

How the East Was Won

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This piece of writing is dedicated to the German women of my ancestry who in the 19th century went to Russia to get a fresh start. How courageous they were, going that long distance, struggling against hardship and risking death. These were women with big hearts who were determined to realize their dream for freedom. Both the written histories and the family stories passed down speak of the pain and suffering it took breaking new ground to establish life in the new area, and how much of the responsibility rested on the shoulders of these women. Today, one can only guess what life was like then and the enormous sacrifice that was asked of these women. I was fortunate to grow up in a family that lived up to their traditions and who kept the memory of the family history alive, both before and after their life in Russia. The stories I tell are dedicated to those women who, against all odds, gave heart and soul in support of their husbands and families. I'm proud to say that we had such women in our family – I was told their stories and also spent my life living among them. These were ordinary women, whose life circumstances demanded much. What the women in my family gave was not out of the ordinary for the times in which they lived. For most, they were living ordinary lives when a turn of events challenged them with the unexpected. Their determined response to the challenge is what makes their story extra-ordinary.

My great-great-grandma Justine Wirth (1809-1875), born in South Germany, was the second oldest of five children. When she was 15 years old her mom passed away, and her dad died seven years later. Living conditions in South Germany at that time had reduced most people to poverty. Justine took in her younger sisters and brother, and provided a home for them. Living poor and with little hope for a better life in Germany, the family made the decision to leave for Russia. In 1834 Justine and her siblings made the trek to South Russia, settling in a colony in Bessarabia. Soon her two younger sisters found mates and got married. Justine and her brother moved in with them. Together the family began building a hut for shelter. It was a start, but living conditions weren't much better than the cave age.

Due to the many deaths as a result of the poor living conditions, it seemed that someone was always looking for a new wife or husband. This was not a matter that involved much choice. As long as the prospective mate could stand up and had a good pair of hands, the decision was easy. Love came cheap. Justine found a partner in August Stephan (1799-1859), a traveling tradesman who did woodwork on a makeshift lathe. Justine and August Stephan married in 1839, then settled in a nearby-village. As a wife and mother, Justine settled into her role and gave birth to eight children. Her second child, Maria Magdalena Stephan (1842-1917), at age 17 married Andreas Erfle and became my great-grandmother. Maria Magdalena and Andreas Erfle had 15 children, six of whom died at birth. As we look back at these pioneer women, we see the historic achievements that they accomplished simply by keeping their families alive.

Even though the Tsar promised aid to each settler family upon arrival, what was actually provided was generally far less than promised. The families were limited in what they could bring with them to Russia, and had very limited resources to work with once they arrived. Every piece of material of any sort was used and reused. Oma

Opp often told us grandchildren how valuable a rag was. In the pioneer years there were little if any near-by markets from which to purchase goods. Even if there had been, folks had very little to trade with. They lived on what they could produce themselves. The tools and equipment supplied to them were ancient and of little use.

When they arrived in Bessarabia, the land was virgin grassland that had never been plowed. Although the topsoil was deep and of excellent quality for farming, the first challenge the farmers faced was to get rid of the weeds and the rodents. To be able to retain moisture and withstand drought, the soil needed to be deeply plowed. This was impossible with the available wooden plows that barely scratched the surface of the ground. To get rid of the weeds, the roots had to be collected by hand after the soil was tilled. On or off the field, a woman's hand was needed to help with every job. At home she had to look after her housework, the children and food preparation. That work in itself took up most of her day shift. Then she had to make time to spin yarn, weave fabric, cut and sew clothing – all without the assistance of any mechanical device. Her time to sleep was cut short – very short.



Regina (Mueller) Zacher and her daughters: Hulda Opp b. 1907, Klara Kehrer b. 1910, and Pauline Zacher b. 1909. Photo taken about 1946 near Stuttgart, Germany.

My grandma Regina "Regge" Erfle (1867-1943) was Maria Magdalena Erfle's third oldest child. Growing up on a small farm and raising a large family was hard. With their low income, her parents found it necessary to send her away as a young girl to earn a living. She worked very hard and conscientiously so as to not dishonor her family. She often told us how sad she was to not be at home with her family, but she found comfort in the Lord. The Erfle family was known to be hard working and honest - Regge should have been considered a bargain for any young man to ask for her hand in marriage. But it was not until she was 29 years old that widower and wagon maker Heinrich Opp asked Regge to be his wife. On May 9, 1896 she said yes. Heinrich already had two children under the age of five living at home. Three more

children came into their marriage, of which my dad was the youngest. Heinrich and Regge Opp pooled their resources together, worked hard and saved enough money for a down payment on a place. Now they worked even harder to get ahead. Regge took the lead at home, caring for the family and with frugality saving all the money she could. Heinrich became ill from working long hours in his trade shop, and died in 1905. With five children in tow and a debt over her head, Regge was fighting a hard battle alone. Her strong will and solid character became her most important resources. She literally worked day and night to pay off the debt on their house. She did laundry, took in mending, pickled vegetables, smoked meat and was a productive field worker. She was both graceful and also gave her children the backbone they needed to succeed in life. Regge survived the Trek back to Europe in 1940 only to die of a gallbladder problem in 1943 at the age of 75 on a farm in Poland. My Oma Regina "Ahna" Opp never saw a doctor in her life. To me she was an angel.

The story of my great-great-great-grandma Anna Katharina Krämer (1794-1834) is a tragic one. She gave birth to seven children, three of whom were illegitimate, a sinful act. As a young woman, Katharina came with her parents to Teplitz, Bessarabia in 1817 and married a young black-smith Siegismund Kämmler (1798-1822).

Together they made their start on a homestead. They had one child: Siegismund “Simon” Kämmler (1822-1881). When her husband died in 1822, Teplitz was in the pioneer stages of its beginning, with everybody trying to get started building a new life in an untamed area, and so was Katharina. She was in a difficult position as to what direction to take. Soon the responsibilities of taking care of an infant and working the farm without a husband became too much for her. In those days and under those circumstances, the time spent mourning for one’s lost mate was short-lived. Katharina had to find a man immediately to work the farm. One day she met that man – Alexander Schaderu – someone she felt she could trust. They went to work where Katharina had left off. They became romantically involved and they lived their life as a family but without the benefit of a legal marriage. Katharina had three illegitimate children with Alexander - something that was out of character and scandalous in those days. She was lucky to not get spit at or chased out of town. Why no marriage? The family believes there was a difference in religion. Alexander was not willing to give up on his religion, nor was Katharina willing to give up on hers. There was no such thing as civil marriage in those days, and neither religion allowed a mixed marriage. Katharina likely saw her choice as an innocent one, driven by necessity, a choice that took a risk. It didn’t work out. Eventually Alexander left, leaving Katharina now with four children. Katharina bravely faced the consequences of her mistake and failure. She did not give in to failure and survived the set back. Eventually she got back a respectable life when she married an honest man, Christoph Handel (1803-1868), for whom she bore three more children. One month after her last child was born, Katharina’s heart stopped at the age of 40. Katharina paid her dues. I cannot condemn her conduct as shameful or sinful. Each soul encounters many challenges; with some we succeed and with others we don’t. We are human. The church agreed to allow her three illegitimate children to take the name of her first husband, Kämmler – this was an act of conciliation and gave the children dignity. Her firstborn son Siegismund “Simon” Kämmler (b. 1822) grew up to be one of Teplitz’ great citizens. Thanks to the leadership of “Simon” Kämmler, Teplitz became a better place to live. “Simon” Kämmler died at the age of 59 of “men’s illness” – apparently prostate disease. “Simon” Kämmler’s daughter Maria Kämmler (1855-1916) married Jakob Zacher and became my great-grandmother.

Turning to another family line, Eva Ehman (1832-1875), my great-great-grandma, was born in war-torn East-Prussia. The family was constantly on the move during their life in East Prussia. Constantly they were searching for a permanent place to settle, but it didn’t happen in Prussia. In 1839 the family emigrated to South Russia and finally found their place in Teplitz, Bessarabia. Eva’s mother gave birth to 12 children, but only five – all girls – survived. Eva was the second oldest. What a difficult time these folks had. But Eva wasn’t about to give up. The parents farmed their homestead until they died. Eva’s sisters married very young. Eva took a job working at a village close by to Teplitz. She started seeing a young lad, Jakob Michael Gerber (1833-1908), a well-to-do young man from Teplitz. They became romantically involved and soon Eva was pregnant. Having a sense of honor, the young couple decided to marry and went to see the Pastor. Eva took the blame on herself. The Pastor told the couple that the marriage could not be held in the church, but they could be married privately in his office. Eva was advised as to the penance that was required for her misdeed. As directed, Eva attended church dressed in black to face the congregation. Only then was permission given for the couple to be married in private. But the groom’s parents gave a handsome donation to the church’s charity fund to persuade the Pastor to bend the rules, and Eva and Jakob got their rightful church wedding. Jakob was 18 years old, and Eva was 19. Jakob Gerber was an ambitious young man and did well. Eva gave birth to 13 children, and eight survived to build their lives on the successes of their parents. But the shadow from Jakob and Eva’s romance remained with them to the day they died. Their unexpected first child, Regina Gerber (1851-1898) married Johann Erhard Müller and became my great-grandmother. After she married Johann Müller (1849-1908), Regina bore 12 children, five of whom survived to adulthood. Regina was such a good mom. She died of a gallbladder problem at the age of 46.

Her life could have been saved, but she refused to go to Odessa to see a doctor who could have helped her. That much trust in doctors she did not have. My Oma Paulina Müller was 10 ½ years old when her mother died. Paulina Müller (1888-1971) married Simon Zacher (1879-1945) and they had four daughters, three of whom survived to adulthood. Their oldest daughter was my mother, Anna Hulda Zacher (1907-1998). My Oma Paulina Zacher was talented in music and needlework, in addition to being an excellent cook and hostess. She strongly supported both education and culture for her daughters.

My mother Anna Hulda Zacher (1907-1998) married Andreas Opp (1902-1949) in 1929. During the first years of their marriage, mom and dad did well in Teplitz. Mom gave birth to five children, of which I was their firstborn and my brother Oskar was their third-born. One baby died in infancy in Teplitz and two more infants were war casualties in Europe. Before their marriage, dad was in the wagon-making business in Teplitz, and owned his own home. All went well until 1936 when Dad came down with rheumatic fever, the aftereffects of which he never overcame. With Dad not able to continue in the trade work, the family hit a financial wall. When in 1940 we were offered the resettlement program to return to Europe, it was felt that this would be a solution. It was not to be. The Trek and resettlement was the beginning of the end. The downhill path led not to settlement in Germany, but to resettlement in Poland amid hostile neighbors in a country occupied by Germany. Both common people and occupiers were blind to morality – they were in a fight for survival. At the end of the war, we Germans in Poland took the brunt of the hostile feelings of the Poles toward their occupiers and we were exposed to brutal retaliation. Our family paid a heavy price. Dad was arrested in 1945 and taken to a labor camp in the Ukraine where he was worked to death under starvation conditions. Mother, four months pregnant, was taken into custody with two-year old Inge (b. Sep 23, 1942 Suchary Poland) and in 1945 was placed into a detention camp near Bromberg [Bydgoszcz], Poland with inhumane conditions and starvation rations. Inge became severely malnourished and was taken away to the hospital - we never saw her again. My brother Oskar (age 9) and I (age 15) were taken into custody and were forced to work on a farm outside of Bromberg. Mom got a break from the Soviets who arranged her freedom since she was a German born in Russian territory. My brother and I got a break and escaped to join our mother. Together with other “Russians” we miraculously got out of Poland and made our way back to Germany – East Germany. There, mother gave birth to a stillborn baby boy. Mom was badly infected, weak and helpless – she came very close to dying. She fought back gallantly to stay alive for us. When the Soviets decided to partition off East Germany, we made a dash for West Germany. We arrived homeless, dejected and poor. But we had our mother, grandmother, and aunts, and slowly they nurtured us back to life. Mother would not have survived if she had not inherited her feisty pioneer spirit from our ancestors. With our backs against the wall, we learned to fight for our life as our ancestors had. What a God-given strength that is. Escaping from hell and getting to freedom is an experience so deep that at times it is difficult to explain. You truly come to feel the power of God combined with your human strength. When Mom, Oskar and I settled in Canada, we were able to rebuild our lives. To this day we are thankful for life and the ability to share that gift. Mom had a good life here in Canada and was with us to the end. During her dying days we were very close. As we had said so often, we again said at the moment of her passing, “Thank you, Mother.” She didn’t have to answer – she knew. God bless you, Mother, and rest in peace.