

The Ethnological Impact of the German-Russian Immigrant
on the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod

Senior Church History -b-

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During the past five years or so, there seems to have been a culmination in the trend towards ethnic identity and awareness within our nation. The movie Roots, local newspaper columns such as "Latino focus," and "On Ethnic Milwaukee," Afro-American studies, or Native American Week, all are visible symptoms of a national epidemic in ethnological interest. Even the 1980 census form seems to have expanded its questions to include more specific racial or ethnic references. At the risk of spreading this current epidemic, the following paper will also be an examination of a particular ethnic group. This group of people had a profound impact on the heartland of our nation, inundating the Midwest during the late 1800's and early 1900's.¹ However, contrary to the prevailing trend, this ethnic group seems well on its way to losing its cultural identity and becoming completely assimilated into the American melting pot. Perhaps this paper in some small way might be able to document some interesting traits of this group while they are still culturally identifiable.

But why is such a study of an ethnic group undertaken for a course in American Lutheranism? Is somebody grasping for straws? Hopefully, I'll be able to vindicate such a thesis in the course of this paper, for I do feel that a study of this group does have a bearing on American Lutheranism, particularly the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. The group is the German-Russian immigrant to the United States. (Perhaps nomenclature can be improved if we switch proper adjectives to Russian-German, for these people are German ethnically, Russian geographically. In this paper, however, we will use the two phrases interchangeably.) For two basic reasons, these

¹In the 1940 census, it was estimated that Americans of German-Russian stock numbered over 400,000. See L. Rippley, The German-American (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1976), p. 173-174.

Russian-Germans could not have helped but influence our synod. First, the overwhelming majority of these people were of Lutheran background.² In coming to America, their search for a new church home would correspondingly apply to a history of American Lutheranism and also our synod. Secondly, the greatest concentration of these immigrants in our country corresponds to the heartland of our synod. Using statistics from the 1920 census, we can easily document this phenomenon: North Dakota - 69,985; Kansas - 31,512; South Dakota - 30,937; Nebraska - 22,421; Michigan and Wisconsin - both over 10,000 each.³

The purpose of this paper, then, will be to isolate this group and their relationship to our synod. In order to accomplish this goal, we will attempt to enumerate specific traits and customs of the Russian-Germans and their Lutheran heritage, with specific reference to two areas of settlement in our country: Berrien County, Michigan, and Akaska, South Dakota. How did this group influence our churches at those localities, and perhaps our synod as a whole?

Before we proceed to the topic at hand, a word of warning is in place. With a thesis of this nature, the danger of generalization without substantiation is grave. Trying to draw conclusions from incidents of certain individuals separated by hundreds of miles and then to apply these conclusions to a church body spread throughout the nation is risky business. Furthermore, in dealing with this topic the problem of generalization is compounded because of several additional factors. The designation

²Although exact percentages are impossible to determine, yet in 1910, the religious breakdown in the Volga area of Russia was approximately 20% Roman, 80% Protestant. Of Protestants, 78% Lutheran, 22% Reformed. In the other Russia colonies, particularly Black Sea and Volhynia areas, Protestant ratio was even higher. Cf. F. Koch, The Volga Germans (Univ. Park: The Penn. State Univ. Press, 1977), p. 117.

³Ripley, op. cit., pp. 173, 176.

German-Russian in our title is in itself a broad classification which overlaps distinct groups. Among the German-Russians one can easily note distinctions based upon their geographical areas of settlement within czarist Russia. The Volga-area German did things quite differently from the Black Sea-area German, although there were naturally many similarities; likewise with the Germans in the Volhynia area, where distinct practices evolved because of their environment. To add to the problem, the major religious differences had great impact. As was mentioned before, the majority of the Germans who settled in Russia were Lutheran, although the Roman, Reformed, Mennonite, Hutterite, and various other denominations and sects were represented. Each locality and religious identity developed peculiar customs, practices, dress, and even distinct dialects.⁴ To generalize with the German-Russians is impossible! At the risk of such an outcome, let us nevertheless proceed and try to establish what I feel is the ethnological impact of the German-Russian immigrant on the WELS.

I. Historical Development of the German-Russian Ethnic Identity

Who are these people? Where did they come from? Although it is not necessary to go into extensive detail about their early history - many books have already accomplished that feat - yet I do feel a brief historical sketch of their origin is in order, especially to trace the development of the Russian-German ethnic identity.

Starting in the mid-1700's, with an imperial invitation from Catherine II, many impoverished Germans began to go east in search of a new home. Poverty,

⁴Roger Welsch reports that "each settlement soon developed its own dialect - clearly identifiable by any other German-Russian, and marriages outside the community were frowned on." Cf. "The German-Russians: Two Centuries of Cultural Submergence and Resurgence," American Historical Society of Germans from Russia, Dec. 1975, work paper no. 19, p. 26.

war-torn Europe, disease, and other similar conditions made the provisions of Catherine's manifesto irresistible.⁵ Soon, thousands of Germans took up the invitation and began to colonize vast areas of Russia. But by no means were these Germans minded to give up their German identity. To the contrary, their colonization of Russian lands seems to have spurred them on to extensive efforts at maintaining their "Germanness."

Their years of isolated minority group status, often coupled with a surprising measure of political autonomy, made them more conscious of their German cultural heritage than many of their brethren...⁶

Throughout their years of living in Russia, these German colonists have made a conscious effort to keep their own culture and identity and to more or less separate themselves from the native population. The means they used to accomplish this aim were threefold. First and foremost, they stressed their own language. Although they lived in Russia since mid 1700's, those who immigrated to the United States knew little, if any, Russian. Luebke states, "Despite the fact that Volga Germans had lived in Russia for nearly a century, almost none of them had learned to speak the Russian language."⁷ Even today, the million plus people of Germanic descent who live in the Soviet Union, still try to retain their language, though no longer as the primary tongue.⁸

Secondly, they stressed their own religion, so much so that no one was

⁵For an excellent translation of this document, see Koch, op. cit., p. 12-18. Some of the guarantees she promised: 1) unqualified religious freedom; 2) freedom from taxation for an initial period of time; 3) self rule; 4) absolvment from military service, and others.

⁶F. Luebke, Immigrants and Politics (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1969), p. 10.

⁷Ibid., p. 10.

⁸See also K. Stumpp, The German-Russians (Bonn: Edition, Atlantic - Forum, 1967), p. 122ff.

admitted to a village unless he was a confessor of the same faith as the inhabitants of that village. Perhaps this religious segregation seems foreign to an American mind brought up in the age of integration, but for these Germans it was a way of life. To document this assertion, we can quote two scholars on the German-Russians.

In a style that was to become tradition among the German - Russians, each village centered on one religion, clearly divided as Catholic, Lutheran, or Mennonite, and relatively isolated from all other villages.⁹

In the course of the settlement, the religious affiliation was a primary consideration. There were no interdenominational German villages in all of Russia, but only Catholic, Evangelical, and Mennonite ones.¹⁰

For this paper, the stress on religious uniformity among the Russian - Germans is perhaps the most interesting, for it is a trait which they carried over to our country as well. Later in the paper we shall explore the possibility that this practice of religious segregation^{ga} affected the fellowship practice of the German-Russians.

The third instrument these Germans in Russia used to perpetuate their distinct identity was their stress on their own German-language educational system. This topic alone could provide enough material for a major theme, and we cannot very well treat it exhaustively here. However, it should be pointed out that the German colonists in Russia made a diligent effort to provide education for their children, in the mother tongue, of course. Each village operated its own school, usually using one building for both

⁹Welsch, op. cit., p. 25.

¹⁰Stumpp, op. cit., p. 15.

the church and school. In those villages where a church was built, they were never able to heat it in the winter anyway, so the school building doubled as church during those months. The Germans also began a system of secondary education rather quickly, even operating normal schools and seminaries.¹¹

Because of these efforts the German people living in Russia not only managed to perpetuate their German character, but also to a certain extent they initiated a German culture distinct from the German culture within Germany at this time. Whereas the German nation was open to many foreign influences and trends during this period, the Germans in Russia succeeded in keeping the clock turned back on their culture. They developed from within, not from external stimuli. Thus, they were soon classified as more German than the Germans. Welsch reports:

The development of the Volga Valley and Black Sea German culture was however esoteric, intracultural; innovation came from within and of the culture rather than from any outside influence so that, for example, rather than borrowing songs from their Russian hosts, the German colonists continued their ancient songs and developed new ones from within their own community and experience.¹²

In this way a new ethnic identity began to develop, that of the German-Russian. It is necessary for us to view the German-Russian immigrant to America as a product of this cultural factory, and to understand his characteristics merely as a continuation of this separatistic background.

The Russian-Germans in the United States have held more rigidly to their Germanic traditions than did the Germans

¹¹For a thorough and concise treatment of this subject, see Stumpp, op. cit., p. 98-121.

¹²Welsch, op. cit., p. 26.

who emigrated to America directly from the Reich. Their experience in Russia had conditioned them to live in isolation from the local population and to retain their Old World lifestyles.¹³

And so it was in the United States, at least for a time. The families that came over from Russia were very close and strove to keep together here in America. Once established, these family units became beachheads in America for later immigrants. Very often people from the same colony in Russia would look up old friends or relatives when they got to America, and were always given help and assistance in settling in this new land. Often, too, large numbers immigrated together and would then settle together and establish a colony here on American soil.

Yet America is not Russia, and there were differences in our country and its geography which altered the rapidity of assimilation. On the one hand, there were the rural plain states of the Dakotas and Nebraska. As in Russia, it was easy to maintain the cultural and geographical isolation on the sparsely populated plains. Eureka, South Dakota, could well be described as a carry-over colony from the German colonies near Odessa.¹⁴ However, ^{for} those German-Russians who settled in urban areas, such as Benton Harbor, in Berrien County, Michigan, the factories and town life eroded the cultural edge somewhat sooner. In fact, Benton Harbor received a large number of these immigrants not only because previous friends and relatives had settled there, but because there were interested people in the community who were willing to assist these foreigners. The story is told of a Jewish clothier, a Mr. Garb, who helped many of these German-Russians with money to

¹³Rippley, op. cit., p. 26.

¹⁴W. Harwood, "A Bit of Europe in Dakota: The German Russian Colony at Eureka," AHSGR, Winter, 1977, work paper no. 25, p. 17-20.

buy homes, and even tried to assist in job placement. ^{In} As far ~~as~~ his own clothing store, Garb gave these unknown immigrants unlimited credit.¹⁵ With such interaction and assistance from outside sources, the German - Russians experienced first hand the American melting pot and its benefits. Future isolation from new found friends and co-workers in factories would be difficult. Thus, one can see that the life style of the German-Russian on the Dakota plains and that of the German-Russian in southwestern Michigan would be markedly different. But similarities are still there to be explored, and subsequently we wish to do so.

Even while these migrations of Germans from Russia were going on, our own synod in its publications saw the need of those Germans still in Russia. At this time there were some 800,000 German Lutherans in Russia,¹⁶ and our synod, through articles such as "Die Not der geflüchteten Wolga-deutschen," and "Die Not der Deutschen in Wolhynien,"¹⁷ made our people aware of the needs of these fellow Lutherans. A Pastor Althaus, from Wolhynia, even made a trip through our country to try and get support, and preached in St. Matthews of Benton Harbor.¹⁸

Our synod was also well aware of the German-Russians moving into this country. The Northwestern Lutheran ran a series of articles in 1922 on the Dakota-Montana mission area and recognized this new group rapidly moving in. There can be no doubt that our synod was interested in these people,

¹⁵As told by A. Jantz, interview of 2/2/80.

¹⁶A. W. Wardin, Jr., "The Contribution of the German-Russians to Russian Protestantism," AHSGR, Aug. of 1973, work paper no. 12, p. 21.

¹⁷Gemeindeblatt, Sept. 10, 1922, p. 297-298; and Feb. 13, 1921, p. 55-56.

¹⁸As related by Mrs. Ulrich, taped interview of 2/2/80.

and with this immigration wave swelling especially the heartlands of our synod, their customs and cultural practices were also bound to have an impact on our churches. Sheer numbers alone demanded attention. For example, it was this immigrant wave of German-Russians in late 1800's to mid 1920's, that founded St. Matthews congregation of Benton Harbor, in 1894. Zion Ev. Lutheran Church of Akaska, South Dakota, was founded in 1911 by the same kind of people. Let us proceed to examine these two localities and study the impact of the German-Russian immigrant on congregational life.

II. The Impact of the German-Russian Immigrant on Liturgical Customs and Various Church Practices

In the area of liturgical customs and various church practices, the two congregations we will study are very similar, giving evidence to common traits of the German-Russian. Naturally, these German speaking immigrants desired a German language service, not unlike the majority of our churches at this time. During World War I, though, pressure was mounted to eliminate this language. Often resistance was offered, particularly by the German - Russians. The congregation at St. Matthews gradually allowed English a place in the worship life, but many of the older immigrants felt that their church was being taken away. If it wasn't German, it wasn't really Lutheran. The stress on German language was so great that Mr. Arvin Jantz characterized the two goals of the German-Russian for his life as, 1) to own his own home; and 2) to have his children brought up in the German language. Mr. Jantz also recounts the story of an old German-Russian who had a plaque with the passage, "Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life," hanging on the wall. This fellow interpreted the crown of life to be the German language.¹⁹ German services are still held at St. Matthews,

¹⁹A. Jantz, interview of 2/2/80.

p.10

Missing in original paper.

Mr. Quintin Sulzle recalls the seating order Koch describes above being observed religiously, every one had his own place. It was almost a part of the worship ritual as to where people sat. In fact, not only was the seating segregated, but the distribution of communion was totally segregated also. Even if there would be only one man at the altar for the next table, women would not be permitted to commune with him.²² Mr. Edmund Bartz remembers a similar practice from his boyhood church in North Dakota. Sitting and communion distribution were strictly segregated, and it was only after a young boy was confirmed that he was allowed to sit on the men's side.²³ Mr. Bartz was quite surprised to see that this custom had changed when he returned for a visit in the late 1960's; but changes did come, also in Akaska and Benton Harbor. Such segregated seating would be unthinkable in our day, but I can't help but wonder if the idea doesn't carry over in the typical synodical joke about men and women sitting apart at gatherings. Any time there is a social gathering, the men end up in one place and the women in another -- "it must be Wisconsin Synod!" Notice how often that takes place, not only at parties, but even while riding in cars!

Another custom among the German-Russians was the frequent use of tolling the bell. I finally learned why the bell was tolled during the Lord's Prayer, at least their reason for doing it.

Sometimes only the largest bell tolled; in either event, the pealing signaled those at home to rise and recite the Lord's Prayer too - and to expedite preparation of the noon meal.²⁴

Tolling of the bell was also used during funeral services, one toll for each year of the deceased person's life. In South Dakota this tolling could be

²²Q. Sulzle, written remembrances supplied to author.

²³E. Bartz, taped interview of 2/2/80.

²⁴Koch, op. cit., p. 129.

heard miles away, even on the windy days, and everyone stopped what they were doing and silently counted the tolls to see if they knew or could guess who had been called home.²⁵ Again I would like to say that such tolling and bell ringing is probably not unique to the German-Russians alone, for I think it was a fairly common practice. But the German-Russians used the church bell as a means of communication within their parish, and persisted in this practice long after others had dropped it. One doesn't hear the custom of tolling for each year of the dead person's life too often any more, but when I was in grade school, St. Matthews still practiced the custom regularly. I remember it so clearly because it gave us something to do during class to count the number of tolls. (Tolling during the Lord's Prayer is still relatively common practice.)

The German-Russians also took seriously the characteristic of the Lutheran church as the singing church. In Russia the worship services were enhanced by whole-hearted and sincere singing of the hymns.

The Russian Germans were a musical people, which was evident in the church services as well as in prayer meetings. They had an intuitive ability to extemporize three- and four-part harmony, and their whole hearted participation charged the worship services with religious fervor.²⁶

In Russia singing was often done from memory. With books at a premium, hymnbooks were also difficult to come by and verses and melodies were learned in the home. Mrs. Ulrich - born in Volhynia, but having lived here most of her life - remembers that a standard part of family life was the family devotion every Sunday morning. A large part of that family worship was devoted to singing common hymns. She also mentioned that the other time

²⁵Q. Sulzle, written remembrances.

²⁶Koch, op. cit., p. 119.

the family sang together was during thunderstorms. Any time a thunderstorm came up, even if during the middle of the night, her father would gather the whole family in the living room and sing hymns until the storm passed. All this was done ~~for~~^{from} memory.²⁷

Mr. and Mrs. Jantz of Benton Harbor tell similar experiences. Mrs. Jantz, whose father also came from Volhynia, remembers much emphasis placed on the memorization of hymns. Every Saturday night the family would gather together for worship and learn hymns together. The singer would speak one line, then the rest of the family would sing the line after. She recalls, as a little girl, kneeling at her chair singing and praying for what seemed an eternity.²⁸

This stress on singing was no doubt very beneficial, but sometimes it also led to tensions during the regular worship service. The people were accustomed to sing the hymns the way they wanted to, and if the organist didn't cooperate, it was to his own chagrin, not that of the congregation. In Akaska the older men led the singing, and being seated in the position of honor at the front of the church, they could lead the organist also, (who also was up front). If necessary, they were willing to rap out the tempo by using their canes on the pews until the organist came around to their speed.²⁹

Did the German-Russian immigrant have an impact upon the liturgical customs of our church? The question is difficult to answer, for since our synod was predominantly German anyway, the German-Russian fit right into

²⁷Mrs. Ulrich, taped interview of 2/2/80.

²⁸Mr. and Mrs. A. Jantz, interview of 2/2/80.

²⁹As related by Q. Sulzle.

the mold. To a certain degree, though, I think he did add a particular character to our church body and its worship life. His deep conviction and enthusiastic hymn singing would undoubtedly rub off on his fellow members. By his example, singing could not but become an integral part of the service. By the same token, his commitment to the status quo in liturgical affairs, especially in matters of language, and often his determination to worship and sing his way sometimes led to a few squabbles within churches. The German-Russian was not known for his open-mindedness, but yet his deep-rooted sincerity was contagious. The effects of his earnest practice of singing can be appreciated today within our church, for we still consider the Lutheran chorale to be an important aspect of the worship service as did the immigrant of old.

Other peculiar church customs and practices usually centered around weddings and funerals. Although these practices most often dealt with customs outside of the service, yet some of these customs are still observable today. The stealing of the bride's shoe, or the stealing of the bride herself, both very common in Dakota, are customs followed by the German-Russians even when they were in Russia.³⁰ Perhaps more important was the attitude the German-Russians had toward who could marry. Mixed marriages were frowned upon and discouraged. One was to marry only a Lutheran, and preferably a German-Russian Lutheran. Mr. Bartz recalls the furor in his small North Dakota town when a Lutheran started dating a Presbyterian. It was unthinkable! Others, more to their parents liking, actually sent overseas for their brides and didn't even consider American

³⁰Confer also A. Schock, The Quest of Free Land, p. 60. An excellent article dealing with this whole subject can be found in AHSGR Journal, Spring 1977, no. 23, p. 37-66. By T. Kloberdanz, the article is entitled "Folklore Forum: Marriage Beliefs and Customs of the Germans from Russia."

women.³¹ This strong insistance against mixed marriages is something that could well be emulated more often today! The marriage then begins on a strong foundation, a common faith in their Lord Jesus. Many arguments and fights could be avoided.

As far as supporting their church and pastor with material means, the German-Russians were a generous people. Not always financially were they so generous, for money was very difficult to come by at times. Yet they never let their pastor go hungry. Stories by Professor Huebner, former pastor at Akaska, and by Pastor Boldt, former pastor at Roscoe, mention the great amount of foodstuffs they would receive from members. Chickens, beef, and pork were frequently given. But financially, money was frequently scarce. In fact, in order to pay for a new church building, the congregation in Akaska undertook a stewardship program of unique, if questionable, character. The congregation decided to rent two quarter-sections of land (320 acres). The members would then gather together at an agreed upon time and plant a crop in the spring and harvest it in the fall. This income was then used to pay for the church building. Some people even wanted to continue the project after the church was paid for, in order to help finance operations, but the voters rejected that idea. One interesting side light to this story deals with the congregation's discussing whether or not crop hail insurance should be purchased. A non-member in the community heard about this discussion, and his reaction was, "They sure must not have much faith in the Lord for the future if they need to buy insurance."³² Such a remark makes one think about all the insurance policies taken out

³¹E. Bartz, taped interview of 2/2/80.

³²This episode is recalled by Q. Sulzle in various written memories.

by our churches today!

The various areas of church practices and liturgical customs that we have examined have shown the impact the German-Russians had in two congregations of our synod. Did this carry over into the synod as a whole? Before we answer that question, let us proceed to study another area where I feel the German-Russian immigrant exerted an influence on our churches.

III. The Impact of the German-Russian Immigrant on Catechetical and Educational Practices

As was mentioned earlier, the great stress the German-Russian placed on education was seen in almost every colony in Russia, to the extent that illiteracy was unknown among the colonists, while the Russian census of 1897 showed 80% of the native population to be illiterate.³³ This educational concern was carried to America. Both of the congregations we are studying maintained parochial schools, although Zion's school has since closed. Could the great emphasis our synod places on Christian education be attributed to the German-Russians, or at least have received an added impetus from them?

In considering the importance of education among the German-Russian, one also has to study the phenomenon of der Lehrer. In Russia, where one pastor had a large circuit of congregations to serve, the individual villages relied heavily upon the school teacher for spiritual support. F. Koch reports that der Lehrer was, in reality, the day-to-day spiritual head of the colony.

Most important, the schoolmaster was the spiritual head of the colony except for the short time on the one Sunday when it was his village's turn to receive the pastor's

³³Stumpp, op. cit., 112.

rotational visitation.³⁴

Mrs. Ulrich confirms this practice, and spoke of her grandfather, who was der Lehrer in the village, performing many of the ministerial functions of the parish.³⁵ To a certain degree, this "office" came to our country also. Mr. Jantz reports that the teacher baptized, confirmed, and married members, and when the pastor finally came, he publicly ratified these ministerial acts.³⁶ In the plain states also, this practice carried over for some time.

The result of this system of education, with only one man available to supply a whole village's educational and spiritual needs, was that a great deal of attention was given to these matters at home. The parents practiced a regular system of family worship and closely supervised the instruction of the child. (It must be noted that education of the children generally followed the pattern of religious instruction. The Bible, hymnbook, and catechism were often the textbooks used for learning to read and write. Koch writes:

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.³⁷)

In the Ukraine, the confirmation instruction of the children was done mainly at home,³⁸ and the parents closely checked hymn and catechism memorization.

³⁴Koch, op. cit., p. 122.

³⁵Mrs. Ulrich, taped interview of 2/2/80.

³⁶A. Jantz, interview of 2/2/80.

³⁷Koch, op. cit., p. 114.

³⁸F. Miller, interview of 2/3/80.

Mrs. Ulrich remembers that a review of memory lessons was a regular part of the Sunday morning devotion her family observed, and Mrs. Jantz recalls that her father always demanded a review of the Sunday sermon as well.³⁹

Thus, the educational system of the German-Russian which centered around der Lehrer was a close connection with the church; church and school were a unit, and often the school building served as the church. The parochial school played an important role for these people, and was assisted by the avid cooperation of the parents. In this country the parochial system of education has gained wide acceptance in our synod. However, Mr. Jantz reports that the German-Russian who came to this country worked for parochial schools also as an agent to preserve the German language and culture, and only secondarily for the benefits of religious instruction and confirmation preparation.⁴⁰ Rev. Roleder also sees the church and school being used by the German-Russian as a guardian of their culture and language. He writes:

I believe that one factor that helped them safeguard their heritage was that the German population jealously maintained their language, national identity, culture, and customs, mainly through their own system of parochial schools and churches.⁴¹

Although it is difficult to gauge the impact of the German-Russian on the educational system of our synod, it is safe to say that by and large they would not have been a detriment to parochial schools. If anything, they would have supported efforts to open and maintain parochial schools

³⁹As told to me on 2/2/80.

⁴⁰Interview with A. Jantz of 2/2/80.

⁴¹E. Roleder, "We Honor our Heritage through Faith," sermonette of closing ecumenical service of the 1979 International Convention of the AHSGR. Printed in Journal of AHSGR, Fall, 1979, vol. 2, no. 2, p. 71.

where possible. One would wish that the zeal of the parents to check up on the progress of the child would be imitated today, and a closer cooperation with the school teachers maintained. All in all, as we have briefly looked at the educational program of the German-Russians, we find it to be completely compatible with our system today.

But the office of der Lehrer is an important one to remember, for it leads us directly into the next portion of this essay. Since der Lehrer was often a substitute pastor, and even read sermons and conducted services as well, there was a danger to the doctrinal purity of the churches. Not being theologically trained, der Lehrer was understandably weak in his practice and teaching. (Naturally, since this is a generalization, ~~and~~ there were those who proved to be very capable and doctrinally sound men.) Thus, tendencies often developed in villages which were incompatible with a confessional practice. Unfortunately, some of these practices followed the German-Russian immigrant to America. Let us now examine what I feel to be the most important section of this paper, and the area where the German-Russian immigrant has exerted the greatest amount of influence on our church, both for good and for bad.

IV. The Impact of the German-Russian Immigrant on Doctrinal and Fellowship Practices

Approximately fifty to one hundred years after the initial trends in Europe, there appeared among the German colonies within Russia a definite pietistic and revival movement. Perhaps due to the inherent weaknesses of der Lehrer system as alluded to above, this trend found many eager adherents. In such close-knit communities, as the colonies were, these pietistic trends quickly gathered momentum. Often starved for adequate spiritual leadership due to the vast distances in Russia and the undersupply of pastors - this despite the praiseworthy attempts of many conscientious

"teachers" - many colonists eagerly embraced the new religious revival. The pietistic trend found expression chiefly in two main groups: the Stundists and the Betbrüder, or Brotherhood.

When the pietism of the Continent gradually made its way into the Russian scene, the development began in private homes. There friends gathered to sing, pray, and read Scripture together.

In the nineteenth century a pietistic and revival movement, called Stundism, appeared among the German-Russians. Numbers of people, continuing as adherents of their own churches, began to meet in homes for one or more hours (or Stunden in German) for singing, prayer, and Bible reading, thereby receiving the name, Stundists. Stundists sought a more personal religion which stressed conversion, the cultivation of the inner spiritual life, and rejection of worldly pleasures.⁴²

These prayer meetings took place once a week, or as often as four times a week; favorite times were Wednesday evenings and Sunday afternoons, and almost always they were held in private homes. Another group which developed at this time, similar to the Stundists in their practice, was the Brotherhood, or sometimes called Betbrüder. Koch describes their activities as follows:

Song was interspersed profusely with prayer at the Brotherhood meetings. Since many members read the Scriptures avidly, there always were Biblicists among them from whom each session's leaders were selected by the elders. They read passages from the Old or New Testament and then each gave a brief clarification according to his own interpretation.⁴³

This Brotherhood group grew in numbers and apparently overlapped with the

⁴²Wardin, op. cit., p. 24.

⁴³Koch, op. cit., p. 119.

Stundist movement to a certain extent. Dr. Wardin reports that both groups gradually assimilated, but continually urged their people to maintain their normal church membership. The leaders wanted no suggestion given to the authorities that they were another sect or cult appearing on the scene.

The Brotherhood movement provided fellowship for Stundists who retained their traditional denominational ties. The constitution of the Brotherhood Conference required its adherents to be members of a church and forbade sectarians, such as Baptists and Mennonite Brethren, to participate.⁴⁴

The reason I am using so much ink in describing this pietistic trend in the Russian colonies, is that its fruit can be seen here in America, and within our own synod. Mr. Koch reports that the Brotherhood Conference rode the wave of the German-Russian immigration to this country, and led to significant developments. We hear two statements of Koch:

When the great exodus carried streams of Russia Germans to the Western Hemisphere after the 1870s, the Brotherhood was transplanted there along with the colonists' organized faiths.⁴⁵

Besides the four generally recognized religious denominations mentioned, there was an early pietistic movement that finally evolved into an organized body of considerable strength and influence here and there. It might be described as a spiritual auxiliary to the Protestant churches that was to lead to an unexpected and important consequence when the Russia German exodus to the New World occurred.⁴⁶

This pietistic involvement which many of the German-Russians brought with them to America can be seen as the catalyst for some of the problems which

⁴⁴Wardin, op. cit., p. 26.

⁴⁵Koch, op. cit., p. 119.

⁴⁶Koch, op. cit., p. 117.

arose in our own congregations in several different locations. Not only in Michigan and Dakota, but also in Fond du Lac and Oshkosh, Wisconsin, serious difficulties soon came to light.

Mr. Jantz reported one of the consequences of this activity which came up in the Benton Harbor area: an unionistic approach among Christians which overlooked confessional principles. Pentecostals, Lutherans, Baptists, and Reformed were often thrown together into such prayer meetings and practiced their own style of Scripture interpretation. These people saw no objections to singing and praying together with other non-Lutherans. Mr. Jantz characterized many of these people as very sincere in religion, yet not too well grounded in doctrinal knowledge.⁴⁷ The result can all too easily be guessed, a deterioration of fellowship practices.

Elsewhere, similar difficulties arose, and often members of congregations who participated in prayer meetings were not averse to even alienating their own pastor in order to pursue their practices. The fiftieth anniversary booklet of the Dakota-Montana District describes such an event.

Even those immigrants who remained Lutheran were somewhat pietistic. And revivalism appealed to many. Therefore the work among these people was not easy. A former pastor, who served in the Mobridge area, wrote me some years ago how he was ordered out of a prayer meeting of his own members, who were revivalistic in character.⁴⁸

Similar incidents were reported in the Fond du Lac and Oshkosh areas, where pastors were not allowed into such meetings.⁴⁹

During a brief interview, Miss F. Miller of Benton Harbor mentioned

⁴⁷Interview with A. Jantz on 2/2/80.

⁴⁸K. Sievert, "Preaching the Gospel on the Dakota-Montana Prairies," Fifty Years of God's Blessings in the Dakota-Montana District (uncopyrighted anniversary booklet), p. 6.

⁴⁹Casual conversations with Professor M. Albrecht of Wisconsin Lutheran

that such prayer meetings were frequently held in her father's home. As a child, she remembers Sunday afternoons being spent by the adults in reading and interpreting Scripture, singing hymns, and praying together. She then made a comment which struck me funny, but later came back to arouse my interest. She said something to the effect that many different people would come to these meetings, not just members of St. Matthews. Often members of the local Congregational church would come and join, and she remarked that it never seemed odd to her, for after all, the Congregationalists were just like we Lutherans anyway.⁵⁰ Coming from a good WELS member, the comment stuck with me, and the concern for a confessional fellowship practice seemed relatively unimportant.

What Miss Miller unwittingly alluded to was a phenomenon well documented within the America religious scene. The German-Russian immigrant was actually the instrument for creating a new church body in this country, the German Congregational Church.

Through an unexpected alignment of circumstances, this lay movement led to the creation of a new church affiliation in America for a large segment of immigrants from the Volga and Ukraine: Congregationalism. This surprising development actually founded a new denomination in the United States, the German Congregational Church.⁵¹

Apparently, what had happened was truly unique. Many of these immigrants settled in isolated areas which had no church, and for years satisfied their spiritual needs through their own prayer meetings. However, since the Brotherhood Conference had expressly stated membership in an

49, cont. Seminary, and with Professor Erwin Scharf of Northwestern College.

⁵⁰Interview with F. Miller on 2/3/80.

⁵¹Koch, op. cit., p. 119-120.

established church, their consciences were uneasy without a church home. But to their confusion, the church they grew up in while in Russia, the Lutheran Church, was not a single church body. Instead there were scores of different churches and synods, each calling themselves Lutheran. Furthermore, some of the Lutheran bodies were apathetic toward these peculiar immigrants and often were harsh in their criticism of the German-Russian Brotherhood movement, an important part of the immigrant's life. No love was lost between the two groups, and the immigrants looked elsewhere. The church that opened its arms and aided these people with German speaking pastors, was the Congregational Church. Koch documents this trend well.

Most Brotherhood adherents did not affiliate with an established religion for a decade or more, concentrating their yearning for spiritual fulfillment on prayer meetings. Yet the order's regulations requiring them to remain within an established church eventually led to their adopting Congregationalism which, because of its principles of local autonomy and the 'priesthood of all believers,' appealed to their pietism. Equally important for this amalgamation was the interested attitude of this church, and English - language American body, which gave these forlorn foreigners sympathetic attention, helped organize German Congregational congregations, and assisted in supplying them with German - speaking pastors.⁵²

Koch concluded by saying that in 1930, 30% of all Russian-German evangelicals in this country belonged to German Congregationalism, with 45% remaining Lutheran, and 25% either Baptist, Methodist, or some other Reformed branch.⁵³

(In Benton Harbor, just down the street from my home, the Congregational Church had a strong German influence. Its pastor during my childhood

⁵²Koch, op. cit., p. 120.

⁵³Koch, op. cit., p. 120.

had a good German name - Schmidt.)

Yet on the other side of the coin, let us not lump every German - Russian into this Brotherhood, and eventually into Congregationalism. We can agree with the statement of Mr. Jantz that, although some of the German-Russians were not too well grounded in doctrinal knowledge and thus prone to pietism and Pentecostalism, yet some were very knowledgeable, and these could not be moved from their convictions. Not only were they confessionally sound, they resisted the unionistic trends inherent in the prayer meetings. Mr. Jantz recalled occasions when some of these stout Lutherans went to a prayer meeting and ended up in vehement arguments with some of those who espoused outlandish interpretations, etc.⁵⁴

What about the effects on our synod as a whole? I don't think it is fair that Mr. Koch throws us in with all the Lutheran bodies who looked askance at the German-Russians. It is true that we would have opposed the abuses often connected with the prayer meetings, and would have attempted to instruct the people about the errors of pietism in general, but it cannot be said that we ignored this group. In Michigan and Wisconsin the German-Russians joined our churches or founded new ones. On the Dakota plains, these immigrants were often searched out and ministered to. As mentioned above, The Northwestern Lutheran, in various articles throughout 1922, reported on efforts in the new Dakota mission field to reach these people. Their impact on our synod probably is greatest in the area of applying Scriptural fellowship principles. Here I feel that this group had both a positive and a negative influence, depending largely upon the area they were living in and the religious training they had received. There can be no question, as evidenced by the immergence of German Congregationalism

⁵⁴A. Jantz, interview of 2/2/80.

from the bud of the Brotherhood Conference, that in certain areas they exerted a detrimental effect on our local congregations. When they brought over their prayer meetings, they exposed our people to unionism and laxness in practice which ended up overlooking confessional boundries. Scriptural fellowship practice suffered.

On the other hand, devoted Lutheran immigrants contributed greatly to our synod's orthodox position. Roger Welsch once characterized the German-Russians by saying, "By their fierce independence they have strengthened the independence of America; in their rock-hard conservatism they have provided a powerful counterpart to hasty change."⁵⁵ This statement could well be applied to our religious position also. Conservative and well-founded in their religion, they were unimpressed by the wave of the ecumenical, unionistic spirit that swept our country. Accustomed to isolation and separatism even from their years in Russia, these people are not aroused when others call our synod separatistic. They care little for the outward opinion of others; they know what they believe, and cling to it. In the application of Scriptural fellowship principles, then, these people do not find our position to be a stumbling block, as many do. It does not bother them to be alone in the religious community.

Thus, when trying to gauge their impact on the doctrinal position of our synod, we have to conclude with a paradoxical answer. In certain areas, those participating freely in open prayer meetings had a detrimental impact on their Wisconsin Synod neighbors. Yet, others provided a solid, confessional, conservative approach to religion, which resisted the popular trends of ecumenical unionism.

Before we close this paper, there is one other area we will briefly

⁵⁵Welsch, op. cit., p. 29.

consider as to the influence of these people on our synod.

V. The Impact of the German-Russian Immigrant on Daily Life

Having lived for years on the Russian steppes in close proximity to nature, the German-Russian gradually became interested in herbal or folklore medicine, and also became somewhat superstitious. The tendency of these people toward the superstitious can best be demonstrated in their dealings with the gypsies. Frequently, when they refused to give these vagrant free-loaders as much food as they wanted, the gypsies resorted to hexing their cattle or horses. Many reports could be cited in which one after another the family horse or cow would die, until some other gypsy undid the hex.⁵⁶ Often their superstitious beliefs brought them into conflict with the church. Some common practices are recorded by Rippley.

Fear of the dark, of cemeteries, and of storms evoked specific rituals. At Christmas, housewives sometimes baked an extra loaf of bread for the cat or dog to ward off hunger for the balance of the year. If someone died in the house, a clock would be stopped until after the burial. Rain on the first Friday of a month indicated that plenty of rain would fall for the balance of the month.⁵⁷

What they were in Russia, they continued to be in America.

Closely associated with superstition would be the various folklore medicines. Some of these formulae were no doubt what we would call home remedies. They made extensive use of herbs, plants, roots, etc., for curing various household ailments.

However, other practices were definitely of the superstitious variety,

⁵⁶So J. Breinling, taped interview of 2/2/80. See also interesting story recorded in Golden Anniversary Historical Book of Akaska, South Dakota.

⁵⁷Rippley, op. cit., p. 178.

which again brought them problems with the church authorities. In this connection we read of the Braucher, a type of village medicine man, who combined a limited knowledge of medicine with invocations calling upon supernatural aid. Following are three incantations recited by such a Braucher, showing their irreverent use of the name of the Holy Trinity.

Three pure virgins went forth,
 They wanted to look at a swelling.
 The first said: it is hot,
 The other said: it isn't,
 The third said: if it is not,
 Then come, our Lord Jesus Christ.
 In the name of God the Father, the Son
 And the Holy Ghost.

Jesus plows. What does he plow?
 He plows up three ringworms.
 The first one's white, the second one's red.
 And the third one's dead.
 In the name of God the Father, the Son
 And the Holy Ghost.

Job ran over the manure,
 He screamed so loud:
 Oh, dear Jesus Christ,
 These awful worms want to devour me.
 They are at once white, blue, black, red,
 They shall be dead in three days.
 In the name of God the Father, the Son
 And the Holy Ghost.⁵⁸

No wonder they got flack from church leaders, and rightly so! I can't help but think of modern faith healers when I read those lines.

⁵⁸T. Kloberdanz, "Folklore Forum: Folk Medicine of the Germans from Russia," AHSGR, Dec. 1975, work paper no. 19, p. 50-51.

Other customs which dealt with minor ailments did not necessarily invoke religious aid, but were superstitious nevertheless. Among the German - Russians in Benton Harbor, several methods were used to get rid of warts. Dig up a mole and rub it across the mole or wart. If you can't find a mole, rub a dead person's hand across the wart. If that is too morbid, take a piece of string and tie knots in it, the number of knots corresponding to the number of warts. Bury the string, and when it has rotted away, the warts will be gone.⁵⁹

Although this area of their customs probably had the least impact upon their neighbors and friends of their churches here in America, yet there was some influence felt. I remember as a schoolboy at St. Matthews Lutheran School, various home remedies still being applied and used. The superstitious practices seem to have pretty well died out, and so much the better. With their questionable belief in supernatural forces and their downright misuse of God's name, the only outcome would have been to lead people away from the solid foundation of God's Word, and to tempt them to place their trust in something other than our Savior. Such practice is condemned in the First and Second Commandments.

To try to draw conclusions for a fitting close to this paper is difficult. In researching this paper and talking to various individuals, I am more convinced than ever that the German-Russian immigrant had an impact on our individual churches and on our synod as a whole. But to try to substantiate these generalizations is another story. Did their preference for the status quo in liturgical customs make our synod as a whole rather slow to change from the accepted practice? Did their zeal for education give a needed

⁵⁹Remedies told by A. Jantz and F. Miller in personal interviews of 2/2/80.

push for parochial education in our midst? Did their entanglement with pietism corrupt our fellowship principles? Did their overt conservatism strengthen our confessional orthodoxy? The answer to these questions, in my opinion at least, is that they did exert an influence, and quite a definite one at that. Perhaps it is difficult to measure and evaluate, but it is still being felt. Other questions could also be asked. Did their many travels from homeland to homeland increase an awareness for world missions? Did their avid interest in folklore medicine gradually evolve into an avid interest in medical missions and charities? While in Russia, did their isolation and resistance to modern ideas help keep them confessional at a time when Germany was rationalistic? If so, could they also have helped to shape our own confessionalism?

I started out this paper by warning against generalizing about the German - Russian immigrant. Perhaps it is time to repeat this warning at the conclusion. Maybe it is impossible to make sweeping conclusions, but my feeling still remains: I do think that the Lord used this ethnic group to shape and mold our synod in the direction and for the purpose He intended.

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