves as Treasurer and past Board Trustee of the Ellis County Historical Society. He is also a member of the Sesquicentennial Committee commemorating the 150th anniversary of the Volga Germans' arrival in Ellis County.



Bridgette Crosby

Bridgette Crosby is an award-winning writer, poet, photographer, and family historian whose work explores Volga German heritage through storytelling and the creative arts. A descendant of Volga German families who helped found the town of Hays, Kansas, she draws inspiration from family writings, photographs, and lived traditions passed down through generations. Her work centers on carrying cultural memory forward through poetry, visual storytelling, and community engagement. Bridgette is active with the Arizona Sun Chapter of AHSGR and is passionate about helping others connect with their heritage through creativity, reflection, and shared stories.



Wayne Garman

Wayne Garman is a descendant of Germans from Russia. His paternal ancestors came from the Black Sea Kutschurgan region, from the villages of Elsass & Strassburg. His maternal ancestors were Mennonite and immigrated from the Chortitza colony in central Ukraine. Wayne grew up on a farm near the town of Allan, Saskatchewan, Canada, a predominantly Germans from Russia community. He has lived and worked in the US for over 30 years.

Upon semi-retirement, Wayne completed a Master's degree in History from Texas State University. Historical research and writing now make up his retirement career. He has presented at a number of Germans from Russia conventions, as well as written articles for Germans from Russia journals. He is currently president of the Arizona Sun Chapter of Germans from Russia in Phoenix, AZ, and a board member of AHSGR.



Jennifer Garza

Dr. Jennifer Garza is the archival research coordinator at AHSGR. She holds a Ph.D in Russian history from Emory University, and is the author of two books: "Keeping the Faith: Russian Orthodox Monasticism in the Soviet Union, 1917-1939" (as Jennifer Wynot), Texas A&M University Press, 2004, and The Nebraska Ordnance Plant (with Erin Hauser), Images of America, 2024. She lives in Lincoln, NE, with her husband and two children.

MEET THE SPEAKERS



Russ Gunther

Russ is a Brand Ambassador volunteer and Volga German sub-project coordinator of WikiTree's growing Germans from Russia project covering all Germans from Russia populations and colony villages. Russ studied Business and minored in German at Iowa State University, including a study abroad summer in Bregenz, Austria. Join Russ to explore one of the most exciting free resources for family connections and research that he used to root his family tree back to the 1600s in Germany. Russ is also the 3rd great-grandson of the 1874 scout explorer Anton Wasinger of Schönchen and a grand-nephew of scout explorer Peter Leiker of Obermonjou.



Jonas Löffler

Jonas is a team Leader & Project Coordinator for the German-Latin American Citizen Diplomacy Project commissioned by the German State. He received a B.A. in Latin American Studies at the Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt and an M.A. in Public Relations & Corporate Communications at the Hochschule Ansbach - University of Applied Sciences.



Brent Mai

Dr. Brent Mai currently serves as the Dean of Libraries at Wichita State University. He is also the director of the Volga German Institute (VolgaGermanInstitute.org). He has spoken worldwide about the history and culture of the Volga Germans. Dr. Mai has also written extensively about the history and culture of Volga Germans, authoring numerous books and articles for AHSGR and translating hundreds of Russian documents that are used by Volga German researchers around the world. Dr. Mai holds degrees from Bethany College (Kansas), George Washington University, the University of Texas at Austin, and Vanderbilt University. Dr. Mai has been a Life Member of AHSGR since 1982.

MEET THE SPEAKERS

Waldemar Masson

Waldemar Masson is an aspiring author, visual artist, and independent researcher whose work explores history, identity, and memory within the Germans from Russia diaspora. He was born into a family of Volga German, Black Sea German, and Mennonite heritage, and his parents immigrated from Kazakhstan to Germany as displaced persons in 1992. Masson developed an early interest in genealogy, beginning family history research at age 14 and building a database documenting roughly 18,000 individuals. He earned a Bachelor of Arts in Pedagogy and Art History from Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg and a Master of Arts in Art History with a focus on the global contexts of Europe and the Americas from Freie Universität Berlin. In 2023, he contributed to the project “Erinnerungsnaht,” which examined the 1941 deportation of Germans from Russia.



Joan & Lisa Mueller

Joan and Lisa are the authors of the Rose Valley book series, based on their Mennonite family’s journey from the Volhynia region in Russia to the Dakota Territory in 1874. They grew up on Rose Valley Farm in Turner County, South Dakota, the same farm their family homesteaded. They grew up hearing stories of their ancestors from their father, Bruce, and his love of history spilled over into their lives. They are currently working on the third book in the Rose Valley Book Series. Joan teaches 8th-grade reading at West Central Middle School in Hartford, SD. She has a master’s degree in reading and is passionate about instilling the love of reading in her students each school year. She always has a book in her hand or in her bag. Lisa loves genealogy and has traced both sides of her family back to the 1400s and 1500s. She leads the research for this book series. Lisa is a Certified Personal Trainer and runs the Rock Steady Boxing program for people with Parkinson’s in Sioux Falls, SD.



Roza Mussabekova

Roza Mussabekova has a PhD in Philology and is an Associate Professor at the Eurasian National University in Astana, Kazakhstan. She has an active research partnership with Arailym Mussagaliyeva. Her research focuses on the history of Germans in Russia, with a particular emphasis on their lives, including their villages and work lives in Northern Kazakhstan.



Arailym Mussagaliyeva

Arailym Mussagaliyeva holds a Doctor of Sciences degree in History. She is a professor at the Eurasian National University in Astana, Kazakhstan. Her research focuses on the history of the German population in Kazakhstan. She uses both regional and national archives in Kazakhstan for her research and has published many articles on German Russians in Kazakhstan, including two in the AHSGR journal.

MEET THE SPEAKERS



Kim Phillips

Kim Phillips is a writer and history buff who grew up in western Kansas aware of her German-Russian heritage. She learned to cook Volga German dishes from her grandmother and great-grandmother. Kim and her husband Mark ran a country bed and breakfast in central Missouri where they offered farm-to-table dishes sourcing the majority of food from local farms. She now lives in Leawood, Kansas where she researches and practices traditional recipes.



Felix Reifer

“Dr Felix Riefer is a political scientist specializing in Eastern European studies and international relations. He earned his doctorate from the University of Cologne in 2020 and is currently working on his second book at the University of Freiburg. His research focuses on Russian foreign policy, the interplay between domestic and international politics, the roles of elites and institutions, and broader political and social developments in Eastern Europe. In addition, he examines Russia’s transnational anti-liberal strategies targeting Russian-speaking communities in Germany and beyond, with particular attention to diaspora politics, identity construction, and the diffusion of illiberal norms.

Dr. Riefer was involved in curating the two German Federal Conferences on Germans from Russia, held in Berlin (2017) and Cologne (2018) by the Federal Agency for Civic Education (bpb), which explored the relations between Germans from Russia and Russian-speaking communities in Germany. “



John Schukman

Raised in Ellis County from a young age and surrounded by family relatives of German-Russian origin, John Schukman shares his heritage, photos, and remembrances. He graduated from Fort Hays State University with a degree in Wildlife Ecology. John earned his way through college by working on construction projects and various farming jobs in Ellis County. After a short period of teaching, he settled into a career in construction. Using his college degree later in his career, he participates in wildlife and bird surveys for wind energy companies and government agencies. He married Linda Harsh, has 2 girls, and four grandchildren.



Ann Marie Stewart

ANN MARIE STEWART is the Christy Award® winning author of STARS IN THE GRASS. As a teacher, singer, actress, and filmmaker, Ann has a unique perspective and is prepared to tell and sell a story. Ann originated AMG’s Preparing My Heart series and writes the column “Ann’s Lovin’ Ewe” for The Country Register. Her second novel, OUT OF THE WATER, won a Bronze IP and was a finalist for the National Indie and Chanticleer Awards. While in her teens, Ann’s dad challenged her to write about her mom’s parents, who escaped from Stalin’s Russia of 1929, leaving behind their three-year-old son. Now, after forty years, Ann Marie looks to publish THE REMNANTS. Though currently an East Coast girl living on a sheep farm in Virginia, Ann Marie spent the first half of her life in West Coast Washington.

MEET THE SPEAKERS



Neil Unrein

Neil Unrein was born in 1956 in Denver, Colorado, the son of Elmer and Rosaline (Jacobs) Unrein. His parents had moved from Ellis County to Denver shortly before his birth. Summer vacations as a child first exposed Neil to post rock limestone on his grandparents' farm three miles west of Pfeifer, Kansas. As a child, he was influenced by his grandfather's stone fence posts, limestone chicken troughs, and the stone buildings and structures on the family farm. Neil chose to return to Ellis County in 1996 with his wife, Susan. In 2007, they moved from Victoria to Gorham, Kansas, where Neil is currently serving his third term as Mayor and Susan serves on the City Council. In his retirement, Neil remains committed to his lifelong passion for studying the historical, ancestral, and cultural traditions of the Volga Germans. Neil continues to work in limestone bracking and carving and serves on the board of the Kansas Post Rock Limestone Coalition. Neil actively promotes post rock tourism through his Quarry to Glory bus tours, oral presentations, and slide shows.

Sandra Wagner

Sandra Wagner is a proud Volga German from Russia, having grown up near the large Volga-German settlements around Wellington, Colorado. With historical villages in Grimm, Donhöf, Pobochnaya, and Kutter, Sandra is a Lifetime member of AHSGR and has served on the Board of Directors since 2023. Her professional career as a chemist at Los Alamos National Laboratory was followed by a stint as an Adjunct Professor of Chemistry at Adams State University in the San Luis Valley of southern Colorado. An accomplished speaker and writer, she has completed four area history books and serves on various boards and committees. She's a former skilled woman of the village and a veteran of making hundreds of gallons of home-made sauerkraut. This was a family affair: Dad grew the cabbage, Grandma supervised the process, and Mom monitored the fermentation and canned the successful results to be enjoyed over the winter.



Tatiana Zabolotneva

Tatiana Zabolotneva grew up in the village of Frank, Russia, and now resides in Saratov. From an early age, her mother, Olga Zabolotneva (née Weingardt), nurtured her interest in local German Russian history, helping her explore the traditions and stories of their community. Tatiana's family roots trace to the Volga German villages of Rothammel (Weingardt/Weingart, Appelhans) and Seewald (Krämer). Through family life and personal experience, she has witnessed how cultural traditions—such as food preparation, communal harvests, holiday customs, and intergenerational storytelling—continue to thrive in the Volga region today. Tatiana graduated from Saratov State Technical University with a Bachelor's degree in Linguistics, a field she chose in part under the influence of her international family. Tatiana is passionate about sharing these living aspects of Volga German heritage with wider audiences.