Peter Eckroth’s Return to Karlsruhe, Russia, 1914

By David Eckroth

My great grandfather, Peter Eckroth immigrated to the United States in 1906. His father and mother were Johann Eckroth and Mariana K. Loran (Eckroth) of Karlsruhe, Catholic Colony in the Beseran District near Odessa, Russia. Peter’s older siblings, Andreas and Rosalia (Knoll) along with their families arrived in Morton County, Dakota Territory in 1891. Siblings, George Eckroth and Barbara (Brucker)brought their families to Morton County in 1900. Peter, his wife Eva Anton (Eckroth), Michael, Franziska (Hoffman) all homesteaded near St. Anthony’s in 1906.

Peter and Eva had eleven children. They were John, George, Phillip, Monica, Ferdinand (Fred), Dany (who died during his early childhood), Anton, Jacob, Rose, Agatha, and Mary. Eva’s death remains a mystery, but I believe it had to do with complications related to the birth of Mary, the youngest child in 1914.

Peter, losing his wife made the determination to return to the old village of Karlsruhe to marry again and bring his bride back to the U.S. While gone, his oldest sons, John (19 years old) and George (my grandfather), 17 years old) would take care of the responsibilities of running the farm.

Peter Eckroth departed the U.S. on June 7, 1914. At the time of his departure, he was a 42-year old man. He arrived in Russia just as the war was breaking out and was held for military duty. Eckroth did not have his passport and couldn’t prove that he was a naturalized citizen of the U.S. He was told that his consequence for his crime of leaving Russia without permission of the Czar, some years past was life imprisonment.¹
Figure 1 Passport Application Image of Peter Eckroth and Khristina Vogel Eckroth National Archives and Records Administration (NARA); Washington D.C.; Volume 008: Russia/Tiflis/Siberia

From prison, Peter wrote his eldest son, John, describing his plight. John took the matter to State Attorney William “Wild Bill” Langer. Langer was the obvious choice as he shared the Catholic faith and spoke fluent German. Langer took up the matter with North Dakota Congressman Patrick Daniel Norton. The two men pursued this matter with Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan in hopes of obtaining the release of Peter Eckroth.ii

At first, the situation seemed hopeless as Secretary Bryan held that Eckroth had violated the German-Russian Treaty of 1868-69 and left without permission of the Czar.iii State Attorney Langer, refusing to give up, continued to correspond with Bryan to try all he could to have Eckroth released.iv

On January, 1916, nearly a year and 7 months later, Eckroth was released and reunited with his new wife, Kristina Vogel. Due to the war and blockade of the Atlantic route, the Eckroth’s were forced to travel across Russia, Siberia, to the port of Vladivostok, and then to Japan. From there they arrived in Seattle, a trip of over 11,000 miles.v

Peter, upon his return described the conditions, “From the little country community of Karlsruhe there have been 35 young girls ordered to the battle line.” He continued, “They do not fight but are ordered to dig trenches and in the commissaries and to do camp work thus letting more men on the lines for the actual fighting. The war has left a great mark on Russia. All the men and boys from 17 years old to 50 have been called to the army, and hardly a family
that has not lost a member. Food supplies are plentiful in Russia but in Poland the conditions are terrible and thousands have starved to death.”vi

By May, 1916, Peter and Khristina had arrived safely in St. Anthony’s to begin their new life together. Sadly, there was to be no long and happy life together for this couple, as Peter became ill soon after his return. On August 12, Peter died of stomach cancer. His body was taken to Kennelly’s Parlor at Mandan and later taken to St. Anthony where his funeral service was held on the following day, only four months after his return.vii
References:


ii Ibid.


vi Ibid.