

## Interview with Alfred Opp (Part 8) – The Slow Road to Freedom

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While we were sitting in the northern camp, the Russians were busy transporting POW's, captured goods and their own soldiers back to Russia - all kinds of things were going on. Now, all the railway tracks and bridges had been blown up - there were only a few places that a train could pass through. Would you think the Russians would be worried about us women and children - to get us back to Russia? No way! So we were sitting there - forgotten. How were we to survive without eating? Nobody thought about that! Then I met another guy who was also named Alfred - he spoke a few words of Russian because his dad was Russian. We took a watch, new socks, and shoes from my dad and took these to the black market and bought some food.

One day, someone said, "There is a train coming through from Lithuania, going to Germany. These were Lithuanians who didn't want to stay under Russian rule. Most people were fearful to do anything, but not our dear mother - she had more guts than you could ever imagine - she said, "We're going to go with them!" That's exactly what she said. She never hesitated. There were others, also Deutsche, who said, "Oh, no, you can't do that -- you don't know what they will do with us. They could take us somewhere else. They could accuse us of being Polish or Russian spies, or who knows what." Mother said, "No way. We're going to go." And she was right.

We knew that we needed a bottle of Schnapps (for a bribe) to get onto the train. So Mom sent me with a very good suit from my dad to cash in on Schnapps and food. And that's what I did, using my stuttering trick. The guy who wanted to buy the suit didn't speak our language. And so I stuttered, and when I got through I had sold everything. Stuttering is a beautiful language, I'm telling you, when you're in a foreign country.

So we got onto the train, which was all cattle cars, of course. So there we were and the train took off toward the west. It went for a couple of hours and then stopped - we were stopped for over a day because the train couldn't get onto the other train track. There was always something more important that had priority. Finally our train got on and we went a little ways, and then we stopped again. Now when we were halfway to Germany, an old man died on our train. He was about 80. His belly was really big, but not from being over-fat. Fluids had taken over his body from starvation. Now when a person starves to death, that's what happens. So the man died. He was from the cattle car next to ours. There were a bunch of women crying, and they didn't know what to do. So finally one woman said, "Let's take him out and put him outside beside the railway track. So that's what they did. Then I went over and said, "Well, does anyone have a blanket?" So they put a blanket over the body and a couple of women and I collected some rocks and put them around on the blanket so the wind wouldn't blow it off. Then I said to this one lady - the man must have been her father - "Why don't we bury that man?" She said, "Can you bury him?" I said, "Well, I cannot put him in the ground, but we can at least sing a song and pray." She said, "Oh, that would be good." So we stood there with our hands folded, and I said a prayer. I don't remember what I said, but it came out sounding good enough because it came from my heart, things I had learned from my parents and from my grandparents. So then we sang the song, Jesu, geh' voran

(Jesus Lead Us On), and also So nimm den meine Haende (Jesus Take Me By the Hand and Lead Me On). Everybody cried, and so did I.

The train never gave a whistle. We always had to keep one hand on the train as we did our things - even to go to the bathroom - because we never knew when the train was going to take off - he never gave a whistle.

We had just managed to get back on the train when the train took off. Finally we crossed the bridge over the Oder river into Germany, and arrived in Frankfurt an der Oder. I never saw anything so sad as that place. That was the only place where people coming from the east could enter into Germany. What we saw were literally skeletons walking around - POW's arriving from Russia. I mean they were literally skeletons! Just a coat hanging over bones! They had diarrhea. They were falling over. Some of them died before they even reached their home. It was a terrible, terrible sight. The German Red Cross did all they could, but all they had to give was bread and tea - and some of the POW's refused that because they could not tolerate food any more.

We walked a little bit out beyond that place - I had to go to the toilet, and there was a shed. When we got to the shed I discovered there were two soldiers laying inside, dead. I didn't see this happen, but I was told that a Polish Partisan crossed over the border and beat them to death. I don't like to tell such things, but it looked bad to me - they were bloody.

So I went back out of the shed and did my thing, and then I went back to my mom. The same afternoon they packed us into another train and took us into East Germany, into Mecklenburg. We were assigned into a room in a mansion, but we had absolutely nothing to eat. To sleep, we were packed in like sardines - literally like sardines. So I went out on the road and begged for food. Nobody helped, because everybody was begging for food. But I found this one farmer, and I said to him, "I can work on a farm." Now mind you all the young men were gone, and all that was left were old men, women and children. So I said, "I will work for you for a slice of bread or something." I said, "I have a mother and a brother, and my mother is expecting a baby." So the guy had a heart and he brought some milk and bread and gave it to me. So I said, "I'll see you in the morning." The next day I was there at five o'clock in the morning, and he wasn't even up yet! He was quite pleased that I even came. He showed me what to do - I didn't need a lot of instruction - and then I did as he said. I worked there for three weeks.

Two or three days after getting there my mom went into labor with the birth of my little brother. He died shortly before his birth was due. All the women in the mansion were available to help, so luckily we found a frail old doctor and a midwife. Now they had no medication - nothing. We didn't even have water! But they got a little bit of water from somewhere. The doctor delivered the baby - my mom said he had to use an instrument (forceps?). That's what he had to do - grab the little head and pull it out from the mother's body. That's the only way I can explain it, because my mom passed out. By the time the birth was finished, I wasn't there, nor was my brother Oskar. But the ladies told me that what came out with the baby was blood and eider (pus) - that's what came out. The women were kind and washed my mother and cleaned her up. After a while I came home from the fields and went in to see my mom. Oh! My mother looked like a dead person. But she didn't give up - she never gave up because she wanted to make sure that we came through. That's how a mother is - to see that we come through and survive. And we did.

It took a few days before my mother got some of her strength back. But in the meantime, I had an address from a girl in Saxony who had worked for my grandfather, and I remember I had that address and I wrote them a card and told them where we were. It turned out that my grandparents and my aunt were only about 20 km away from where we were. She also wrote a card down, and that way we got together with my grandparents. My aunt came to get us. By then my mother was barely able to get out of bed. What a wonderful woman my mother was.

By then the situation was that my grandfather had no horses left - only a wagon. He had been able to get out of Poland with two horses and a wagon, but then he lost the horses somewhere - most likely to the Soviet army, I don't know. Anyway my aunt came by train and picked us up and took us to where my grandparents were staying. They were better off than we had been. They had more to eat - my grandfather was working for a farmer as well. We were with my grandparents about a week while my grandmother did all she could to get my mom back up on her feet. She was also a good mother and she knew how to help. Everybody worked together, and we all prayed. We had a lot of hope because we had made it to Germany. We felt things were going to get better. Hang on! Hang on! Just hang on one more day! Hang on one more week! Hang on one more hour! It will get better! And it did.

Then my granddad found out from a Russian army officer - a young guy actually - this young man liked my grandfather very much because my grandfather spoke very good Russian. This young officer took my grandfather's pocket watch that my grandfather had received years before from his commanding officer in the Russian army. My grandfather begged this young man to give the watch back, but the young man refused. But he was kind enough to tell my grandfather to leave. He said, "Simion" - you know in Russian it is Simeon (Simon), but he called my grandfather "Simion.." He told my grandfather, "We are going to close the border down. Go to the other side of Germany - to the Western Zone." Now the war was hardly over, and it actually wasn't even over when the cold war started between Russia and the United States. I'll get into that later.

So my grandfather came home. We packed up everything that afternoon, and the next morning we got onto the train and traveled toward the west. We got into Bebra, which was on the border, and there already were Russian guards. But my grandfather spoke Russian so well, you would have thought he was Russian! And he was able to smooth out the situation with them - and he also gave this guard a bottle of Schnapps. He knew to do this from our experience and probably also from his experience. So the Russian guard broke the seal on the cattle car and opened it up, put us into the cattle car and put on another seal. He told us, "Don't say a word. Wherever you go, be quiet." Now we were in that cattle car for hours. We dared not even sneeze! And the train stopped and started, stopped and started.

After three or four hours on the train we heard a voice "Senn do leit drenna?" To us that was like the voice of God! We were already in Stuttgart, in Schwabialand - the very area our ancestors had come from. And what that guy said was, "Are there people alive in there?" in the Schwabish dialect. Wow! You should have heard us. We were so jubilant and happy! So he opened up the door, and the next thing we were talking about this and that. That was like meeting a brother we hadn't seen in 125 years! Exactly! Oh! I will never forget that!