

Interview with Alfred Opp (Part 10) – A New Life in Canada

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Boarding the immigrant train at Quebec, we found that it was one from the 1920's still, with wooden benches. There were about 3 or 4 of these old passenger cars that were put into service at the end of a freight train that was going west. Now you can imagine! It took us six days to get across Canada!

I started out with very little money - I had very little money to start with. But during the six days, we had to feed ourselves. Lucky enough - I don't know where I got the idea, but Gerhard and I had collected left-over food on the ship. The seasick people weren't eating that much, and so we collected bread and made sandwiches. So on the train we ate a bunch of sandwiches. That lasted for 2-3 days. Then after that, anytime the train stopped we were looking out for food. I remember this especially in Regina where there was a woman outside selling hot dogs. And brother! Did they ever taste good. So we made it through on that.

In Vancouver there was an immigration office. They took us in for a little bit of questioning and to check our papers. No English - absolutely no English! He shook our hands and pushed us out the door. Welcome to Canada! So there we were. Now what? Gerhard and I were standing there outside the immigration office for a while. Lucky enough, there were volunteers that came to help, and there was this German lady. She was quite short. She said in German, "Kann ich Euch helfen?" - that means, "Can I help you?" Oh, ya gerne! we said, Of course! So she went in and called a taxi, and said, "Well you come to my house, and you can stay at my place until you find a job."

The two of us stayed in one room, and we paid her \$8.00 a week. I had about \$40.00 with me. And we had to buy our food. Getting a job quickly was easier said than done. We walked the streets day after day after day. Gerhard got a job right away - he was a machinist. But I was an upholsterer, a harness maker. You must be kidding! There was no job like that! And don't forget there were many people moving in at that time in 1955. People came from Scandinavia, from Italy - from everywhere! The interesting thing was how to get a job for all those people. So what finally happened, I met a Swiss guy at a restaurant where I washed dishes for him for a while and he gave me food that was left over that he wasn't able to sell. One day I met another Swiss guy who worked as a part-time accountant for an auto upholstery shop - an auto upholstery shop. This was the contact I needed! So I told him that I was nearly a month without work and I had absolutely no more money - I had only a little pocket change. I was really desperate. I had even applied to cut trees - cut off tops of trees - up in a logging camp. So the guy said to this lady, "Do you want him to get killed?" Every time someone asked if I could do it, I said, Yes - no matter what it was!

So this Swiss guy gave me the address of the auto upholstery shop, and it was in Vancouver on East Broadway. I walked in with only a few words of English. There were three guys there. I asked if they needed help, and they said, "Yes." Well! It was 65 cents an hour, but I couldn't care less - they could have paid me 10 cents an hour, as long as I got the job! But they paid me 65 cents an hour, which was big money! So they hired me on. They said, "Come tomorrow morning - we open up at 8 AM." I was there at 6:30 or 7, not to miss it. I walked all the way

from the west end to East Vancouver - quite a long way - because I didn't have the fare for the street cars. So I walked. And I walked into the shop and they gave me a job. After I had worked there for about an hour and a half, one of the guys motioned me and said, "Come here, let's go for coffee" - him and I. Oh, did I ever feel like I was in a jam! I thought he was testing me, offering me coffee instead of working. "That's the way they do it," I felt. So I went in there for coffee, and I drank the coffee down so fast I burned my tongue. Then I ran back to the shop and kept on working! So the guy must have thought, "He's nuts!" But I was so anxious to hang onto my job - I didn't want to lose it!

I learned very quickly and worked my way up. They did no sewing by sewing machine, and no tailoring and cutting - things I had learned in Europe. The European way is more exact, more time consuming. Well, they did it their way as long as it ended up looking good. All we did was put seat covers on top of old car seats - and we did some repairs. We also sold ready-made seat covers - it was easy to learn to put them on. So I did quite well, and they were pleased with me.

Then three months down the road a problem developed - they declared bankruptcy! Now what? While they were trying to sell the shop, I went in every day and worked for nothing. What that did for me is I learned English - and every once in a while I got 50 cents or a dollar for a tip. I also learned the trade. The owners said nothing, but after they couldn't sell the shop one of the three partners came to me with an interpreter and offered to give the business to me, debt and all. So I said, "Yes."

And so on January 1, 1956, I opened up the Seat Cover Center under new ownership. In the beginning it was just me, Alfred Opp. Then Horst Juraschek came a month later. I opened up the shop and people came in. I found the business had a lot of work orders, a lot of customers, but they had mismanaged the business very badly. They got greedy. They bought themselves new cars. All of a sudden they were \$8,500.00 in the hole. Beside that, they were also 3 months behind in their rent - that was \$450.00 a month with taxes and utility bills. As the new owner of the business, I now owed that money to the creditors. And all that I had in the bank was \$85.00. Can you imagine? Now the one who helped me was the landlord we rented the suite from, who lived across the alley - Mr. Perry. He was a businessman. He loaned me \$200.00.

And the people came in! And I spoke no English! Stuttering wouldn't help in this situation! The phone would ring - I could say "Seat Cover Center" - and then hang up. I didn't know what to do! So the landlord Mr. Perry came in and worked half a day. Then a customer came in who spoke a little German, and he volunteered to answer the phone and help me. That went on for a couple of weeks, and I was still busy. I was the only employee. I answered the phone, I was the salesman, and I also did the work. I worked day and night! Then one of the previous partners - Ralph Barrick - came by and said, "Well, I'll work for you on 5% gross." Naturally, we had to make the deal through an interpreter. He said, "I'll do the managing, I'll answer the phone, and I will work with you." Well! That was a blessing from the sky! So that's what we did. We still worked day and night, and so did Ralph - except he was married and worked the odd nights. He worked from 8 AM until 6 or 7 PM. In the meantime I took Harry, my other German buddy, in as a partner, and we worked a day and a night, a day, and slept that night; worked a day and a night, a day and then slept that night. We only took home enough money to pay the rent and eat. Everybody thought we would never get out of that hole, because in 1955 for \$8,500 you could buy a house! Plus we owed another \$1,200.00, plus back taxes, plus government income tax, plus, plus - it never ended! We had to pay! And we also had to purchase supplies! The suppliers knew we were trying very hard, so they sent everything C.O.D. plus a dollar or two or five added on to it. Sooner or later some of them

wrote off what we owed, and some eventually gave us a good discount on what we owed. Anyway, we managed to climb out of the hole.

In 1962, I married Helgard, my soulmate - that also was a blessing from the sky! I was able to buy a house and pay off the mortgages. We raised two kids, and life went on from there.

With the business, my partner and I got out of the hole, and we had up to sixteen employees at a time. From the old ordinary seat cover work, we went into the installation of some other manufactured goods used in the modernizing of cars. We had the business for 33 years. When we left, we owed not one cent. We had made a lot of friends through honesty and dignity. Harry and I walked away as very, very proud Canadians - citizens of this country that gave us a chance and trusted us. The Canadian people, I have to add, were also very kind to a couple of immigrant boys who wanted to make a living here in Canada. They showed us their kindness and we lived up to it, paid our taxes, raised our families, and my daughter is interviewing me! She is very successful in her job, and so is our son Bernard.

Let's back up a little bit and talk about your mother and your brother coming to Canada.

Yes, that's a good question. I always felt sorry for my mother. We got to Alfdorf in 1945. My grandfather died December 18, 1945, then we got the news of my father's death through a fellow inmate of his who was in Russia. And I want to say this: My dad worked in the Ukrainian forced labor camp chopping big rocks into smaller rocks. And he had to sleep out in the open for a month before they put up a roof over their heads. My dad was not well, and when his health deteriorated they put him in a shed for the dying with no medical attention, and that's where he died. But a guy came out who survived that camp in Dnjeprstroj, Russia - actually not too far from Bessarabia, and this guy gave us the news of my dad's death. And then my grandfather died - he and his brother died the same day from typhoid fever.

My mother first worked for a farmer so we could have food on the table. She worked for the farmer until the new currency came in. Then she worked for the Forestry Department in Germany. I don't know much about what she did, but she had to take branches off of little trees, or cut small stock off so there would be light and space so the rest of the forest could grow. She made good money for her work in the forest. And on Saturday and Sunday she waited on tables in restaurants. She scraped up all the money she could to make a living.

After I had been in Canada about a year - I had rented a house with my partner, so we had our own house along with Gerhard - we called him Jerry. He was working as a machinist. We were doing our own cooking at home. I wrote letters to my mom and I asked my mom if she wanted to come over. There never was a question! She wanted to be with me. My brother Oskar was 19 years old at the time. He was reluctant to come because he had friends. He was in a sports club, and he had a good job making washing machines at a factory. My mother wouldn't leave Germany without him. So reluctantly he came along.

Naturally, my mom took over right away, doing the cooking, the washing, and looked after us. All the other boys paid board. She managed the money so well that there was a little left over that paid for her food, so she could eat with us. And my mother also got a pension from Germany - both a railroad pension and a war widow's pension. Even though my dad wasn't a soldier in the war, he worked for the railroad which counted the same as being in the army. So my mom had two pretty good pensions. And after she was here a year, she qualified for a Canadian pension. So my mom did quite well.

In the meantime, Horst - we always called him Harry - we always put our money into the company, making payment after payment. It seemed we would never get out of the hole. But sooner or later we did get out. But thanks to my mom, who saved us so we didn't have to manage the home - she was very good at taking care of the home and things like that.

Then after a while we bought a house in Richmond. We paid \$2,500.00 down and took out a \$7,500.00 mortgage. Boy was that a lot of money! So we paid that with about \$75.00 a month. We lived in that house, and my mom did all the gardening. She planted vegetables and everything to save money. She also did the painting in the house. Then I got married in 1962 and Helgard took over. My mom then lived for a year in a house with my brother. Then he moved into an apartment and my mother moved into another apartment in Vancouver. Then Helgard and I had two children - that's the way we started out in Canada.

I did go back to Germany a few times, and so did my wife, but Germany was crowded. That's why my ancestors left, that's why I left again in 1955. We saw the refugees come in, and it was crowded again! It's not that I didn't like Germany, but somebody has to leave to make room for all the others.

If I had learned a different trade, I may have not decided to come here. But being handicapped with the trade like I was, I had enough courage to say, "OK, let's give myself a chance to be here in Canada and do something else." I would have worked in a mine, I would have worked in a logging camp, I would have. . . You name it - I would have worked at anything! I was ready to do it, no matter what it was.

So your mother lived until she was 90 1/2, and now you are 77 and your brother is 71? So with all the hardship in your life, and all the things you went through, you still have a very long and successful life. What are you most proud of?

Well, I'm very proud of my family, and this I can honestly say, of the children, of my wife, and how everything has worked itself into the way it is. Now this is not, by far, giving me the credit, because I have my faults also. But it is the family, the love that the kids and the wife - that we all came together on it. And specifically Helgard, who had such a great understanding. She is such a hard worker, and she has so many skills - natural skills that are practical. She did all the lawn - she dug it up by hand without using a plow or equipment. She pulled a log behind her to level it, and then put the grass in. She planted trees. She did the painting and the wallpapering - everything to save money. She organized the house - this house, our second home - the first one we sold. She organized all the plans and found a builder to build this house. So all that together - that is my proudest achievement in life, and the kids doing so well - and being good kids.

The business? The business comes through hard work, of course. But my family, yes, that's the most important.

Thank you for sharing all your memories.

Thank you for listening.