The Volga Flows Forever ~ Book Two

The Volga Germans

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The Volga Germans

Taming Wild Nature

The steppe is like an ocean, with waves of windswept grasses and islands of trees. As a small boat vanishes in the rollers of the sea, the horseman disappears among the chest-high silver green of the steppe. That is how the German settlers perceived the land they’d come to conquer. With food their energy returned. An eagerness to test their bodies against this solemn, secretive earth sent them into the field.

“It’s virgin soil,” said Martin, when they first went out to work their allotment. “The grassroots will be strong and welded together, and we will have to pull the mat to bit by bit.”

They staked out their land and fenced off pastures, because Martin realized that, without animals for food and pulling plows, they’d be forever hungry. So before building a proper house that would keep them warm, they built stables, a sty and a coup for the animals. They’d been told that some years the wolves were a ferocious plague and that the animals needed solid buildings, if they were to survive.

Christoph now saw the wisdom in his father’s choice of the site. The trees of the hillsides, together with the scarce lumber brought from Saratov, provided the building materials. When this task was completed, the men of the tiny commune, accompanied by Herr Reis and other officials, descended upon a Russian village, where Assessor Reis helped them with the purchase of stock.

Martin had a small sum of money hidden away for emergencies, which he wanted to keep. Therefore, the animals and the seed he needed for the farm were bought on a loan from the government. The other men purchased on the same terms. Herr Reis paid for everything, and they signed a contract that spelled out the terms of their loans.

It was reassuring for them to have, once more, a few hens and a noisy rooster in their coup, two young porkers in the sty, a milk cow and a plow horse in the stable. The one item a farmer cannot do without, a plow, they’d not been able to bring with them. The plow, the sokha, Martin had been given in Saratov, could not be assembled.

Instead, Martin had purchased in the Russian village an awkward, primitive wooden hook plow. These implements of the Russian villages
were fashioned from two likely strong branches, one forming the beam, the other the handle and sole, held together by a lashing of leather thongs or a crude metal pin. The sole, shaped to a point, was the share that tore the soil. Christoph regarded the primitive thing with disdain. Poor as they were in Germany, they had plowed with a shiny iron share. But this was a different world.

They tore the sod off the soil. Then they tilled and raked the fertile loam deposited here by ancient floods of the River Don. Bent over the virgin ground, hacking and pulling up clumps of weedy grasses from the soil, Christoph’s mind wandered, as the clouds drifted above in the clear May sky. The soil was loath to release her legitimate children, loath to offer her breast to a strange brood. Christoph felt as if he was pulling clumps of hair from an unyielding scalp.

Earlier, right after sun and wind had dried the thawed ground, they had burned off last year’s old, dry growth, with the fire softening the grip of the roots. But now it was too late to use controlled burning as help with the wretched task, as a fire would have raced everywhere, driven by the wind.

Daydreaming, Christoph pretended that his back did not hurt, that his hands had not blistered. The moment he slowed his steady pace Martin called, reminding him that without soil for the seeds, “We will be hungry in the winter!” So, heeding this, he settled back into the rhythm of hack and pull, hack and pull.

At night, on his mattress – a coarse burlap sack stuffed with dry grass – he nodded in the rhythm of hack and pull.

With the sod torn from the soil, his father then seeded the prepared ground with wheat, barley, and rye, while Christoph followed him with the horse, pulling a roller they had constructed from an empty barrel filled with sand. From morning till night they slaved, hastily downing the food a neighbor woman prepared for them. They rested only on Sundays during the time when their small, deeply connected group held their Sunday service.

While they planted their fields, nature lulled them into believing that all was well, by alternating mild, sunny days with gentle, warm rains. They would come to find out the truth about the wicked, unpredictable climate much later. For now, they accepted the perfect conditions with thankful delight, watching their grains sprout and grow with phenomenal speed. They had also planted a garden and fenced it against loose pigs and cows. It contained nothing fancy, just cabbage, potatoes, lettuce, beans, onions, and carrots. Herr Reis had brought them the potatoes, already well known and liked in Germany, but disdained by the Russians, although the Tsarina
advocated for the tubers' usefulness. The thought of vegetables, especially
greens, spurned them on to greater exertions. Their bleeding gums itched
from want of vitamins, and so did their skin.

In turn, the neighbors built their houses, helping each other. This
time they built with real timber, not branches, albeit with clay floors and
clay chinked walls, and roofs covered by carefully placed reed-bundles at­
tached in rows to the center beam. Each of their houses measured sev­
eteen feet wide and twenty-two feet long, with a seven-foot ceiling, except
for Martin's house. He had felt claustrophobic in the dugout house and
insisted on an eight-foot ceiling. The kitchen was separated from their
main sleeping and eating area by a partition.

They had learned their first winter's lesson well, and every house was
outfitted with a proper stove, its parts delivered via the river and assembled
in the houses. Remembering the words of Assessor Reis about wolves, they
surrounded the house and the stalls with a six-foot high fence at the end
of the harvest. They cut young trees, sharpening the upper end to a fine
point, so that a high-jumping animal would impale itself.

Summer had been mostly benign, except for a spell in August, when
man and beast suffered from the searing heat. But overall, the settlers by
the Karamysh were fortunate, for the site contained a natural spring, flow­
ing from the hillside. Its small stream, running toward the river, provided
clean water for man and beast until well into August, when most of their
gardens had finished growing.

Exploring the New Land

Thinking back to these days, it seemed to Christoph that during
these years he was always hungry, forever tired, too worn to do anything
but work, and work more. At least they had enough food now, so that
when he could find time to eat, he would sling down, like a hungry dog,
large amounts of whatever was available, and wash it down with large
drafts of milk.

On Sunday afternoons, when his father gave him a few hours off to
sleep or walk, he had done a little exploring of the area. Those were pre-
cious hours before they had to feed the animals again for the night and milk the cow. During these explorations he once came face to face with a wolf, a curious, good-looking, gray-brown animal with a few black markings in its shiny coat. At first the creature had shown him its teeth in a grimace of threat, growling low in its throat, but it contained its aggression when Christoph quietly stood his ground.

For a few minutes man and beast assessed each other, then the wolf melted into the tall grass and was gone. “I have no doubt,” reported Christoph to Martin later, “that three or four of them can take down a weaponless man. Perhaps we have to make it a habit to carry a stout stick when we move about.” However, during the months when wild game was abundant, the wolves were never a problem.

On his excursions Christoph had seen plenty of deer and shy antelopes, animals he could never surprise to see close up. In the wooded copses he found squirrels, foxes, a profusion of mink that lived upon the multitudes of mice and other burrowers that the steppe produced so richly. He almost stepped on a Kreuzotter, an adder also commonly found in Germany. There were many birds around that looked very familiar, much like the species from home, which, strangely, comforted Christoph who was homesick all the time.

And then the day came when his father looked at him with great emotion one evening and said: “We have enough now. I’ve sent for them.”

On this memorable day his father sat with him after dinner at their substantive kitchen table, fashioned from rough timber. From the board on the wall Martin took two heavy green glasses with pewter tops and handles and filled them from an earthen crock with rich, dark beer.

“Drink,” he said, “you are a man now. You’ve worked like a man and stood the hardship like a man, uncomplaining, stoic. So drink. It will be easier now. We’ve survived the worst.”

He ran his hand over the unlovely wood and said: “Now I will have to plane and sand this top until it is smooth. Your mother would have no other.”

With his father’s letters home began the saga of nine hundred and fifty-seven people. All came from Hessen, led by recruiters who immigrated with them. Unlike the members of the resident families, the new recruits were led across the rough, virgin steppe in a cumbersome wagon train. This first day of August would be a historical day for the new village; for the Meininger family it was the day of reunification.

Until the very moment Christoph saw the ship, he had banished all longing for his mother’s presence, the longing for her soft touch, her
melodious voice, the feeling of warmth in the house and the smell of her food. Searching the ship with his eyes for every detail, the longing returned with unnerving vehemence. His knees felt too weak to carry his body. For a moment he leaned against his father, who stood unmovable like a tree, bent perhaps, but solid.

As Christoph looked about, he acknowledged that three years in Russia by the very first colonists had not greatly enlarged the two small settlements. Children were seldom born to women suffering from hard physical labor and deprivations. It was as if the body decided to wait for a more advantageous time to make life. Christoph knew about such things by now. He knew that during years of dearth sheep and cattle had fewer offspring, and that deer killed the weaker of twins in a drought year by stomping it to death with sharp hooves.

He was nineteen and thought about women all the time. Of all the things he had to leave behind when they came here, he most missed girls and boys his own age. Among the young couples he and Martin often stood out oddly alone, and as he saw the ship approaching, he prayed fervently that among the new arrivals might be a girl his own age, a pretty girl, warm and friendly, whom he could marry.

At first, for perhaps the first two years, they had considered leaving the hellhole by the Volga. They had talked about the effort needed to extricate themselves from Russia and discovered that this was impossible. The Empress had extended her help to immigrants to enter the realm but, like a spider closing the trap, made it impossible for them to leave the web. There was no escaping their new reality: relatives could join them and be provided for, but they could never go back again. The cost of leaving was exorbitant.

In later years, when Germans settled the other, the meadow side of the Volga in Kazakhstan, conditions were even worse. Life for these people was excruciatingly painful, horrid even, so that some parties tried to flee. To escape and migrate back to the old homeland was foremost on their minds. How miserably they failed! Before they ever left the realm of Kazakhstan, they were caught by bands of murderers and thieves, robbed and killed. And yet, their fate never became known, and so the myth that escape was possible, persisted.

However, Christoph and Martin had soberly deduced that their only chance of survival lay at the bosom of the Volga. Here lay their destiny, whatever trials fate would put upon them.

At last the boat had come close enough. Excitement reached a fevered pitch. Christoph shouted with joy, "Father, Father! I can see Mother. She is the one waving the white kerchief, and beside her is Annelis! Oh,
look how tall she's grown.” He forgot his newfound dignity and jumped, shouting and waving up and down, with the same expression of unstinting love and delight a puppy bestows upon a beloved owner.

A sideways glance at his father stopped his exuberance. Martin was crying unashamedly. Apparently the last four years had been as hard on him as on his son, although they had never talked about their pains. He grasped his father’s hand, “Ah Father, you good man. You never showed me a weak moment, never a doubt, never despair, just so I would not weaken, but be a man.” His grip was returned with all the strength Martin could muster, and suddenly they laughed aloud.

“It’s all better now. They have come, and we can face together whatever may happen.” Martin’s smile, as he looked at his son, illuminated his face.

Finally, finally the boat was tied to the much-improved landing site, one of last year’s projects undertaken by the few colonists. They had received good timber for this work from Saratov, free from the government. For, besides improving their accessibility, it also improved commerce, and the Empress was forever looking to improve trade.

The passengers, long confined to the boat, streamed onto the shore with renewed vigor. They carried their most important, precious belongings in their hands, and in packs slung over their backs. The few passengers fortunate enough to be met by family members were anxiously trying to reach them. Their eyes were filled with longing and the deep pain of separation. Christoph’s mother, unable to wait any longer, resorted to gentle pushing, moving those blocking her passage out of her way. Perceiving her urgency, they stepped aside and let her be.

Christoph, quicker than his father, crushed his mother to his chest. Ute cried, repeating again and again, “My boy, my Christoph! Look how you have grown. I almost did not recognize you waving on the shore.” Crying profusely she covered him with kisses. Christoph, overwhelmed by his feelings, just muttered, “Mutter, ach Mutter.”

Having poured love over her boy, being satisfied that he was healthy and well, Ute turned to her husband. Their greeting was much more reserved, for a display of marital love in public was deeply frowned upon. Barely had his mother turned from Christoph when his grandmother took hold of him.

“Blessed day, blessed day,” she cried, as tears trickled over her wrinkled apple cheeks, “God allowed me to see you once more. He must be praised!” His grandfather, unnerved by this emotional display, patted Christoph’s back with manly affirmation, chiming into the chorus, “Fine tall man you turned into.”
Standing back, bashful and feeling left out, Annelis observed her family’s reunion. During the years of separation she had blossomed into a golden flower, with wheat-blond hair plaited in a crown around her head. Her cornflower blue eyes observed all – her family, the unfamiliar, empty scenery, the bustle of the crew mingling with settlers unloading the boat, and the astonished looks of the new arrivals upon beholding the few miserable huts that appeared lost in the grand, empty space.

Suddenly she found herself in her brother’s strong embrace, “As always, you are standing about dreaming, lamb,” he teased, using her old, familiar nickname. “Come, let me look at you,” he commanded.

“You have grown a bit since I last saw you. You were the size of a rabbit then,” he joshed, stifling the emotion that threatened to cloud his eyes. He fought to keep the tears at bay, tears that his sister, now that he held her close, shed so easily.

For a moment in time the little group was like an island in a lake, an entity unto itself, uncaring of that which floated by. Then, as if struck by a thunderbolt, they remembered that their possessions were still on the boat. Martin took charge, depositing the women with their few personal items in the wagon that was to carry them home. Anticipating the large transportation needs of the arriving group, every cart had been pressed into service. Martin’s conveyance was nothing fancy. Wagon was definitely a misnomer, cart a rather more fitting description.

Martin’s precious horse, a formerly spindly nag he had purchased from a Russian estate with the help of Herr Reis, had become a sleek, handsome beast. It had been tied to the side of the cart by a long rope, giving it freedom to graze, and was much admired by the newcomers. While the women made ready for the one night they had to spend here, out in the open, their men went down to the boat to carry up the rest of their belongings.

On shore frantic activity was taking place. From the boat’s belly stores of supplies were brought forth. For the boat carried, besides colonists, mostly relatives of young couples, all of their belongings, plus government allotments. Among the relatives were a few families with older children. However, most of the colonists expected to found the village did not arrive on this boat. Over seven hundred colonists had been sent from Saratov with newly provided carts and animals on a long journey.

Amid the chaos of unloading and depositing goods on shore, Martin spied Herr Reis. The good man was dispensing help, advice, providing order – in short, he presented an oasis of calm.
In his endeavor Herr Reis was helped by a distinguished, capable looking Russian man he addressed as Vadim. Vadim was in his forties. He was dressed in the manner of the country gentry: high, brown boots, fitted pants for riding and a corn-colored, heavily embroidered, wide-sleeved blouse. A soft brown leather coat covered him from his shoulders to his knees as he moved about, determining where the boat crew was to stack the supplies.

These goods were a part of the supplies promised by the Crown, the nest egg for a people beginning life from scratch. Therefore, on the Volga bank arose a pile of building material, a yard of iron implements, a huddle of kegs filled with nails, stacks of grain and flour sacks, barrels filled with cooking oil and lard, and with salted meat and fish. Below, barely offloaded onto the landing site, sat the heavy pieces of timber. Christoph, looking down, thought the beams looked forbidding. How would the small Tartar horses the people had been given be able to drag up such loads? "It will break their backs," he thought, "and make them useless for plowing."

Although the assembled stacks and piles of goods looked imposing, heartening to the German settlers, Herr Reis and Vadim knew only too well that the piles before them represented but a small part of what the Crown had allotted.

Russia was an enormous country, deeply rooted in its past, and old customs died hard. That which had been paid for in Moscow had never been fully received by the carrier arranging for the shipment. Sent to the frontier, it had melted even further. As it had traveled along the roads and down the river, its volume shrank bit by bit. The age-old proverb always held true. "A lump of sugar sticks a little to each hand as it is passed along, sweetening many cups of tea."

The largest morsels stuck frequently to the grasping fingers of those on top. By the time the much-needed supplies were loaded onto the boat for the last relay, it was not easy to even steal a barrel of oil, because at that time all was set down on paper and could be counted. However, one could not discount the ingenious ways known to men for the alteration of documents.

As Martin retrieved his family’s belongings, he met a few couples known to him from the Lauterbach area. These people had paid for their own passage from Saratov, thereby avoiding the trek across the wild grasslands. Some of them came because of his letters mentioning how much land was available. His neighbor’s son, Peter Borchert, was one of the latter, arriving with his new bride, Karla, for a new life in Russia. Returning to his wagon, it seemed to Martin that his family had grown in size. As he came
upon the group, a voice boomed above the confusing din: “Martin, Martin Meininger! Did ye forget that ye wrote me to come? Well, I am here.”

Martin covered the remaining ground in two leaps, holding a moment later his friend’s broad, strong hands in his. He shook Kurt Halberstamm’s hand as if he wanted to break it off. For a moment Martin was weak with relief. He had come. His friend had really come. There would be no more going it alone. Henceforth he could rely upon help and advice. They had helped each other in the past, although separated by miles. Kurt had lived in Altental, the village next to Lauterbach. On Sundays their families had worshipped in the same church, attending the same events on holidays and during feasts.

As happy as Martin was to see his friend, none were more delighted than his children to have the Halberstamm girls near in this God forsaken empty place. Ute had known all along that Berta and Kurt Halberstamm with their daughters Karin, seventeen, and Beate, thirteen, would be joining them in Russia. Yet she had kept this bit of news to herself as a surprise for Martin, thinking that one could never foretell the future, and Kurt might change his mind at the last minute. Had Martin known of his friend’s intentions and fate had prevented him from emigrating, the news might have crushed him. This, she thought, was much better – everyone was happy.

Standing back among the baggage, Christoph looked upon the happy reunion with a quiet joy of his own: henceforth there would be many young people in the village and he would be growing up among them. Best of all, there would be girls – unmarried – ready to be courted. He walked briskly to the small group consisting of his sister and the Halberstamm girls and reacquainted himself. “Karin has grown into a lovely girl in the years I have not seen her,” he mused. In the last light of day the tall, slender girl with her deep brown eyes reminded him of a doe, or better yet, one of the fairies in the folk tales. Her long chestnut hair was fine, streaked by the sun and, as was their custom, half covered by a blue cloth.

As the light dimmed, a gentle fog rose from the Volga and people prepared to camp in the open field. Under no circumstance was it possible to transport them the same day to their new homes. First the supplies had to be divided. Transportation had to be arranged, for after the allocations of homesteads had been discussed, it became apparent that most of the settlers wanted to stay together, leaving the river site in favor of the site between Karamysh and Medveditsa. Martin’s site among the hills seemed more promising.
The wagon train with the full complement of settlers, having left Saratov much earlier, had arrived at the site the day before. Among the newcomers was a deacon who called the settlers to prayer at last light. People interrupted their busy milling about and assembled for a prayer of thanks for the safe deliverance to their new promised land. He compared this flock of Germans to the wandering tribes of Israel and reminded them that their promised land would be as fruitful as they chose to make it. No sooner had the last Amen rung out, when the sun set fully on the other side of the Medveditsa's hills. Pitch-covered faggots were lit, illuminating a veritable Gypsy camp.

Some families spread their bedding on tarp-covered ground, others fashioned oddly assembled tents against fog and dew. The Meininger women slept in the wagon, thoughtfully covered by Martin with a piece of canvass against the dew, while the men slept under the cart on the ground.

With the onset of darkness a veritable host of hungry mosquitoes had arisen, driving men and the few beasts present to distraction. Fortunately, by that time the cooking fires had been lit, and the men set more smudge fires around the camp's edge, lessening the plague of bloodthirsty pests, enabling the women to prepare the meager meals. They fried onions and bacon together for flavor, added some eggs and finished the whole by adding slices of the hard, black bread they had carried with them, made palatable by frying it in a little oil. Some had a head of cabbage in their pans together with bacon and onions; some had tomatoes, bought in Saratov. To everyone's delight, Vadim had purchased the amazing Kazakh apples in town, which he liberally distributed.

After the people had finished their meals they moved about, visiting, talking about the conditions in Germany—much worse than when Martin and Christoph had left—and about their high hopes and dreams. They spoke about the Tsarina who so generously had invited them to come, providing passage, land, and loans for supplies.

However pleasant their communion, there was to be no prolonged, pleasant lingering, because their scarce supply of firewood ran out and soon the swarms of the tormenting mosquitoes returned. Blessedly, as the night wore on and temperatures dropped sharply, the flying pesky pests disappeared, allowing restful sleep.

In retrospect it was a miracle that it only took one day for Herr Reis and Vadim, with the help of two clerks, to divide the supplies left by the boat. They lined up the heads of households and allocated goods per head. However, they counted two children as one head. Meanwhile many women, driven by burning curiosity, visited the huts of the few couples living by the
Volga. They marveled at the primitive conditions, suddenly realizing with mounting awe and apprehension that, in a very few days, what they saw before them would be their lot henceforth. And yet, they were intrigued by the almost limitless freedom these couples enjoyed. Within their allotment of ground they had chosen a site that they hoped would become a village one day, had staked out their home sites, their fields and grazing grounds. They seemed to be, if not happy, at least content.

With an insatiable appetite for stories about the new country, Ute heard for the first time about the settlers' first horrible winter. Martin had never mentioned in his letters that people had frozen to death that year. She realized now that she was truly blessed to see her family together once more. Thoughts of a barely avoided tragedy made her feel pensive, and she fled back to her loved ones.

Next day, by mid-morning, a wretched caravan of assorted dirty carts and wagons arrived as promised. Vadim had contracted for conveyances with the owner of a grand estate – one of those magnificent estates, bequeathed by the Tsar upon a noble for service to Tsar and country, complete with indentured serfs. It was from such an estate that wagons were sent for the transport of settlers.

Beholding the conveyances, Ute remarked, "We must thank God for Martin's homemade contraption. At least it's clean." Looking at the filthy vehicles pulled by half-starved horses, she could not imagine placing her prized belongings, bedding mainly, onto a wagon-bed employed to ferry manure to the fields only the day before. The wagons stank distinctly of offal and were dirt encrusted. But no matter, there was nothing for it, the settlers had no choice: on went the loads of supplies – on went their belongings.

Only a few couples chose to stay behind on the Volga bank, becoming part of the village they would shortly name Schilling. They were not from the Hessian land, outsiders among a crowd with the same lilting dialect. As each wagon was loaded, it followed Martin's lead to the hills of the Karamysh. The wheels of their carts grooved the ground, almost virgin in appearance, for only Martin's cart and the hooves of a few horses had been imprinted upon it.

A festive mood prevailed. The settlers were mostly young, filled with hope and fresh spirit, and so they sang the old familiar folk songs, songs of leave-taking, the excitement of a new Heimat, of the sadness of losing their old land. Their arrival at the site coincided with the arrival of the recruiter's wagon train. Although they were two days late, the true founders of the new village had arrived.