

GROSS NIENDORF - A VILLAGE IN MECKLENBURG

(Reprinted and updated from Wunrow / Wundrow - A Family of Wisconsin, by Daryl Wunrow, 1982)

Gross Niendorf is a tiny village in the old province of Mecklenburg, Germany. German history shows a rather constant changing of borders and place names. In the late 19th century the name of Mecklenburg was changed to Mecklenburg-Schwerin and from 1952 until the fall of the “wall” the name Mecklenburg was dropped completely. The East German government divided old Mecklenburg into three districts: Schwerin, Rostock, and Neubrandenburg. Gross Niendorf is located in the Schwerin District today. Since 1991 the province of Mecklenburg has been reinstated. The city of Schwerin remains the capital city.

Finding a Remote Village in East Germany

Gross Niendorf is a hard place to find. In fact, I first located the village on an old 19th century map located in the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee geography department map collection. Even then, it took a strong magnifying glass and several hours of patient searching to locate the name out of the thousands shown on the map.

Gross Niendorf is located about thirty miles east of the provincial capital city of Schwerin. It is about fifteen miles east of the city of Crivitz. The land is open, generally flat farmland. About one hundred miles south of the Baltic Sea, Gross Niendorf is but a few feet above sea level. Forested areas today are seen from time to time. Like many parts of Germany, all buildings are found in village clusters rather than on separate farms.

Heading for Gross Niendorf

My Dad, Alfred Wunrow, and I visited Gross Niendorf in March of 1979. We reached Gross Niendorf by taxi from the small city of Parchim, where we had spent the night previous. (Incidentally, Parchim was next to a large Soviet army base and officers were everywhere in the morning, heading for their offices). The fifteen mile taxi ride had taken us past large collective farms with huge piles of seed potatoes protected from the harsh winter cold by mounds of straw. Workers were beginning the process of uncovering the straw from the potatoes and preparing them for spring planting. Large tractors pulling large wagons were a common sight on the roads and in the villages.

As we approached the village, we stopped at a sign which proclaimed the village of “Gross Niendorf”. What a thrill! Dad was overwhelmed as he recalled that it was here that his father, Gustav Wunrow, was born and grew up. For Dad this was a “mountaintop experience.” It was an honor for me to be part of this experience and to have had a hand in making it happen.



Imagine the sudden let down when I came to the realization that there were only a few photos left in my camera and all the other film was back at the inn in Parchim. So careful decisions about what to photograph became critical.

Now What Do We Do?

Next, we faced the urgency to decide what we should ask about here. All of our planning to this point had gone into getting to Gross Niendorf. Now we were on the spot to decide what to do next there, let alone communicating these questions in an unfamiliar language. So we inquired about a church; there wasn't one; but there was a woman who served the community as a spiritual leader.

Gross Niendorf Today

Gross Niendorf, was a small village, of about fifty or so red brick cape cod-style houses. They are set along one muddy main street and several other block-long sidestreets. There was no recognizable business area, or for that matter, anything that appeared to be a business. There was no church, only a structure that appeared to be a town hall meeting place.

A World War I monument stood in front, bearing the names of townfolk who fell in the war, including one named Wunrow. The town is presently served by a pastor who reportedly visits once every forty-five days. In the interim a female resident named Mrs. Hartz tends to the spiritual needs of Gross Niendorf. We were introduced to Mrs. Hartz and her husband and found them to be very friendly. Thanks to Dad's knowledge of the German language, rusty as it was, we were able to converse somewhat about the village.

The Village Cemetery

We inquired about the town cemetery and found it is located some distance from the town in a wooded area surrounded by cultivated field. We walked to it and found the cemetery is well-cared for. Each marker is lettered in gold. Most markers were dated within the past thirty years. We were told that earlier graves were not marked. Each grave was neatly covered with spruce boughs. It appeared to me that the cemetery was recycled often and therefore remained the same size over the years.



We were told a Wunrow family lived here before leaving for the west in 1961, as the wall was going up in Berlin. This is a typical house in Gross Niendorf, where in olden days there was room for the farm animals along side of the living quarters. Notice the large doors on the left side of the house. The man on the left is our taxi driver. I saw his taxi parked outside the Police headquarters several times, wondered if he was an informant. My guess is that he was.

Ninety Minutes Goes By Quickly

Our visit to Gross Niendorf ended about ninety minutes after it had begun. As our taxi took us back to Parchim we were filled with strong feelings of nostalgia and relief. Our long sought goal had been achieved: Dad had been to the place of his father's birth and youth. While we were to spend two more days in East Germany, including one in the city of Schwerin, there could be no highlights to match this.



Mrs. Hartz guided us toward a former Wunrow house. As we walked along the main street of the village, it was easy to image Gustav and his father, Heinrich, who walked here a century ago.



The Lutheran Dom (Cathedral) at Schwerin, Mecklenburg is a dominant feature of the city skyline. This was our last view of the city as our train headed for Hamburg in West Germany.



Dad posed with our taxi driver, the widow, and Mrs. Hartz, the community spiritual leader.

The altar in the Dom was from the 1300s.

