

## Chapter 4 ~ Giesick Family Origins

*"The past is a Foreign Country: They do things differently there."* These words, written by L. P. Hartley at the beginning of his book, *The Go-Between*; seem a fitting and poignant theme for introducing the osmotic passage of my grandmother's people from the old country to America. The first known recorded data of the Giesicks began in Brunntal, Russia. Today it is known as Krivojar, Russia, and is a small agricultural community in the farm regions of the Volga River inside Russia. The closest major city is Volgograd. Brunntal is situated to the east of the Volga River. It is a river-bottom valley with plenty of water, which led to its name—*well-valley*. Brunntal is in what is known as the Samara region and is called the Wiesenseite (valley or meadow-side). Its rolling hills are known as *steppeland*, which stretches all the way to the Ural Mountains and south to Tsaritsyn (Volgograd). The west side of the river is referred to as Bergseite (hilly side), and its hills merge with the many level areas. This entire river-bottom area is well suited for grain farming. The approximate latitude is 50° 51' N and the longitude: 46° 29' E.

### ***History of the Volga***

How did this region originate and grow? In 1763 the Russian Empress, Catherine II (often called *Catherine the Great*) invited foreigners except Jews of neighboring countries to bring their skills and settle in Russia. The newcomers were encouraged to develop the remote region of the rich river-bottom land of the Volga River. This manifesto was a great success, and large populations of starving farmers, skilled tradesmen, and veteran soldiers from surrounding countries signed up for emigration to the area. Although agents traveled throughout Europe recruiting émigrés, the largest numbers came from the German-speaking regions. These areas had just witnessed the Seven Years War, and its citizens were ripe for any semblance of economic opportunity, independence, and security that was available. From 1764 through 1767, approximately 25,000 to 28,000 Germans left Germany to settle in Russia and the colonies. A much smaller population of French, Dutch, Italian, Polish, and Swedish also homesteaded these new lands and began farming beside the German majority. (Webmaster, 2010)

From what areas of Germany did the German farmers, tradesmen, and soldiers come? I found that recruited emigrants converged at assembly points in cities such as Regensburg, Freiburg, and Rosslau, to name a few. Under the guidance of commissioners, they often traveled to Luebeck, a city on the Baltic Sea, and sometimes to Danzig where they set sail for Russia. Marriages, births, baptisms, and deaths took place in these ports of departure. Sometimes, challenges such as frozen rivers, insufficient funds, and crowded ships prolonged their leaving. Germans came from the regions of Wetterau, Vogelsberg, Spessart, Rhoen, Odenwald, Hessen, among others. In addition, certain areas such as Hessen, some villages' populations totally disappeared and reappeared in the Volga River Colonies. (Miller, 2010)



This simple map, which I annotated, shows the German-Russian settlement area of the village of Brunnental, Saratov region, within Russia, which was colonized by the Germanic people. The area west of the Volga River was known as

Berseite (mountain side), and east of the river was Wiesenseite (meadow side). The map is from *CIA World Fact* book (public domain).

## ***Life in the Volga Colonies***

What was life in the Brunnental region like? Following are excerpts from a history of Brunnental written by Jakob Mohrland in 1986. Jakob left the area and went to Germany in the early 1940s due to events that are not entirely clear. The manuscript he wrote has been translated into English from German, and his passages are in the context of the Germanic tongue. The intent in using his history is to give the reader an idea of the geography, economy, and culture of the Volga River colonies. In addition, it will highlight what my grandmother's people experienced during these times. (Mohrland, 1986)

*The colonists, who founded the first colonies on both sides of the Volga River, are in the walks of life from 85 to 90 years, when even with many setbacks, became prosperous. The colonies became always more beautiful and well off. For that reason, the colonists' families always had many children. Because of that, there prevailed already in 1840, a large demand for land for the grownup sons who wanted to become independent farmers.* (Mohrland, 1986)

At the end of this chapter is the Ancestry Chart of the Giesick family, which reinforces the proclivity toward large families during these times. Likewise, the emigrants to this river-bottom area focused on developing an agriculture that would become the breadbasket of the area. This land was suitable for growing many of the grains that accompanied the Volga-German immigrants to the United States to be cultivated in Kansas, Nebraska, Oklahoma, South Dakota, and North Dakota. Here began the cultivation of a "brain trust," a developing of the first of many techniques, methodologies, and expertise in farming large crops, especially wheat.

*Brunnental was founded in 1855 (according to the statement of the Homeland Almanac of 1955). It lies almost exactly in the middle between Seelmann and Krasny-Kut. From Seelmann to Brunnental it is 35 kilometers. I am of the opinion that those colonists who founded their village sought a favorable site... the scouts, who sought suitable arable land for the new village location, found a place with a light flat valley where three river-like canals came together into a larger canal.*

*The larger canal, in the springtime, on account of the snow melt and heavy rain flow, the scouts saw in advance that this area would be favorable...For the new founded colonies, these canals were of great significance because they could be used for the collection and preservation of water...I learned this from the older people who said that the new colonists of Brunnental constructed dams on the canals right away. (Mohrland, 1986)*

The climate of the Volga Valley was one of extremes, similar to that of the U.S.–Canada border in the region of North Dakota, Montana, or perhaps Wisconsin, which is on that same latitude as the Volga Valley. Nevertheless, the soil was fertile and conducive for raising grain crops. The winters were brutal, and keeping warm was a high priority.

*To keep from freezing in the cold weather in winter, farmers wore fur coats made of sheepskin with high collars, when they made trips to Seelmann with horse and sleds. The fur coat tailors came every winter from the surrounding Russian villages in order to sew for the German farmers. These fur-coat tailors were big specialists in their profession. They have lived among the farmers a long time and were given good board and room. The sewing was paid for. They came mostly in groups of 2 to 3 men and went by orders, from house to house... (Mohrland, 1986)*

This region was dependent on its snowmelt, rainfall, and water channels. Its agriculture (economic system) was the focus of everyone in the region. Everything centered on crops and a barter system.

*Wheat, rye, oats, and barley were mainly raised in Brunnental, while smaller portions of sunflowers, watermelons and melons were also raised. Very few potatoes were raised because the climate was too dry for potatoes. One could only raise potatoes in moist deep earth and for those the farmer raised only enough for himself...Some fruit was raised...but without importance. The people of Brunnental received fruit from the hilly-side farmers, every summer. Every summer from the middle to the end of June, the hilly-side farmers would come first with wagon loads of cherries and later apples...The Brunnental farmers' didn't buy the fruit. It was exchanged for wheat or rye – measure for measure. The hilly-side farmers drove the length of the street and called out, 'Fruit exchange, tit for tat, small for large'. It was meant like this: For one sack of apples, one sack of wheat; or 1 pail of apples, 1 pail of wheat. The business went well and for both there was satisfaction. (Mohrland, 1986)*

Vegetables were the responsibility of the individual farmer. Tomatoes, cucumbers, carrots, beets, beans, peas, and other foods were cultivated in the gardens of the farmers. Many of the vegetables and fruits (such as watermelons and apples) were pickled for the wintertime. Sauerkraut also was a mainstay food supplement in the wintertime. (Mohrland, 1986)

Religion played an important role in this community and was the cornerstone and foundation of the farm society. Religion in the eighteenth century went through major discord and reformation, and as a result, the colonists organized their villages and towns around their preferred religion. The primary worship centers of the area fell into three religious groups: Lutheran, Roman Catholic, and the Reformed Church (Christian, Protestant denomination). Brunnental was essentially of the Lutheran persuasion. Later we find that some of the family immigrants to Rush County, Kansas, broke away from the Lutheran church and began their allegiance to the Methodist religion. This schism would cause discord for many years to come.

Donald Hergert, my grandmother's nephew who now lives in the Duluth, Minnesota area, sent Grandmother Martha a letter and photocopy of the history of a popular hymnal he owns that is dated 1844. The hymnal came from Brunnental and was given to him by Samuel Giesick's wife Ella (Hergert). It accompanied the family all the way from Russia. The article he included in his letter reads as follows:

*The circumstances and conditions peculiar to the Volga colonial area that led to the consociation of the two faiths must include the creation of a common hymnal in 1816 for use in all evangelical colonies. It replaced an assortment of 20 or so publications brought by the settlers from various regions of the Germanies. The new book contained an exceptionally well-balanced collection of 823 hymns in the first edition, all printed without notes. By 1834, when the third series came off the press at Dorpat (Yuryev), located about 160 miles southwest of St. Petersburg, the number of lyrics had grown to 878. The twenty-first edition, appearing in 1905, still was printed in Dorpat, still with 878 hymns, and still without notes...*

*The popular hymnal carried an imposing title: "Collection of Christian Songs for Public and Household Devotions for Use in the German Evangelical Colonies on the Volga." It will be noted that this explicatory appellation did not associate the hymnal with any single Protestant group. It was used in the Brotherhood prayer meetings as well as in Lutheran and Reformed churches. The third edition*

*stressed the ecumenical aspect by carrying this line: 'Assembled by the Pastors of the Evangelical Colonies on the Volga'...*

*Together with the Bible and one of the two catechisms, this Wolga Gesangbuch formed the omnipresent bibliographical trinity in almost every Protestant colonist's home, and for many years the three constituted the only reading material to be found in most of them. The hymnal was carried proudly tucked under the arm of a man strolling to church or prayer meeting; the women carried it with sprig of fragrant leaves or a small corsage projecting from under its cover... (Even the occasional colonist who was unable to read proudly carried the Gesangbuch to church!) (Hergert, Letter to Aunt Martha, 1988)*

Donald further states ...*Do you remember seeing it as a child? There is a lot of scribbling in it – mother (Grandmother Martha's sister, Mary) wrote her name in it – evidently, when she was a child. I suspect it was brought over by Grandpa Giesick. His name appears in it several times in German script – Adam Giessick – the strange thing is that Giessick is spelled with 2 s'. There are many other things written that are barely discernable, including the village of Brunnental and the year (Jahr) 1880. It's interesting to speculate about. (Hergert, Letter to Aunt Martha, 1988)*