

Germans from Russia program to receive \$1.1 million gift

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The Germans from Russia Heritage Collection at the North Dakota State University Libraries will receive a \$1.1 million endowment at ceremonies at 1:30 p.m. Friday, May 26, at the NDSU Main Library. The gift comes from the estate of Marie Rudel Portner, a former North Dakotan of German Russian descent, who lived in Las Vegas at the time of her death.

"The endowment reaffirms the permanency of the program and it reaffirms our commitment to the Germans from Russia heritage and culture," said Richard Bovard, interim director of the NDSU Libraries. "While there is significant support from people in the state and around the country for the Germans from Russia program, this is by far the greatest example of that support."

The Germans from Russia Heritage Collection collects, documents, translates, exhibits, preserves and publishes resources about the culture, history, folklore, foodways and clothing of the Germans from Russia and their descendants in North Dakota and the Northern Plains. The NDSU Libraries and the collection privately funded and co-produced with Prairie Public Television the documentaries, "The Germans from Russia: Children of the Steppe, Children of the Prairie," which was shown on the Public Broadcasting stations throughout the country, and "Schmeckfest: Food Traditions of the Germans from Russia," which aired on PPTV and other PBS stations.

The endowment is intended for the program's general use, and funds could be used for such things as travel for staff members to gain oral histories of German-Russian culture, translation work, publishing, traveling exhibits and staffing needs.

"The endowment will substantially enhance and enrich the activities and mission of the collection," said Michael M. Miller, Germans from Russia bibliographer. "Students, scholars and family historians will have access to additional and significant print and electronic resources, oral histories and archival materials because of the endowment."

"It was truly an honor to know Marie Rudel Portner, who would always say, "North Dakota is my real home and I still love it there," Miller said. "She was a wonderful example of the strength, faith and determination that characterize the Germans from Russia who settled in the Dakotas."

Portner, who died last year at the age of 102, graduated from Fessenden High School in 1917, and then attended Valley City State Teachers College. She taught at North Dakota elementary schools at West Norway Township, Wellsburg and Heimdal, before moving to Spokane, Wash. She married O.H. Portner in 1922 and moved to Los Angeles. O.H. Portner, an electrician, also developed property in the Alhambra area. The couple moved to Las Vegas, where he was an electrical/plumbing inspector for the city and county, and involved in land development. He died in 1972.

Portner's gift is in honor of her parents, Simon and Dorothea Rudel. Simon Rudel's parents moved from Wuerttemberg, Germany, to Arzis, a Bessarabian town in what is now the southern Ukraine. He immigrated to the United States in 1877. In 1882, the couple married in Scotland, S.D., and they later moved to Wells County in North Dakota. He is listed on the document for the incorporation of the German Baptist Church of Germantown in 1902. They were both charter members of the First Baptist Church of Fessenden.

Representing Portner at the ceremony will be Doug Reimer, trust officer of the Nevada State Bank; lawyer Ashley E. Nitz; and her great-nephew, Ross Rudel, an artist from Los Angeles.