

Obituary of Alfred Opp

Alfred Opp, 1930-2009. Alfred Opp was born in 1930 in Teplitz, Bessarabia, which was then part of Romania. His ancestors had immigrated to South Russia from Germany in the early 1800's. While the early pioneers of Teplitz faced an up-hill battle to tame the land and establish a settlement, by the 1930's life was much more comfortable, although still full of hard work for most people. Much of village life was determined by culture and tradition. The people retained the Schwabian German language of their earlier homeland, although the Russian and then Romanian languages had been required as part of their schooling.

In July of 1940 the Russian army rolled into Bessarabia and occupied the German villages, including Teplitz. Before the people could recover from the shock, they were under the Iron Curtain. Then German officers arrived from Berlin and offered a way out. Unbeknown to the villagers, an agreement had been made between Berlin and Moscow that Russia could have the land if Germany got the people. The villagers, knowing what had happened to German Colonists under the Russians during the 1920's and 1930's, needed no second invitation. To stay and live under the Communists would mean certain terror. The vote was 99.9% in favor of evacuating Bessarabia and moving to the Fatherland. By the end of September, 1940, they were packed and on their way.

After indoctrination into the Fuhrer's philosophy and passing ethnic purity standards, the Bessarabian Germans were issued German citizenship papers. Then in the spring of 1941 they were transported to German-occupied Poland and settled on farms that had just been confiscated from Polish families. To say the least, their Polish neighbors were less than friendly.

When Alfred's father suffered a heart attack, the family was moved to Bromberg, Poland where they were settled into an apartment from which a Polish family had just been evicted. After a recovery period, Alfred's father was assigned to work in the wood-shop of the local railway yard. Alfred and his younger brother attended school in Bromberg.

When the Russians invaded Poland from the east, most of the Germans in Poland fled to Germany. Somehow, Alfred's father did not realize they should leave, and the family received no orders to evacuate. When Bromberg fell to the Russians, the Opp family felt very isolated -- one German family surrounded by Polish people who felt no sympathy for them. Alfred's father was arrested and sent to a labor camp in the Ukraine. Then Alfred's mother and baby sister were told to report to the local police station, and did not return. Alfred (then age 14) and his younger brother were alone in the apartment in the middle of one of the coldest January's on record, with only a small amount of food to try and get by. One neighbor lady had pity on them and gave them a little soup and bread from time to time.

Then the day came that the local police knocked on the door, and Alfred and his brother were taken to an internment camp that had been set up a few blocks away. There they were fed watery soup once a day, and slept in a horse stable on the straw-covered floor. The internment camp was occupied mainly by women and children, with a few old men. All males from 16 years to retirement age had been conscripted earlier into the German army, or had been arrested by the Russians. Eventually Alfred was assigned to work for a Polish farmer, and his brother was allowed to come along. The work was hard, but at least they were given food to eat. With the assistance of the farmer's brother, Alfred and his brother escaped from the farm and were able to locate their mother. The Russians moved them from one camp to another and then abandoned the camp entirely.

Alfred, his mother and brother simply walked away from the camp, but were still in the middle of unfriendly Poland. Hearing about a train of Lithuanians going west, they bribed their way onto the train with a bottle of Schnapps. The train made frequent stops to let other trains pass going the opposite direction, or to wait for railroad tracks and bridges to be repaired. Alfred had to forage the countryside during these stops to try and find food and water, as none were supplied on the train.

They finally crossed over into Germany - East Germany. Alfred found work with a local farmer, and was paid with a little food he could share with his mother and brother. Eventually they made connections with Alfred's grandparents who had also fled from Poland to East Germany. A chance meeting with a Russian army officer resulted in the grandfather's silver pocket watch being confiscated, but with the return information that the Russians were in the process of closing the border into West Germany. Alfred's grandfather immediately went to where his family was staying and they packed that afternoon and went to the train yard. A cattle-car train was about to leave for West Germany, but all the cars, although empty, had already been sealed. Again, a bottle of liquor did the trick, and a car was opened up for them. They loaded their few possessions on board and the car was resealed, with stern instructions that they were not to make a sound. As the train began to move, they could tell the general direction they traveled. Eventually they realized they must be in southwest Germany. Then the train stopped and they heard someone coming down the train, banging on the railroad cars and asking, "Is anybody in there?" The man was speaking Schwabian German, and they realized they were home safe.

But although now in "friendly" territory, they found they were not welcome. West Germany was overloaded with refugees, and the locals had more than they could take. Refugee families were assigned to one room per family. Local families were told they had to accommodate the refugees. Refugee families were lucky to have access to shared cooking facilities and shared bathrooms. Eventually, ingenious refugees began producing basic necessities like small cook-stoves from the rubble of the war. Alfred and his brother went back to school, then apprenticed to learn trades. For a time, Alfred worked for an American-run company that refurbished Army trucks and jeeps into vehicles that could be used to meet the needs of local businesses.

By 1955, Alfred felt that he needed larger horizons and greater opportunities. He decided to go to America. His mother was less than enthusiastic about such a plan. She had already lost her husband and two young children during the war, and felt that if Alfred went to America she would never see him again. It took some strong convincing from his grandmother before his mother consented. Alfred and a friend took passage on a converted troop carrier across the Atlantic and after nine days at sea they landed at Quebec City. Then they boarded an "immigrant train" - a few old passenger cars with wooden seats, coupled onto the back of a freight train. After six days they arrived in Vancouver, British Columbia. They soon found themselves processed through the Immigration Office. Standing outside on the sidewalk, they realized they had no jobs, no English, and very little money. Then a woman who spoke German approached them and asked if they needed a room to rent. They thankfully accepted her offer, but after they paid the room rent, they were down to pocket change.

Then came the search for a job. It seemed that the place teemed with newly arrived immigrants, all looking for work. After a week, Alfred offered to wash dishes at a restaurant in exchange for food. A couple of weeks later, a friend referred him to an auto seat-cover company that was looking for a worker. They paid \$.60 an hour, and Alfred had a job! Alfred gladly put in 9 to 10-hour days even though he was paid for 8 hours. When the company shortly went bankrupt, Alfred continued to work simply to have something to do. Impressed, the owners offered the business to Alfred on a handshake, if he would also take over the debts of the company. After the deal was sealed, Alfred found out they owed nearly \$80,000, including back-taxes.

Alfred and a friend worked tirelessly, including all-night shifts several days a week, to pull the business out of the deep hole it was in. The suppliers of the business sold them materials on credit and eventually forgave some of the old debt. The land-lord helped them get a small loan to pay the back-taxes. One of the previous owners worked with them part-time for a while to smooth out the transition. Customers kept coming, and eventually the business succeeded. For 33 years the company employed 12-16 workers and became a community asset.

A few months after he immigrated, Alfred asked his mother and brother to join him in Canada. In 1959 he and his mother purchased a house in Vancouver, BC. Alfred took flight lessons and became a licensed pilot, transporting tourists to vacation spots around British Columbia. In 1960 Alfred became a Canadian citizen, and in 1962 he returned to Germany to court Helgard Aipperspach, who became his wife. Alfred eventually was able to own his own home, and he and Helgard raised their two children in the Richmond, British Columbia area.

In 1989, Alfred retired from his business and was then able to pursue his life-long dream of writing out the stories he had accumulated over the years. These stories focused on his childhood growing up in Teplitz, Bessarabia and also the stories that his mother and grandmother had told him about the culture and traditions of his ancestral heritage. Then there were the stories of the war years - stories that were so difficult to re-live that he had kept them tucked away in the back of his mind for many years. By 1997, he had typed a notebook full of his stories and ancestral genealogical information. In 2006 he sent his notebook to the Glueckstal Colonies Research Association, and his first book began to take shape. "Pawns on the World Stage" was published in August of 2007. But Alfred continued to write, and in October of 2008 "How the East Was Won" was published. By the time his second book came off the press, Alfred had written enough additional material that it was clear a third book would soon follow. "Our Roots Grew Deep in the Russen Soil" was published in April 2009.

During the time that his stories were being prepared for publication, Alfred was battling metastatic cancer. Through the struggles of chemotherapy, he found that writing his stories gave him a feeling of wellness that helped make his treatments more tolerable. Alfred wrote so that the memories of Teplitz and the life of the Bessarabian Germans would not be forgotten. Alfred wrote for his children and grandchildren, and for all of his people. In the stories he has written, Alfred has offered to us the treasure of the culture and history of the German Colonists in South Russia. His writing will continue to be an on-going memorial and a tribute to his love and regard for his people and their life in Bessarabia.

Alfred Opp passed away Saturday morning, September 5, 2009. He was 79. He is survived by his wife Helgard, their son Bernard and daughter Rita, and their families.