

A Two-horse Journey to Visit Tante Katja

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Until we left Bessarabia in 1940 we had virtually no modern roads in our area. All travel was made on dirt roads with horse and wagon. We had access to a railway, but it had only limited connections to the other villages. Both money and convenience were major factors as to why our people chose to travel by horse and wagon rather than to use the railway.

My Grandma Pauline Zacher had a sister Katja (Katharina) Balmer that was living with her family in Neu-Dennewitz, about 60 km west of us, and close to the Rumanian border. That was a long way away, and quite time-consuming with a team of horses even in good weather. In bad weather, travel became even more difficult. My Grandmother and her sister were very close, therefore the two families visited each other twice a year on a rotating basis. One family would make the trip before the harvest, and the other would go after the harvesting was done. The weather was still good either way. Such a trip was a memorable experience. As children, we seldom got out of town and when we did it was like seeing another world. My mother had often gone on such trips, and I was allowed to make the trip in 1938 or 1939. Mom and I often talked about it and exchanged our memories of these trips.

The days leading up to the trip were exciting, and the wait held many memorable moments. When preparations got under way, excitement was in the air. From the kitchen came the aromas of Grandma baking and cooking for the trip. In the shop, Grandpa worked on his carriage to get the axels greased and the harness polished. The "Stepkischt" had to be packed - this was a trunk especially made for going away on visits or working far out in the fields. It held dishes, and there was space for food and wine, and a crock for pickled vegetables. My grandparents' "Stepkischt" was lined inside with a blue and white checkered oilcloth. For this long trip, Grandpa used the carriage that he had built - unlike the farm wagon it had four-leave springs between the frame and body. These springs made the trip more comfortable as we traveled the bumpy dirt roads. The carriage was a 4-seater carriage, with the back wheels higher than the front. The back seat could comfortably seat two adults and a kid. The front seat had no backrests, and only room for two people - much less comfortable on a long outing.

Before the trip, the horses got a good brushing and careful grooming, and were allowed extra rest. Grandpa made sure he took along a blanket for each horse, feedbags, and a big bag of feed.

When the day arrived for us to leave, my grandparents got up while it was still dark outside. Grandpa fed his horses and harnessed them, and Grandma packed the last of the food and gathered up the luggage that had been previously packed. All was loaded onto the carriage for a long day-trip.

My grandparents and I wore warm clothing and dust-overcoats. Both "Opa" and "Oma" wore a "Burka" over their clothing. A "Burka" was a long overcoat made of heavy fabric that was warm and comfortable. For protection from the rain, they used a rubberized sheet over their heads. In heat and sunlight, both wore straw hats. Over our feet we had a leather cover to protect us from the rain and mud.

As we traveled along, we passed through village after village. While each village had a marker giving it's name (in Rumanian or in Russian, even though the people living in the village spoke German), there were no maps and no road-signs to direct us. We simply went from one village to the next until we got there!

My memory of the trip is that it was long, with many stops. Grandpa and his horses understood each other well. I think "Opa" spoke the language of the horses! All he had to do to give a signal was to use a certain tone from his tongue and the horses reacted to his command. What respect those horse and "Opa" had for one another. He would not push his horses beyond what they could comfortably manage.

Along the way, we came to many dug field-wells where the horses could get a drink. As we traveled, "Opa" would have them gallop gently at a safe speed, and then he would just let them walk. Pooh they made on the go; pee was a different matter. "Opa" knew exactly when they had to do their thing. He would stop the carriage, get off and walk up beside them with a gentle stroke over their backs while softly whistling. That worked most of the time to relax them so they could pee. If that didn't work, he peed besides them - that seemed to relax the horse's muscle enough to let go. We usually stopped to rest the horses under a tree, of which there weren't many.

Most villages had no inns or restaurants, unless it was a market village. But that did not mean that one could not find food, drinks or a bed in a village. Each village had a house or two catering to travelers in exchange for a modest fee. Grandpa knew many of them - they often didn't charge him but returned the favor when they came to our town. These people valued a sense of community, they were friendly and respected hospitality. These attitudes also carried over to the care and feeding of the team of horses.

On our trip, we did stop at one family's house, as I remember. But at lunchtime, we were not near a village. "Oma" laid out a tablecloth on the ground beside the road and set out the spread of food. She had brought a lunch that remains a special memory to me. There was no shortage on goodies! Everything seemed especially appetizing.

For the entire trip, I was sitting between my grandparents. I could not see all that was going on, but I still had a pretty good view of the country-side. We went through towns where we didn't stop, but at other towns we did stop to say "Hi." To relieve my boredom, both "Oma" and "Opa" told me stories along the way. I remember "Opa" saying that there were wolves in the land, and he told me that he had seen them and that they go after sheep. "Shepherds have to watch out for them" he said. Then he told me the story of the shepherd boy who cried out "Wolves" and there weren't any. When the wolves did come one day, he cried and nobody came. Was I ever scared the rest of the trip! As we passed shepherds with their flocks, I immediately asked, "Are there wolves?" I never can forget that!

We made it to the Balmers late that day after it was dark. "Opa" took care of his horses and "Oma" unpacked. Then we ate supper and I was sent to bed. After a few days we got ready to go home again. All went as prepared and planned on the way back. Mom told me that on the return trip the horses knew they were going home and they went a little faster. "Opa" had a fancy whip on a long handle that was for show - it had two colorful tassels on it. He never used it - he didn't have to. The whip was kept in its holder on the carriage - to "Opa" it was a decoration.

These are some of the memories that made my childhood so special. The love I received as a child is with me to this day. I was also fortunate to learn that a good time can be had on very little. To be with my parents and grandparents built special memories - the time I spent with them is a gift of life for me.

As a parent, I also took our children on trips, but it was not quite the same. I could not make the gasoline smell like horses!