

## Interview with Alfred Opp (Part 9) – Post-War Recovery

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When we arrived in Schwabialand we were put into what had once been the Stuttgart Theater. The building was still standing in ruins, damaged by bombs. So we were there two or three days. Then they took us out, and put us on a truck - the truck was powered by wood-gas. A lot of people don't know what I mean by "wood-gas." That was a wood-burner that produced a gas to run the engine - and it was as slow as hell! We went up hills in first gear and five km an hour! But we made it to the town of Alfdorf. There we were put into an inn that no longer was an inn. We were put into a room - actually there were two rooms that we had to share with another family. The other family had to walk through our room to get to the bathroom. So we lived in that situation for 2 1/2 years with no privacy.

Finally my mom went to the Mayor and begged him to give us a room with a little more freedom. She told him, "I have a 17 year old son, and there's a girl walking through." All the time we had to listen to see if the people were about to walk through. If we heard something moving, we had to right away pull our pants up, because they could walk by. Then we'd put our pants down again to do our thing with our washing and so on, because they never knocked on the door, either. We told them to, but sometimes they did and sometimes they or their kids forgot, so they just walked through. So if my mother or I were washing up - we didn't have a bathtub, just a basin - that's how we washed ourselves up. But, you know, in life you get used to everything! So finally we got a room somewhere else, and later two rooms in the same house. Then my grandmother and aunt lived in the second room. We lived downstairs with a little kitchen, and life took off from there!

I was wondering how you knew what was going on during the war while you were going through all of this. You talked about knowing a bit about what part of the war you were at. How did you get that kind of information?

Well in Poland we listened to the radio - my dad was always listening to the radio. And naturally what came through the radio from Berlin was only propaganda - misleading propaganda and false information. But we found out from the people in our complex, especially the Polish couple downstairs. I used to bring pigeon food to them from the farm - their 21-year-old son had pigeons - that's another story - but actually what he was feeding were carrier pigeons, carrying messages from one place to another. I didn't know that. But I liked pigeons so much. I asked if I could see his pigeons, and he said, "Well, someday I'll show them to you." But I never saw them.

But Mrs. Kaminsky and Mrs. Piek and several of our neighbors were connected with the Polish underground. And the underground had a network going that kept all of us informed. But do you think my father would listen to what they said? "Oh, they're wrong! Hitler has superior weapons, and sooner or later they will kick all the Russians back to Russia." He was so sure. He never belonged to the Party, but he believed in it. And for all of his loyalty he got knifed in the back, after being so trustful of them. So that's how we got some information. And naturally I went to school. There were also newspapers my dad read - but it was all false information. Mostly we found out from the Polish people themselves.

*Tell us a little about life in Alfdorf.*

Well, in Alfdorf the people were so overloaded by all the refugees coming in. Don't forget that Stuttgart was bombed out. Any of the fair-sized cities were bombed out. So they put all those city people out in the countryside - into small villages. Then there were all the military - all the Americans. We were in the American zone and there were lots of military people. But I want to tell you those humans, being as they are, even if there are bad people there are always good people. And I found there were more good people than not - they were all good people! But you have to understand, when you have so many refugees as we were, they literally had to force us into their homes. We shared their kitchens, we used the bathroom and kitchen in shifts, like it or not. And these people were not allowed to refuse us or say, "No, I don't want any refugees in my home." No way! They had to take them on. Naturally that caused friction. Our asset was, as Bessarabians, that we spoke the same - practically the same - dialect they spoke. It didn't take long until they all warmed up. They were religious people and so were we. They all went to church and there we sat beside them. The pastor that we had was a terrific man - Christoph Dunker was his name. He was actually a high-ranking officer in the army. He fought near Leningrad - which is St. Petersburg. He was a great humanitarian. He preached so wonderfully in his church. If you walked out and did nothing for your next of kin or for your neighbor, you felt guilty and ashamed. That's how good he was. Many times he had to come and break up an argument - people lost their nerves! Who can blame them? People literally lost their nerves and they were shouting at each other. But that all eased off.

Now what we did as young people. I joined a sports club. I joined a musical brass band. I joined a choir since I love singing, and so did my mom and my grandmother. Then a year later I joined a theater club - we did acting on a stage. The pastor was so good to me. He sent me to Stuttgart for acting class. He thought that I had some talent and maybe someone would have a look at it. But it never got to that. But I took the acting lessons and I did quite a bit of that. But then I had to forget about acting because I had to work. At 16 I entered the trades as a harness maker. There was no material around for something better. Up until 1948 there was nothing. I was glad to even get a trade as a harness maker, because my schooling had only gone to Grade 5. You could not get a job as an electrician or a plumber or anything else unless you had Grade 8. Now where in the world was I to get Grade 8?

But I did manage to get Grade 8 - I have to mention how I got the grade. There were about 3 months left, so I went to school when I was 16. And Mr. Glattbach, the schoolteacher there, was sympathetic with all the refugee kids. So he put me into Grade 8. Now the only good note I had was singing. Mathematics, science, grammar or anything else - forget about it! But I was good at singing. That was the only grade where I got a mark of 1. We had a scale of 1 (very good) to 6 (poor). But he cheated and gave me a 3 for the rest of my grades. So then I had an Abschluss Zeugnis - a graduation report card that said I had graduated from Grade 8. And boy! has God ever helped me out here, too.

I finished my training as a harness maker, and I did a little bit of upholstery. Everyone in the trade did the same because there was not enough work for one or the other trade. So my boss did harness work, upholstery and wall-papering. He even did draperies, believe it or not! How that fits - tell me! But that's what he did. But I was never good at any of that except harness making. And at that, I must say, I was really good. So I stuck around there with that. But by the time I finished in 1949 my trade was already on its way down. In 1948 Germany put

in a new monetary system and everything took off. Industry took off, everybody was building, and I was sitting there as a harness-maker while farmers bought tractors to plow their fields! So what to do now?

But I became good at sports - running. I ran 1500 meters in a 3000 meter steeple-chase. Then I went to a meet between eastern Austria, southern Germany and north-east Switzerland where a guy saw me running - I came in 5th or 6th. At that day I wasn't good enough, but I had a little bit of talent. So this guy asked me if I would come to Switzerland. At that time he represented a team of cross-country runners. So I went to Switzerland and got a job as a volunteer to work in an upholstery department to upgrade my trade, so I could draw something and make a living off it. But then I found out I wasn't that good in upholstery, decorating, and everything like that. I was made for something else! I was a harness-maker and he put me onto that.

One day we had a beer together with a bunch of Swiss, Austrian and German guys, and one guy said, "Well, I'm going to leave and go to Canada!" That's when a light went on in my head.

*How old were you?*

I was 25. So I wrote home to my mom and said, "I'm going to go to Canada!" Now can you imagine! My mom told me, "You have lost a father, lost a brother, lost a sister. You've gone through hard times in a war. And now you're going to go to America and leave us?" To my mother that was like burying someone alive - you'd never see them again! That came from way back home. If someone went to America, you never saw them again. And no matter how I explained it to her - it's not that way anymore - airplanes go back and forth now - "Yeah, Yeah, Yeah! You're not going to go!" Well, thanks to my aunt Lena who said, "Hulda, look - Canada and America have a future. People there get rich quick! Let him go there - he'll make money and in three years he'll come back and we can build a house." And my grandmother was always on my side - no matter what I did. I was her boy! My grandmother pulled my mother to the kitchen - "Hulda, you cannot stop him. Look at him. He wants to get ahead in life!" Finally, she gave in. So that was it.

I quit my job in Switzerland and went home and packed my things. My boss where I had learned my trade lived across the street. He had a car by then and he drove me to Stuttgart to the railway station. I took a train up to Bremerhaven, and my other friend - Horst Juraschek – we met in Switzerland - he came from a different direction and we met up with another guy Gerhard Bareiss - we met each other at Bremerhaven . There we boarded a very old passenger ship. Don't forget at that time all the merchant ships had been used as troop carriers in the war and they were all old and used up. So our old ship was one from Onassis - the Greek guy - a ship that he fixed up. I'm telling you, going across the Atlantic near Greenland with that weather there, was like being in a walnut floating on the ocean. We were going up and down! For three days the ship was stuck in one spot – we made no progress! All the people - the kids, the women - they all got so seasick they wished they could die right on the spot. But us young guys and especially the old people, we were going out to get fresh air and eat - always eating steadily. Even if we felt like throwing up - we would always eat. And that was good - I never got sick and neither did Gerhard - we never have been sea-sick. We came to Quebec harbor after 11 days on the water. We went up the St. Lawrence River and at Quebec there was a train waiting for us - they called it an immigrant train.