

## Interview with Alfred Opp (Part 7) – Horse Sense

Conducted by Rita Opp Marchildon

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Transcription by Connie Dahlke, Walla Walla, Washington

Being chosen to work for the farmer was a lucky break that got us out of that camp. When the farmer picked us up, he told us he couldn't see very well. And when I looked into his eyes, I could see he had some strange shades in his eyes. Maybe that was from abusing alcohol - I don't know.

He took us to the railway station where there was a small-track railway for the country and a wide-track railway from city to city. We went by railway out into the country for about an hour to his place. His place was out in the middle of nowhere! When we got there he gave us supper, showed us our room, and said, "I'll see you in the morning."

Five o'clock the next morning he came, I got up, and we went out, and I did whatever he told me to do. He always told me, "You do it right, or else!" He gave me that very strict warning - but he didn't need to warn me because I knew what I had to do.

He had an ox and a horse for a team. The horse had only one eye and was gun-shy because it had been in the war. Any time the wind slammed the door, the horse reared up and snorted.

The farmer asked me, "Have you ever plowed a field?" I said, "Sure I have." Well, I hadn't, but I didn't want to get beaten or sent back to the camp. So I said, Yes. So he put me on a wagon with the horse and ox and took me out to the field and said, "OK, you plow that field." With an ox and a horse! Now anybody who has worked with a horse and an ox knows they are not the same! One moves faster than the other. So I had to hold the horse back and poke the ox so that he would move a little faster. It took me a little while, but I managed it.

The farmer left, but he had told me that when I was finished, after I had gone around a few times, at lunch time I was to stop and give the horse and ox something to drink while I went out and collected rocks. So I was not allowed to have a lunch break. But the farmer's wife had given me a sandwich - she must have been very religious. So I ate my sandwich and I collected the rocks and piled them up beside the road. I had no pocket watch, but when I was finished with the rocks I figured it was about one o'clock or one-thirty. So then I went back into the field with the team and finished the field - I kept on working, finishing the field. Then toward evening I took the team back home.

Now when we got back home to the stable, I fed the horse and the cows and the other animals. I gave them hay, and I cleaned the manure out and put down new underlay. Then I went in for supper. After I had finished supper, I went out and stayed with the horse. It was very important to me that the horse would trust me, because anytime the horse made a fuss about things, the farmer would beat up on the horse. When I arrived on the farm, I could see on the horse's back and feel with my fingers how the horse had welts from the beatings. But the farmer never beat the horse again while I was there because I stayed out with the horse as much as I could. I fed the horse and I stole a little bit of barley to feed the horse, and I would go and get some grass for the horse, and so on.

It didn't take long - only two or three days - and the horse and I were the best of friends. So when I said, "Whoa, whoa, whoooo" - Whoa, Hischt - Whoa, Hot - the kind of horse language I had learned from my grandfather -- Hischt or Hot - that was left and right -- the horse responded. And that's the way I tamed that horse for me.

After my mother was taken to the Polish camp for German outcasts, my little sister was taken away from my mother - she remains missing and is presumed dead. Later, my mother got out of that camp because she was born in Bessarabia when it was part of Russia, and so the Russians considered her a Russian citizen because she was born during the Czarist time in Russia - before 1918. So that was lucky for her and she got out and was put in with the people from Bessarabia and Vollandhynia - all the people originally born in Russia. These were mostly women and children, and there were no guards at that camp. Well, actually there was one guard, but he didn't do much.

So then my mother was able to come and go. The first thing she did was go and see our apartment. I had also been back to our apartment once or twice with the farmer, to pick up some of our things. This happened on trips into Bromberg where he would visit his family. He took us along and took us to our apartment only for the purpose of picking things up for him and not much for us. At that time he was more cooperative. He knew by then that Mom was in Russian custody, and that made him think. He was afraid of the Russians - the Poles hated the Russians fiercely.

The first time my brother and I came back to our apartment with the farmer, when Mieta saw us she was very smart about it. She told us "Everything of yours is gone." But I'm not sure it happened quite that way! The farmer then said he was going to take us back to his farm. But as we left to go back he was thinking how to get rid of us. Anything could have happened to us then. So we walked back towards the railway station. I knew that part of the town very well and on the way back I told him, "My brother has to use the bushes." There was a small strip of land beside the river, down a steep bank. But the area had bushes and trees. The farmer said, "Go ahead." So my brother went toward the river, into the bushes. Mind you, this was pre-arranged with the farmer's step-brother. The step-brother's wife was German also. So I think this plan had been pre-arranged. At least that's the way it looked to me, that this would give us a little slack to get away.

A while after my brother left, the farmer said, "Where is he?" I told him, "I'll go and have a look." So then I grabbed my bags and ran down toward the river. I could hear the farmer yell "Policia - Policia" (Police - Police). But in the meantime, we were running down the bank and along the boulevard people use to go for a walk on Sunday, and there was the step-brother standing with his bicycle. He put my brother on the bicycle, and I ran alongside as best I could with my bags. We reached the step-brother's house and from there they put us on a streetcar - he paid for it - and then we went out to meet up with my mother at the camp.

*So your mother was involved with all the pre-arrangements?*

No. My mother didn't know about the pre-arrangements. But my mother knew that this farmer had relatives in Bromberg. She knew this because I told Mieta Piek at our apartment complex about us - that I was sometimes at his relatives. And I gave Mrs. Piek the relative's address - she knew I was there. So my mother made contact with the farmer's step-brother. And the brother's wife who spoke German - she was of German descent - she helped my mother a great deal. She gave her something to eat, and some clothes - some dresses. My mother's clothes all became too small as her pregnancy progressed. My mother literally had to cut a hole in her dress to let her

belly come out. She had no maternity dress. Literally, that's what she did! Then she had a sweater from somebody who died - there were always people dying - so they would take their clothes. And my mother wore that sweater over her belly - over the hole in her dress. This didn't matter to us one bit! Because we now had a bit more freedom. We had a chance to continue our life.

*So, once you were re-united with your mother –*

Well, we went on the streetcar, and we went to our mother in the Russian camp. In the Russian camp, I had my first bath in months. We were put into sort of a box-like booth where they de-loused us. They put a bunch of white powder on our hair - they did this to both women and children. Now, if it was a woman who had lice, they didn't fuss around with it - they cut all her hair off because lice are carriers of disease. That everybody knows! I already had my hair cut short like a Russian anyway - I looked a little bit like a Russian and so did my brother Oskar. So my mother managed to get rid of the lice. We were at the camp for a few days and then we walked back to our apartment and packed whatever we could carry and went back to the camp. Then we were put on a train to go further south, with the idea that we were going to Russia. Down south the train stopped and we were there for a few days. But there was no room - this was in Thorun (Thorn). Then they took us by train further to the north. This time the Russians didn't protect us anymore. We had no food. The only thing they provided was a place to stay. Now what were we going to do? In Poland it was like being in a lion's cage. Anybody could come into the camp to molest us. We were a group of women and children - there were no men left.