

Interview with Alfred Opp (Part 1) – Childhood

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When and where were you born?

Well, I was born 22 June 1930 in Teplitz, Bessarabia which is today part of the Ukraine.

Have you ever heard an interesting story about your birth?

Yah, matter of fact I did. It's quite funny, actually. My mother told me more than once that when I was born that she had a heck of a time because my head was too big. So I told my mother, Well, you know I had no complaints about that because lots would get in.

Was a mid-wife or a doctor present at your birth?

No - we didn't have a doctor at my birth. We had a midwife - she was very good at it. Actually my grandmother Zacher brought along another midwife who was long retired, who assisted her during my birth. She had a lot more confidence than the other one. But it didn't matter because both midwives did a pretty good job. And that's why I'm here!

Please share with us some of your earliest memories.

Well, I can remember about, I would say about four - I was four years old - and I can remember a little bit, that I wandered off. My mom was busy doing the wash (laundry). But she had a baby-sitter - a girl from next door, she was about three or four years older than me, but she ran away, so I was all by myself and I wandered off out to the shepherd's field because we used to live at the end of the town. By the time my mom realized that I was gone, she panicked. So she called my dad who was working in the wagon-making shop - and then he asked the neighbors all around, but he couldn't find me. But finally, looking all around, by the evening my dad went out to the shepherd's shack which was out about a kilometer away, out in the field, and the shepherd said, "Yah, I picked up a kid and he's over in the shack." So my dad went up and brought me home. Well, I tell you, I still appreciate what the shepherd did, because there was another danger out there in those fields - mostly from open wells where they used to water their animals. I could have fallen in. But that's about it - I can't remember too much - I can remember a little bit sitting on the shepherd's back - that he carried me in.

But I can remember a little bit about the bed he had, that he called a goiga. What is a goiga? A goiga is a bed, a sort of fold-bed. There were a lot of sheepskins on it. I was laying in it. But that's about all I can remember.

Now we're going to focus on your childhood in Bessarabia. Please tell me a little bit about the house you grew up in.

Well, we lived in a house that was pretty well standard in all of Bessarabia. It looked like a long house. The gables were all toward the street. I can go into that later, why it was like that. We had the main house a little higher above the ground than the rest of it, because we had a flooding problem. We lived close to a river that flooded quite often. So, there was a parlor with three bedrooms. Then three or four steps down was the kitchen that we called the winter kitchen. The kitchen was where we spent a lot of time - it was like a family room. That was where the cooking was done, where the eating was done, where the socializing was done, all of that. For the simple reason it was easy to maintain and easy to live by.

Now the house was built with the gable to the street and the workshop came after, and the stable, the barn and the chicken bin and so forth were after. The summer kitchen and cellar were close to the end of the property. The reason for us having a winter and summer kitchen, that has been said in one of the articles that I wrote.

The family that I grew up in, my mom and dad, it was a very, very nice family life that I had. I was given a lot of room. I could play with animals. It was really nice. Because at any time my mom had to look after about four or five workers in my dad's shop, she was often quite busy. So, I spent a lot of time at my grandparent's place that was in the middle of the town, right across the street from the church, the store and the hall. So that was a very, very pleasant time for me, because I learned a lot. I got a lot of warmth and love from it, but also a lot of memories, because my grandparents, both of them, they talked a lot about the past time. And I was always interested in it because they were so good in explaining it, talking about it. So as a young child, you see, I was six or seven years, I got excited about it, I always wanted to know what they were talking about. Because, you see, we had no television - I mean no radio (forget about television!) - no radio or telephone to get distracted on. So that was our main thing in the evening, after my grandfather read his Abend gebet, read out of the Bible, then, you know, we sat around and we did some talking. It was a wonderful time.

Also, my grandparents made sure that I went to kindergarten - we had a kindergarten. There I learned a little bit of craft, we did some plays and all like that. It was very nice. So, for me it was a wonderful time.

But then, when the time came for school - to go to school - again because in the winter there was lots of snow, and we were quite a ways away, it took a lot of time to go from our house to the school which was across the street from my grandparents. So I spent most of the wintertime there at my grandparents.

I want to tell you something. I was always a kid on the go. I was always a lively guy, also very talkative. So, the people, going from my place to the other one, they always said, "Hey, little Alfred, come over here. What is new?" But one time I said, "Well, nothing. My mother did the baking and all her bread turned black." So, I didn't think that went over very well with my mom. But anyway, I was an open kid that everybody kind of liked, because of me being so active, running, things like that.

So, I remember very well a couple or three ladies that came out to me, not only me but there was another kid that was there, they had no candies or anything to pass out like today - a piece of chocolate or anything - so they gave us dried fruit, called Schnitz or Hutzla. Now this was always a little treat. So I put it in my pocket, and said "Thank you" and so on. So there were so many little things that made my childhood so pleasant, that other kids today would think nothing of, that would take it for granted. But we didn't.

Now going to school I was very fortunate because I was not good at school, because my mind was always busy with something else - playing out in the field and so on. So, I wasn't good at school. So, my aunt, my mom's sister had to help me out, and my mother and my parents helped me out, but they had a little bit of a struggle with it, because, like I said, my mind was always someplace else.

I want to tell you something - there was no mercy. If the school teacher felt that I wasn't listening or hadn't my mind on it, out came the rod. I felt that at least once a week. Now going and telling my parents about it and my parents going back to the teacher, they would never have heard of it. If I told my parents about it I got another lesson with the rod. So, I never complained about it, you know. So, well, I can't complain - my teacher and I, we later became good friends. So that was basically about my childhood.

I went to church regularly, and also I made a friend with the gravedigger. His name was Hansjerg Kramer. I remember him very well. We called him Hansjergvetter. What was so unique about it is he took me to church to ring the bells. Now we had three bells in the church. That is a very fond memory of mine. There was a big one, a small one, and one in the middle. So, he let me ring the small one. And was I ever proud

But one time he was busy working in the church the and the Vikar wanted to practice the organ, so he said "Go up there and step on the organ pedal." Now, it was a step up, step down pedal - you had to step on and push that pedal down. Oh, that was hard! I was only a hundred pounds, so I did my best for a little while. He had the confidence that I could do it, and after I was done the Vikar gave me a candy - a wrapped candy I may add, because they were very hard to come by. Usually we had not very much of that. But to have wrapped candy! Oh, boy, did I ever like that one. So that's basically about it.

You talked a little bit about your grandparents living nearby and some aunts. Who lived in your home with you and what other family members lived in the same community?

Well, no, I lived in the same house with my parents, you know, and my little brother came later. But in the community halfway up to my grandparents was my Opp grandmother. She was a great, great lady, but she didn't have the money for things like my Zacher grandparents did. My grandmother Pauline Zacher's father, his name was Mueller, he was the richest man in Teplitz. But, anyway, my grandmother Opp - - I will tell you about my grandma Opp. It was during the harvest time and we had grapes - a lot of grapes and watermelon -- a lot of fruit. I was at her house and I ate a little bit too much of that stuff. What I got was diarrhea sort of thing. So, actually I was about five years old, and to go to the outhouse sometimes there wasn't enough time, so my grandmother Opp, she had a solution for that. So, she took my pants off, and she took a kettle that she preheated, turned it upside down, put a towel over it and sat me on it. Now you tell me - I can't tell you how it helped, but it did help. The diarrhea was gone! I don't know - we still talk about this. My cousin who is about five years older, in Germany talked about it and she laughed. She said, "Whatever came out of you - I never thought that so much was in you." But that's the way it was - I just ate too much of that stuff.

Where did you go to the bathroom?

Well, I don't want to say this on camera, but we had a bathroom everywhere - us kids, that is. But usually we had an outhouse, that was at the other end of the property, that was made out of wood about 4-5 feet by 4-5

feet and so high, and there was a hole in it and one look into it and it scared the hell out of you, when you looked in to see it. So, you didn't bother to look into it too much. So, we sat down on it and did our thing, but there was no lid on it either. So, us boys, you know, we usually go behind someplace on way out to the yard somewhere and did our thing there. But the outhouse - oh, it was quite something. My grandfather had a nice one. But my folks didn't have a nice one. Because with all the workers they had to move it every two to three weeks. Forget it! That's the bathroom that we used to use.

How about taking baths - where did you take baths?

OK. Well, the bath is something else. Every Saturday night in our house, my mother had a wash basin that she used to wash clothes in, and she filled that up with water. To get hot water, that was not easy. We had to bring in the water from outside, heat it up on a stove that was made out of mud bricks, get a fire going with straw and everything else we had, because we had no forest for wood -- absolutely nothing! We used corncobs and anything that burned. Everything was saved. Cow manure - you know, go out in the fields where they had the cows and all, the cow patties. We collected them and so did other people. So anyway, that's where we heated the water. There it was put into the wash basin. First, in came the kids, standing up. So, my mother washed us all down with soap - with homemade soap of course. Only in later years did we have what was called Schmeck Seife. Now Schmeck Seife is a smelling soap - it had fragrance to it. And that we only used on the weekends, you know. But my dad remembered, to just mention it, that he bought it a little bar earlier in the 1920's which was actually quite rare. He couldn't buy it in Teplitz, but out of town some place. And he used to put it in his pocket when he'd go off for a date, so that he smelled good.

Anyhow, let's go back. After the kids were through, my dad had a bath and washed. When my dad was washed, my mother went in. She was always the last. Now, the woman always took the last thing as far as comfort is concerned. Then we got our underwear and our mother schaffed us to bed. And my mom and dad were sitting around and socializing, but we had been schaffed to bed. Then, naturally, the next day we all went to church. We got a new set of clothes, what we wear during the daytime. We had only one pair of shoes, one pair of pants, one shirt and one jacket that was meant for Sundays. The rest of it was all old stuff, hand-downs, you know, and so on. But that's what it was. Also, my mother, when we go to bed, always made sure we said our prayer. This I remember so well. I could barely talk, and I was three or four years old, the *Liebe Heiland mach mich fromm das Ich in den Himmel komm*. That says, "Jesus make me fromm - holy - so that I can go to heaven." I'll always remember that, and I prayed that for years and years and years. How beautiful.

What were some of your favorite childhood past-times when you played?

Oh, I had many. I was allowed to play with animals. I want to tell you this was a beautiful time. My grandfather raised horses. He was a blacksmith. Now one thing - he treated me special because he had three girls. They wished they would have a boy, but he never came. So, when I came, I was treated just like a royal. They were so proud of me, being a boy. So, my grandfather made sure that I learned enough and got to know things so I could hold a hammer, ring the anvil - he made sure I liked what I did. He let me hold a piece of iron while he beat on it. "Good boy!" - "Du bist mein knechtle" which translates "You are my little helper." *Das eine muss Ich noch sagen. Wir in Teplitz haben Schwabisch geschwetzt. Une ein (schönes) schwabisch. Fast dass gleiche als wir zuruck*

gekomme sind. What I'm trying to explain is that we spoke an older Schwabish dialect - more or less the same like where our ancestors came from. That's why I said this. So, a lot of those words that we had, we used. Teplitz was actually one town that kept the dialect pretty well intact. A few words of Russian got into it, but not very much of it. So anyway, that was it.

And then back home my dad allowed me to have pigeons. Now, that was something else! The pigeons took care of themselves, mind you, but I was feeding them, or trading these to other ones for different races.

But one time - I want to tell you about a time I had because I liked the animals very much. We had a lot of shepherds for caretakers of the animals. Like for instance, in the morning the guy came around with a big whip that made a whip-noise. When he whistled he said I'm here, and everybody let their cows out and the calves, and out they all went. The same thing they did with the horses, the young ones. But the shepherd always had a donkey with him. He would sit on it, you know. One time he came with the donkey and he had a little one. How I did love that little one! I looked at it every day. I said, "Gee," I told my mom and dad, "I'd like to have that little donkey." And she said, "You're not going to have a little donkey - what are you going to do with it? It belongs to the herder - to the caretaker." So one day I thought, Well, I'm going to get me the little one - it was going along so tiredly behind his mom - it was about ten yards behind. So I looked around to make sure that nobody was looking and I went out there and grabbed it around the neck and I put it in, and the little donkey didn't resist one bit. So I went out there and I put it into the barn. So the shepherd must have looked around after a while and saw that the little one was gone. But he took care of his flock and later in the evening he came around asking if anybody had seen that little donkey. I was in trouble, I thought. He came to my dad, and my dad said, "No, I didn't see - I didn't see nothing." I was standing right beside him. So that's about the first white lie that I came up with. So, well, after a while the little donkey was making a noise and my dad went out there and he saw it, and the next thing you know I was over his knee and I got the whole thing on it. Not so much because I took that little donkey but because I lied. Well, that was a big lesson, and he was right. So he eventually took the donkey and went, and led him back to his mom. That was one big lesson that I took. Boy, was I in big trouble then!

Well, another story about animals. My grandfather had a lot of sheep that a shepherd took care of. Sometimes a sheep rejected its young one. So they brought it to the farmer and the farmer had to take care of it and feed it with a bottle. Now my grandmother was so busy, and my grandfather he also had a smithy shop. So she said (well, I was right there), "You take the bottle and feed the little lamb." OK! I would like that! But I would regret it too! Because when you feed that little thing he never leaves your side. I couldn't play with my friends hide and seek. He followed me to school - he followed me everywhere, always wanting the bottle! Well, anyway, sooner or later he grew up on it. But that was an experience.

Oh, another story I want to tell - this is the most important - about horses - that helped me in later life so much. My grandfather had never got rid of a horse unless it was really sick, but only if it was old and done its job. He had one he called Lydia. I remember she had arthritis. And I remember my grandfather being a little bit of a vet - he made horse shoes so he was a little of a vet, too. He had some big pails made out of canvas. And he filled them with water and put something in it. And he went over to the horse, tapped her leg and the horse knew exactly what to do - (lifted her leg) - he put the pail in place and she stepped right in - to get infection out. So, after, he let me do that, you know, tap the leg and the horse put the foot up and put it back into the pail. So I did that with Lydia.

And in the wintertime, when the horses weren't all so busy, they had to get out and be walked about. So he gave me Lydia, that old horse, to take it out in the snow. And I had a sled. It was quite a big one - three kids could sit on it. So I harnessed it up, and I was pulling my sled up and down the street. Boy, was I ever popular! Oh - - Well, all the neighbors' kids hitched their other ones on, and we went up and down and up and down. Every once in a while, I would say, "Lydia, hisch," you know, and use a little bit of the whip. "Hisch, Lydia." And Lydia was sort of plodding along and then, you know, went faster. Well, we had a lot of fun. So, I'm telling you we were rich having the animals.

And not only that, we made all our own toys. We had a pocketknife to make our own toys. And we played with it. We did everything that you could possibly dream up. We did it on our own. Oh, we were excited from morning to night.

What was your favorite toy?

Oh, gosh, we called it knochen hutcha. Now this is a little hard to explain. This is a bone joint from the lower part of the horse's leg. We had like a graveyard for animals, way out there. You couldn't get close to it, it stank so much. But every once in a while, some of the bigger boys went out and got the joints and we would pretend this was a horse. Anything else - I just played games with my friends, I think. But that one we had, and the way we painted it a little bit, and there we put a string around, like we would make a little wagon, or pull something to slide along. That's the way we played, jah.