

My Family's Life in Russia

The history of the Maria Teresa Windemut family when they lived in the Volga Region and in Siberia, Russia.

By Tatjana Atadschanow, daughter of Rosa (Windemut) Atadschanow

Finally, after many years, the taboo that has prevented writing about the details of the German's History in Russia has been lifted. It is no coincidence that I am interested in this topic, as the history of Germans in Russia is closely connected with the history of my family.

It was especially interesting to learn of the history and extent of the communication, cooperation and support provided by the German Government. The immigration of Germans from Russia to Germany, the founding of the German nationalist districts and the social organization "Rebirth", in Russia and the role of the German Consulate General during this process, all aroused my interest.

The Germans living in Russia always depended on their own history, in spite of the political extremes of the two large countries, Russia and Germany. Two great nations, inhabited by two cultures divided by extremes, in much the same way the majority of the world's civilizations are divided. Why is this situation the same today?

The story of the Germans in Siberia, a story that is interestingly close to me, not only because of past history, but also because of the modern life the Russian Germans have today.

I have known many things since my childhood, I heard about the tragic fate of the Germans from relatives and parents and I heard their own stories from when I was only nine or ten years old. Often, neighbors, friends and relatives gathered in Grandma's house and remembered the time when they lived on the Volga, the deportation to Siberia and of how much pain they tasted in Siberia. They cursed Hitler and Stalin and wept with grief and pain. It all sounded strange to me at that time and I did not understand much.

Let us make a little excursion into history. It is known that in the mid-16th century Tsar Ivan the Terrible conquered the Khanai of Kazan and Astrakhan as he expanded the Russian Empire to the southeast. The result was a rapidly growing role of the Volga River as a main transportation artery for trade in Russia. Here and there along the shore the new cities of Samara, Saratov and Zanizin began to emerge.

Trade flourished in the Volga region during the 17th century and beyond. Many merchant ships laden with expensive goods traveled through the region. The nomads, who inhabited the Volga Steppes, caused great economic loss to Russia, as they brutally robbed not only the cities and ships, but also the merchants.

Catherine 2nd (Catherine the Great) understood how important the Volga trade was to the welfare of Russia and that the brutal robberies must be stopped. She believed that they would stop only when the Steppes were repopulated. Then on December 4, 1762, Catherine issued a letter which called on the inhabitants of other countries to colonize there and promised that free land would be given to them. She thought that these immigrants would be a kind of defense against the nomads and in addition, significantly broaden the culture of Russia. The reputation of the Empress led a number of Germans to emigrate but only a small number of enthusiasts from other countries came to the Volga Region in the 18th century.

Approximately 150 years later, on October 19, 1918, the first Region of Powolschje was established along the Volga.

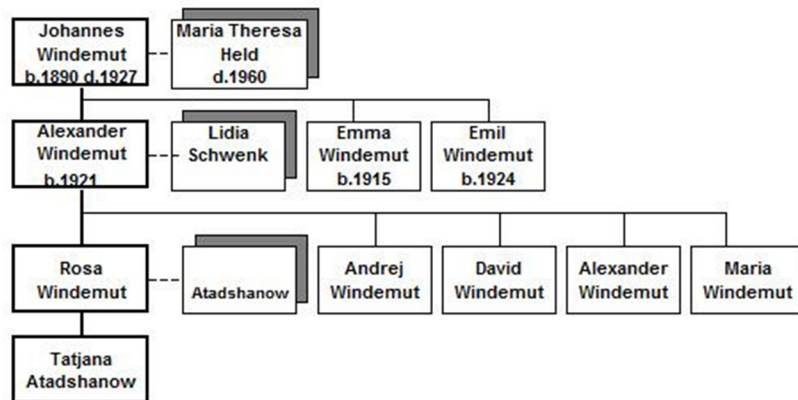
Editor's note: The first Region of Powolschje was established soon after the Soviet Revolution. The region was inhabited largely by ethnic Germans and this was the first of several regions that were established as labor communities in the Volga region under the Soviet system.

My ancestors came to the Volga during the reign of Catherine 2nd; they wanted to escape from tribulations in Germany.

My Great-Grandmother, Maria Theresa (Held) Windemut, was born in Philipsfeld, Marx district, in the Saratov region of the Volga. Her family always spoke German and never learned Russian. Maria Theresa had one daughter and two sons. Emma was born in 1915, the elder son Alexander was born in 1921 and the younger son Emil, in 1924. Tragically, Maria Theresa's husband, Johannes Windemut, my great-grandfather was killed in a hunting accident in 1927.

In those years the family lived in a wooden house with a dirt floor and there were some barns in the yard.

My great-grandmother was a hard working orthodox woman and she taught the family to work at a young age, almost while they were still in the cradle. My grandpa Alexander had a difficult childhood. His mother went back to work in the houses of wealthy families a week after giving birth to earn money by doing various household chores. Emma, her daughter, worked with her and the oldest son, my grandfather, had to stay home to look after his younger brother.



The Windemut Family Tree from 1890 to present

The two boys were left with a piece of bread and sugar to calm the little brother when he was hungry. The bread was broken and mixed with the sugar into a kind of porridge and then wrapped in a gauze bandage. Each time the baby cried, it was inserted in his mouth. The hours while he waited for his mother and sister were very bitter because he was very hungry himself.

Life was hard and of course became even more difficult for the family after the death of the father. The year 1921 was especially difficult for the family because of the famine in Powolschje.

Editor's note: The Soviet Famine of 1921, only three years after the Soviet Revolution, severely affected all of the USSR.

The family collected wild garlic and onions and made tea from cooked licorice. In the spring, ground squirrels were caught and fried. The house was heated in the winter with dried dung which spread pleasant warmth in the house. It was not easy, but the family lived through that year without losing anyone.

Later, when his brother grew, my grandfather began to help with various harvesting work in order to earn money. He could hardly stand on his legs then, but brought money home.

Great-grandmother skillfully managed the family budget. To help support them, they kept horses, goats and sheep. There was little money, so even to buy a horse in 1922 you had to get a loan.

All work on the farm was done by the sons. Watermelons, pumpkins, potatoes and vegetables were planted in the fields. Tons of cucumbers, watermelons and sauerkraut were made for the winter. Sugar beets were cooked to make syrup, which served as a sugar substitute.

The schedule was strict and hard. Everyone had to be up at six o'clock and after only a few minutes to wash and get ready they went straight to work.

The family survived the severe famine in the years 1932-33, during the years of forced collectivization. The "5 ears of corn" law was adopted on August 7, 1932. Under that law, if you took only 5 ears of corn from the government field you could be shot.

The family knew what it meant to have enough to live on for the first time in 1937. They could afford to have wood floors in the house, wallpaper and furniture.

Grandpa successfully finished the secondary school in Backerdorf in 1939. We have his certificate, written in both German and Russian, dated June 19, 1939 and stored in our family archives.

The Volga Region was among the first to have good education and during those years classes were conducted in our native language, German. There were 196 schools, 11 Technical colleges, 3 trade schools and 5 high schools and the textbooks were even made in the Volga Region.

My ancestors on my mother's side lived nearby in the village of Neb. From the pages of my grandmother's records we learn that my great-grandfather, Salomon Schwenk was born in 1897 and my great-grandmother was born in 1901. There were three children in the family that survived; a daughter Lidia (my grandmother) born in 1921), a daughter Elvira born in 1931 and son Victor born in 1936.

In the years before the deportation, my great-grandfather was a very wealthy man. He owned a large house with a garden and he also had a large mill. He was a mechanic by profession; he had a knack for everything.

Great-grandmother Schwenk was a homemaker. My grandma, Lidia, was a teacher and worked in Neb.

The holidays were very important in our family and cannot be ignored, especially Christmas, New Year's Eve, Easter and Pentecost. I will tell you about Christmas. The celebration began on Christmas Eve at 5 o'clock in the evening. Everyone went to church at 5 except for one adult who stayed behind to set the table and get ready for 6 o'clock when they all came back home.

Each member of the family was given a gift, but first the children were given homemade honey biscuits, along with nuts and a pair of bonbons (which were made from melted sugar that was wrapped in paper). The adults were then given gifts; a plate of sweets and a pocket knife, a scarf or cloth for a dress. This tradition has been passed down in my family, from generation to generation.

During the years before WWII things were going well for individual families and everyone was happy because of the good luck of others. You often heard the phrase: "how well we are doing now and how well the others are doing".

The collective farms were getting stronger as they gained more experience and had good harvests, the economy flourished.

Then as the war in Europe continued to expand, people became very uneasy. At night, men were picked up by the Soviet government, no one knew where they were taken nor for how long they would be gone. My grandfather's brother, Salomon Schwenk, was picked up and his father, my great grandfather even hid himself in another village.

On August 26, 1941, only two months after Germany invaded Russia, the Soviet government issued a decree requiring the removal of the Germans, from the Volga. Later, in 1956 we learned that Stalin was personally responsible for the decree. Of course, Stalin did not need to explain his action nor justify his decision with laws.

Without any agreement or formal instructions from the "legislature", the very next day it was determined that the "operation" was to be carried out between the 3rd and the 20th of September. They used 1,000 police officers and 7,350 soldiers of the red army to enforce the decree. There was an equal number deployed from Saratov and from the Stalingrad area.

My Grandfather Windemut remembered that those days were filled with great sorrow for his mother, my great-grandmother. She was not just sad that they had to leave their entire household but they must also leave everything that they loved.

They were tortured by questions like: Who will provide everything we need? Who will take care of the dog? Where can the cat nestle for warmth in the house it is so accustomed to?

She moaned softly, "Will I possibly see Philipsfeld again? Will I never again go to those familiar streets and see the blue sky and the green gardens?" In her heart she knew she would never see it again and she was not mistaken. She died in 1960.

My grandfather and grandmother spoke often of how the dogs howled, the cows were lowing and the sheep were bleating; they would no longer be taken from the barn yard and put out to pasture, the farm was gone. It was as if the animals sensed that something unusual and disturbing was happening. My grandmother spoke sadly about how very difficult it was to abandon our house and the village.

When the families started leaving the village, all the women raised their voices. The children were crying, even the men were not afraid to cry as they left their houses, the village and half of their lives.

People from the neighboring Russian villages came out into the street, looked silently at the passing children and old people and they shook their heads sorrowfully. They pressed apples and tomatoes into their neighbor's hands and tried to express their sympathy.

As they were leaving they saw a train that was carrying refugees, tired and worn children and old people, who had few possessions. The refugees were happy that their lives had been saved and that shelter was nearby. They came to the Volga from Leningrad and other cities and were allowed to take over our homes and businesses.

It was clearly painful, how much suffering my relatives had to endure because of the deportation, the elderly and children were among those on their way to exile. During the journey, epidemics broke out but medical help was not available. The dead were not buried along the way; the soldiers of the escort just threw the dead on the bank beside the road.

By the end of September the emigrants were in the Siberian District of Ust-Tarka. Among them were my relatives.

Most of the Siberians were friendly to the Germans, and in the beginning treated them as if they were evacuees from the combat zone. Then the Soviet government made sure that the Germans were considered to be enemies of the Russian people and their freedom should be limited.

Then regulations that controlled the German resettlement were put in place. These regulations included a life-threatening 20 years of forced labor if they attempted to escape. Naturally this all caused changes in the relationships with the local people. Even so, the Russian people remained ambiguous, some behaved with understanding and compassion and others believed the government.

The German exiles were housed in the homes of collective farmers and they lived in whatever free space was available, in barns, warehouses, offices, and even saunas. All able-bodied Germans were considered equal in regard to their ability to work on the collective and state farms.

Great-grandmother Teresa Windemut and her family came to the village of Rodkino in the district of Ust-Tarka, when they arrived in Siberia. Later, in 1947, they moved to the village of Ust-Tarka.

The collective farms could not even take care of the needs of their staff. Food was trucked in, but only in bits and pieces so there was not very much and if it ran out, you went hungry. The locals were also frequently hungry and often they ate the meat from fallen animals.

However, the local population could somehow afford the expense of taking care of the cattle, but could not provide financial assistance for the struggling German families; the Germans were actually considered to be nothing.

My Great-Grandfather Salomon Schwenk and his family came to the village of Resino, in the District of Ust-Tarka, where the people were not exactly friendly. Salomon was very clever, he was a mechanic and quickly found use for his knowledge. As he mastered the Russian language, he found himself quickly accepted into the population. Soon he built a small mill with his own hands. Thanks to his diligence and mastery, he along with his family did a lot for the collective farm.

According to one writer; "The Germans, by their diligence and conscientiousness have done a great service." Even though it was not until the middle of the 1950's that the ice of mistrust was melted and the Russian population accepted the exiles as members of the collectives.

The Germans became more and more respected, as time passed and the Russian public even came to trust them to be in charge of work. This was a great victory for the Germans because of the way the wary Russian citizens saw an enemy in every German.

However, on January 22, 1942 there came a new and disastrous blow. My grandfather Alexander was drafted into forced labor in the Labor Army. He was, like many others, sent to the labor camp in the district of Iwdelsk in the territory Sverdlovsk.

The labor camp was surrounded by three rows of barbed wire fence with watch towers and guards. An eyewitness said, "The guarded camps brought only harm, people were humiliated, and there was general unhappiness."

The men in these camps were not criminals; they were not even dissatisfied with the Soviet order. They were ordinary people who supported the country and they had no weapons.

Grandpa remembered when they had to work in snow up to their waist to overcome huge drifts. After a day of doing this backbreaking labor, their clothes and shoes were soaking wet and they were completely exhausted.

Their shoes were very poor, only a few workers had boots or bad shoes, most wore footwear made from tires. They worried about their own wellbeing because of the cold, the malnutrition and the forced labor.

The barracks became roomier with each passing month as people died in their bunks. The people who died were loaded onto carts and taken outside the camp where they were thrown into a mass grave.

Each day the people in the labor camp were given between 600 and 800 grams (approximately 1-1/2 pounds) of bread and herbal broth, they had broth in the morning and the evening. The bread was baked with whatever ingredients were available and it looked like a piece of clay. In 1943 it was not possible to have any fat to put on your bread; it was not even thought of.

Their clothing became shabby and they were burdened with the yoke of mortification and uncertainty. Their countrymen and acquaintances did not recognize them anymore, partly because they had become skeletons. They were afraid to speak openly to complain about their experiences. They did not want to look helpless and were humiliated by the pity. Approximately one in three of them died from starvation.

A former prisoner from the village of Sokuluk wrote, "From what Labor Army you say? Why are you lying to the people? It was exactly the same as in the fascist concentration camps. There was no crematorium, but there were 'sanatoriums', where those too sick to work were taken to die, and they are comparable with the crematoria of the Nazi concentration camps." He wrote further, "I dare say that my assumption is not wrong when I say that mass destruction was planned at Balkastroje, from the beginning."

Why were there so many people used in the camps when a more physically fit man could do the job alone, instead two hungry people were used and they would die from exhaustion after a while. That was not the worst of it, there was a third man then used as a replacement, until he died. Had the work really progressed much farther, after the three had died? At what price? The loss of life was considered insignificant.

My grandfather's sister and brother had both been drafted into hard labor, in the Labor Army. Both my grandfather and his mother remember that letters were rare during those times.

My great-grandmother wrote letters in German, but they did not arrive very often, because they were destroyed. There were never any complaints in the letters about the living conditions, grandpa knew that his mother tried to spare him, she wrote about very little.

The sensitivity and feelings, which we had for each other, came from grandpa and were a hallmark of our family. He never complained, even in the most difficult times and he tried not to show any negative emotions to his loved ones.

Day after day he worked in the camps, surrounded by barbed wire fence. He nearly died of exhaustion and vitamin deficiency, he lived in barracks that let the cold wind in and at night he laid his head on cold straw. He lost his health and vitality, but not his faith in justice. He came back from the camps very sick from the horror he had experienced, but not broken. It was a difficult time for him, but he was happy.

Females from the age of 16 to 50 were also conscripted into the Labor Army and by the end of 1942 labor camps for women appeared alongside the men's work camps and in buildings, mines and quarries. These women were forced to leave their small children and old people to fate, without food, clothing, and sheltered among strangers there in Siberia.

The living conditions of the German women in the Labor Army did not differ too much from those of men. They were seen as people, they had duties, but they had no rights. Their weathered rough faces were pale and tired. Their hands were coarse and heavy as a sledge hammer.

They wore men's work clothing, sailor jackets or cardigans and trousers. On their feet they wore ugly wooden shoes and they worked 12 hours every day.

The German women even worked in the aerospace industry in Novosibirsk where they were involved with the construction of missiles and other aerospace things. My father's mother, Emma (Metzger) Atadschanow, worked in forced labor camps for several years and was among those women in Novosibirsk.

Yes, life was difficult for a lot of women during the war years. It was difficult for all women, Soviet and German alike, but especially difficult for the German women. They lost as many, if not more, men, fathers, brothers and sons, as the Soviet women lost. The difference, however,

was that for the Soviet women their men died on the front, but the German men died of hunger, for nothing.

The Russian people worked hard, day-to-day, during the war and in the post war days. The big difference was that the Russians were at home, with their children and parents and the Germans had to do forced labor in labor camps, in the forests (the taiga), and in mine shafts and pits.

Some shed a sea of tears for the soldiers that had fallen at the front; the others shed oceans of tears because they had to except the loss of the men who died from hunger and the children who were beaten down by their difficult lives.

The railroad tracks of Ulyanovsk and Kazan, Kottas to Vorkuta, along with the 700 kilometers of oil pipeline, the metal industry of Chelyabinsk and the petroleum-refining plant in Omsk were all built at the cost of many thousands of German lives. The Germans labored in the coal mines of Kusbassa, Karaganda and Vorkuta, they labored to bring in the crude oil from Tatarstan and Barschkirien and built mines.

The Germans were the first to be exploited in the construction and operation of the nuclear industry in the Uralstadt Kyshtym and for the extraction of ore in the Chita region.

Similar humiliations were experienced by 13 other nationalities living in the Soviet Union, however, the Russian Germans had to endure more than the others. They endured protracted suffering and now live scattered in Siberia, the Urals, Kazakhstan and other regions of the former Soviet Union, they have no region to call their own.

The war ended, and finally, in May of 1947 my Grandfather Windemut came home from the Labor Army. He came to Ust-Tarka, where his family had lived since the deportation. It was not possible to think of living anywhere else, because of the November 26, 1948 "criminal responsibility" regulation that prevented them from leaving the area. He met my grandmother Lidia there, she was a widow, her husband had been killed at the front. The marriage was finally registered in 1955 when restrictions were lifted by law and passports were issued.

There were 6 children in the family and the forced relocation rules extended to each of them. Thanks to the strength and rationality of my grandfather and grandmother they persevered and finally got the whole family, including my mother and all the children properly married and registered.

The children spoke German at home and Russian when they were in school. They had no problems with the Russian language during these times since they were speaking it more and more. If grandmother had not been there speaking German with them they would now have problems with the German language, but there is no problem with the knowledge of the language.

Especially I want to write about the lovely children that were raised by my grandmother Windemut. She insisted that the father was the head of the family and that older people should be treated with respect and honor, especially the father. She tried to keep the German culture alive; she was pretty, could sew beautifully, had good taste, dressed in very attractive simple



Alexander and Lidia Windemut's children (circa 1960.)
(L-R) Andrej lives in Siberia; Rosa lives in Mannheim, Germany; David lives in Wiesbaden, German; Alexander lives in Moscow; and Maria lives in Siberia.

dresses and was always the center of attention. My mother, Rosa, got her good taste from her mother and she also insisted on rendering honor to the elderly and respect for the father.

My Windemut grandparents built their own house in 1958, even though there were major problems getting the building materials. Having one's own house is a highpoint in the life of every man and at this point those problems were taken in stride, without panic.

According to the requirements of the "acceptance of restrictions in the choice of place of residence" that was imposed on November 3, 1972, there could be no more thought of searching for another home.

Grandfather and grandmother were always well written and love of the Russian people was a familiar characteristic of the family. There were Russian daughters-in-law and also Russian sons-in-law, in the family.

My Great-Grandfather Salomon Schwenk worked for some time as a master mechanic and earned great respect from the people and the government. He worked on the collective farms and then the state farms before he was pensioned. My grandmother lived 50 years in Siberia and always spoke Russian with a German accent. She often told fairytale stories and sang German songs to keep the family's German nationality alive and separate from their life in Russia.

Some relatives in Grandfather Windemut's line lived in the village of Kokchetav in Kazakhstan. The German village where they lived is forever stuck in my mind as beautiful and well-off. Tradition and work were appreciated and there was a measure of moral sincerity and spiritual purity.

These images are from the memories of my mother's relatives that often came to visit my grandfather and grandmother. I remember that they usually brought some of their children with them. Today Kokchetav is not the only German towns there, a lot of compact settlements have been developed in those districts where the German nationals live.

In Siberia today, the district of Asovo, along with 103 other districts where Germans live, has transformed the Omsk region into an "island of hope" for the future of 150,000 German Russians. This transformation, together with the transformation in the district of Galbstadt, in the neighboring Altai region provides a promising model for the 600,000 German-Russians who live in West Siberia.

Let us also turn our attention to the Volga region, our small historic homeland. What is there today? The population of people of German nationality, in the Saratov region has grown to about 17,000. The people there live in compact cities such as Marx, Engels and Krasnoarmej. There are also about 2000 Germans that were resettled, in the Volga, from Russia in 1933 and 1934; they are distributed among 9 sites in the Saratov region.

There are significant potential opportunities for the formation of a network of small production companies in those districts where the German-Russians are scattered. There is still a lot to do in the coming years in order to build these facilities:

- 7 companies for the processing of grain
- 5 companies for manufacturing
- 4 companies for the production of vegetable oil
- 9 companies for the processing of milk and meat
- 4 production centers with 30 sites are planned with compact settlements

Living space will be built, there will be jobs and conditions are being created to foster the study of the German language and to foster the rebirth of the German culture.

The Government of the Russian Federation has assigned agents to support the formation of the German National District in the Saratov region. German-Russian families' from other regions

already want to move into the new compact settlements in the Saratov region. The formation of this German national district in Saratov will allow 15,000 German-Russians to move there, according to the Regional Office surveys of German-Russians who want the opportunity to move there today. However the opportunity to move is limited, because the settlements are completely filled and the floor space is only expanding slowly. It is worth noting that a number of important steps and initiatives are now being taken by the Russian government and the democratic public to correct this difficult situation and sooner or later this issue will be resolved.

The Novosibirsk region of Siberia is multinational with approximately 90 nationalities living there. Among them are 60,000 ethnic Germans, 2% of the total population of the area and the second largest nationality group after the Russians. Throughout the territory there are 12 places in which between 20 and 50 percent of the population is German. Novosibirsk region ranks third, among all regions with the largest population of Germans. This research is carried out carefully to find solutions for the German nationals in the Volga, Altai and the Omsk Regions.

The management and staff of the area council are working to help the cause of Germans in Russia. The Council consists of representatives of all German social organizations, the economic opportunity leaders, business people and cultural organizations.

One important contribution that has promoted general business in the area was the introduction of an ordinance that requires that cellular concrete be used in the construction of individual houses, "The Sibit Program".

The German Government has played an important role on behalf of the German-Russians by assisting with the construction of the Siberian Training Center "Hope" in Novosibirsk This center trains people for a number of important occupations in the new technologies, including modern computer technology.

The education of the German population had become a serious problem, in Siberia. To correct the situation the kindergarten "Dear Sun" was opened and began to teach children German in preschool. A center for the in depth study of the German language was created in the high school and special German groups were established in the Academy of Architecture, Agriculture and the universities of higher education. These groups reinforced ties with German universities and scientific centers, and student groups are exchanged. Many projects for the development of health services and medical care were carried out in Siberia, with the technical and financial support of the German Government.

The German Embassy in Novosibirsk was given the main task of administering the German language tests and providing visas for travel to Germany.

The Russian-German organization "Rebirth" was founded in Novosibirsk in 1989 and is worthy of mention. The main task of this organization has been and is to preserve the German language and culture in Russia.

Dr. Horst Waffenschmidt said, "Today we cannot make a safe forecast of how many German people will have to leave Russia for Germany, or relocate from one area in Russia to another. One thing is certain; there will always be German people in Russia who do not want to emigrate from there. The German Government sees that its role is to support these Germans, now and in future."

Editor's note: Dr. Waffenschmidt was a long time Cabinet Minister in the German Government of Helmut Kohl. He became the German Government's Representative for Ethnic Issues in 1997. He was known as the "Apostle of the Germans from Russia" and played a major role in the development of Germany's support for ethnic Germans living in the former Soviet Union and support for those who returned to Germany. Over two

Million ethnic Germans have returned to Germany, from Russia and other parts of the former Soviet Union, in recent years.

Credits:

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A German translation was made by Helene Windemut, 1st cousin 1x removed, of Rosa Windemut-Atadschanow. Mike Wintermute of Noblesville, Indiana, provided this edited English version from the German translation.

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