

## **Pawns on the World Stage**

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It started with a note that Germany sent to Poland. The demand was for access through the Corridor. Germany was a divided country, with an eastern section divided from the main area of Germany by a strip of land known as the Corridor. The Corridor was Poland. To get to the eastern side, known as East Prussia, the Germans had to cross via the Baltic Sea. Germany approached Poland to obtain access by land across the Corridor, but Poland refused.

Germany signed an alliance with Russia, and Poland signed an alliance with France and England. Everything came to a head on September 1, 1939 when Germany declared war on Poland with the goal of obtaining land access to East Prussia. "Bring it on," was the attitude. England sided with Poland; Russia sided with Germany, and all hell broke loose.

The Corridor region from Bromberg (Bydgoszcz) to the Baltic Sea at Danzig (Gdansk), was once held by Prussia (Germany). Ethnic Germans were still living in this area, scattered in amongst the Poles. The ethnic Germans sympathized with the German need to have access, while most Poles sided with their government.

In 1795 Poland had been taken over by Prussia, Russia and Austria. Poland as a country disappeared off the map. Attempts were made in 1807, 1815, 1830 and 1863 to re-establish Poland. Most of this time, the majority of Poland was under Russian control. Independence was regained in 1918, although with German and Austrian protection. In 1939 the Polish people were aware of this history. They did not want this to happen again. They were aware that some ethnic Germans sympathized with the German government. Patriotic Poles started harassing the ethnic Germans, who were also Polish citizens. Bromberg was the hotbed of the conflict. This was the town that would become our residence for 2 1/2 years. Germany wanted this territory back. Russia also wanted to regain territory. Berlin and Moscow risked negative world reaction by trying to retake the territory of Poland. Berlin also foresaw that they would need ethnic Germans to strengthen their position in the area, once they occupied it. That is how the Germans in Russia got sucked into the situation.

In our hometown of Teplitz, Bessarabia life went on peacefully at the beginning of the war in Europe. At the time, we had no idea how the affairs of Europe would impact us directly. We knew what was going on. We read about it, and heard about it on the radio. Our German-language newspaper took a "wait and see" attitude. What we heard on the radio directly out of Germany was full of speeches giving praise to a successful war effort. There were only a handful of radios in our village. More people read the newspaper. People passed messages neighbor to neighbor about what they had read or heard. Most of the older folk took the situation in stride. However, the young people were getting high on Germany.

We learned how the war affected us on July 1-2, 1940. The Soviet troops descended on Teplitz. We had heard reports that the Soviets had made moves to take Bessarabia back. Local gossip was that we might get moved as well. When the Soviets arrived, we didn't wait for things to happen -- we prepared for what might happen. The leaders of the village actively developed a system to handle the on-coming emergency. They were good leaders for us. Everyone who could write participated in preparing identification documents that each person could

carry with them. The town records were written in books, so these records had to be hand copied. Each land owner was also given a copy of his or her land title, prepared by the officials at the Town Hall.

Now the time to "wait and see" had arrived. The young people were beginning to see that war was not such an exciting idea. One day the phone in the Town Hall rang. The voice on the other end was a Soviet Commissar who told our mayor that the intention of the Russian Army was to liberate Bessarabia, and not to panic.

The mayor immediately called a meeting to inform us of what was about to happen, and to warn us to not act foolishly. He told us to stay calm, and use common sense to deal with matters as they arose. Everyone was stunned and stood around in a daze. Rumors started to pick up and so did nightmares.

A short time after the meeting the Soviet troops moved in armed and in full gear. My mother took me and my brother out to the vineyard to hide. My dad stayed home to guard our place. After a time, my dad came and got us and we went back home. We stood around feeling helpless and very sad. The troops settled down just across the street from us in what had been a pasture. In no time at all the pasture was turned into a town of military tents. The Soviet Commissar also quickly set up command posts throughout town. Our place was assigned to accommodate a field kitchen. One of our bedrooms and the parlor was taken over as quarters for the officer who ran the field kitchen.

Quickly the village was divided into blocks of ten homes each. The iron curtain had descended. We were trapped and under Soviet control. Military agents were sent to accompany the local officials from the Town Hall as every home was visited and valuables were confiscated. The estates of all wealthy property owners were commandeered. Soon the local store was also emptied out. Our people were in a straight jacket before they knew it. One thing led to another and we quickly learned what to expect when living under a Communist regime.

A series of meetings were held that everyone was required to attend. We were indoctrinated into the philosophy of Communism. Our people listened politely and tried to maintain a cheerful demeanor - the newsmen were there and we didn't want to make things more difficult for ourselves. The Soviet Commissar was very firm in his orders that we were to keep working, on and off the field. It was harvest time and soon people began running out of supplies such as salt, sugar and kerosene. Folks stuck together and shared what they had. Everyone was brave and showed a good face. Our people were cooperative and did the right thing. They behaved well, were obedient, listened respectfully and made wise decisions to meet the need. The Soviets put on a good show to convince us how good their system was -- our people matched them in acting ability!

In mid-September 1940 the whole scene came to a head. First a Soviet and then a German team arrived to start the resettlement process. Seeing the Germans arrive brought a sigh of relief to us all. The Soviets toned down after that. Again, meetings were held to inform us as to what was going on, and to instruct us on what we were expected to do. The town was buzzing with rumors and gossip. The Soviets came prepared to handle the proceedings but faltered behind the Germans in proficiency. Any time the Soviets made a fuss about things, the Germans stepped in and over-ruled them. All the Germans had to do was call Berlin. The Russians knew an agreement was in place and backed off. Our people couldn't wait to walk away from their own village. All the pressure of the situation made the decision easy. Everything went forward on time and very efficiently. As soon as the formalities were in place, everyone started to pack. Each of us received a Pass Card that we were to wear around our necks. The Pass Card gave us permission to leave.

We were allowed to take with us only our clothing, bedding, household goods, food, personal belongings and a set amount of cash. Any excess cash, loose precious metal, and letters containing a claim were confiscated. For assets left behind like buildings, stock, inventory, furniture, etc., each owner received a receipt. Land was not an issue. Russia was to compensate Germany for the goods left behind.

Time marched on. People wanted to leave. A date was finally set for us to go. Before leaving, we spent time saying farewell. There were many heartbreaking moments. The most emotional was a last visit to the cemetery to say goodbye to parents, husband, wife, a child, and many loved ones. To have to separate yourself from the sight of your hometown, with all its memories, was hard. The last goodbye was to the animals - to leave the animals to an uncertain fate was deeply painful. The animals were a big part of our life. Most dog and cat owners destroyed their pets. To see that being done was not pretty to watch, but it was better than to have them stay behind and starve. The dairy cows suffered so much. To ignore their calls to be milked and just walk away was very hard. The Russian Army took care of much of the livestock by confiscating them for food or horse-power.

In the morning of September 29, 1940, the women and children left town on army trucks. At midday, busses took away the elderly, the disabled and the sick. Later in the day others with no wheels were taken away on army trucks.

The last transport, mostly men, left on October 5, 1940 by horse and wagon trek loaded with the bulk of the baggage. People driving motorcars could take with them 85 kg. (187 lb) of baggage. Each horse-drawn wagon was allowed to carry up to 960 kg (2112 lb/1 ton). My mother, my brother Oskar and I left by truck with the first group. I was ten years old, and my brother was not yet 4 years old. Dad came later with the trek of wagons. It took us 5 hours by truck to reach the Danube port of Reni. The roads were poor to non-existent. The trucks encountered mud and washouts all the way. What a bumpy ride that was! But nobody complained - we were glad to get away. In Reni a ship was waiting for us. We boarded late in the day. The ship was clean but crowded with all of us on board. The food was good and the staff was very helpful.

Three days later the ship arrived near Belgrade, Yugoslavia. We spent the night there, put up in army tents. By then we were ready for a good night's sleep. Food was excellent and plentiful. On the next day, October 3, 1940, we left by train for Germany. It took us three days to get to our next stop in Saxony, Germany. On arrival, we were assigned to clean rooms, two to three families to a room. We slept in bunk beds on clean bedding. Food was served three times a day. We were exhausted, and mentally stressed from worry about our fathers and husbands who weren't there. After we settled into the situation a bit, had a bath and cleaned up, we prepared ourselves for what might come next. The culture shock started to set in. We were in a compound that once was an institution for the mentally ill. For us to get out, we had to pass through a gate that was restricted. We kept to ourselves and tried to not make a commotion or make too much of our situation.

My father and my grandfather left Teplitz by horse and wagon with the baggage trek. It took them nearly four days to reach the Danube on the Rumanian side. The Soviets gave them a hard time crossing the border. Nothing much came of it, but it left a bad taste in one's mouth. This only added to the stress of being forced out of one's home under duress, and the uncertainty of what lay ahead.

The villagers started the horse and wagon trek with the understanding that they were being allowed to take their teams and wagons all the way to Germany. Perhaps the Germans had that thought originally, but changed their minds due to the cost involved. The men had to hand their horses and wagons over to the Rumanians. For

each team and wagon they were given a receipt. The baggage was shipped off to Germany. But the men could not leave Reni by boat as planned, because all the ships were being used for troop transport. The officials took the men to an aircraft hangar to await the arrival of a ship. After several days, the men became impatient and complained that they needed to be with their families. The officials who were in command sternly lectured the men that they should show some respect for what the Fatherland was doing for them. They were told in no uncertain terms to behave. Enough was said to put a lid on the complaining.

After 13 days of waiting, the ship arrived. On October 20, 1940 the men boarded the ship and arrived four days later in a Yugoslavian town. Two days later the men were put on a train to Germany. Exactly one month after we had arrived in Saxony, our men caught up with us, but without the baggage. By then we were in need of the extra clothing that was in the baggage. We were told that the baggage was being held in storage and to get by on what we had with us. The women had packed food in the baggage, including meat stored in grease. All was left to rot. Reality and shock started to set in, yet more surprises were to come.

Camp life was hard on us. We had to undergo indoctrination into Deutschland's political point of view, the preparations for relocation, health checks, immunizations and examinations from head to toe. Most of our people had never had a pill or a shot before. The food was losing its appeal, as the quality seemed to deteriorate, and the isolation was getting to us. With the added homesickness, people started to feel ill and out of sorts. Being hemmed in and deprived of most of the comforts of life tested their patience.

Germany was in an all-out effort to win the war. Almost daily we heard triumphant announcements on the camp loudspeakers. Our young people became anxious to get on with it - they didn't want to lose out on the victory parade. Some were allowed to leave immediately, others had their chance as time went on. On the home front, everything was rationed to help with the war effort. People had enough to eat, but were short on some consumer goods.

In our camp, the situation was different. Camp officials were caught skimming off food rations meant for us. They took the foodstuffs and sold them on the black market for cash or to trade for goods that were hard to get. Any complaint about our food was brushed aside with a hefty tongue-lashing. The headman shouted at us, "The *Fuehrer* brought you home and saved you from becoming slaves. Shame on you." Eventually the state officials found out what was going on and cleaned house. The new team was more humane in their efforts to keep order. We were allowed to go out into the community to meet the Saxon people. At first the locals looked at us as though we were a different breed. "The Russians are coming," they said. The way we dressed was, of course, different from what they were used to. Eventually things changed. We believe that it was the people of the community who made the government officials aware of what was going on and intervened for us.

The state officials could enter the camp at any time. They came and lined up the young men to see which ones were fit for the military. The rest of us were sorted out as to who was fit to go to the east (to live in Poland). The emphasis was on racial purity. Family by family the examining went on. People were branded like cattle. Those who fit the purity test were tattooed under the arm with a "O." Those who did not fit the criteria were tattooed with an "A." They tried to separate the "A's" from the "O's" but the "A's" fought their way back into the group of "O's." My parents walked away branded as "O's." Dad was one of the few who wished he could stay permanently in Deutschland. After everyone was examined and the process was finished, the State gave us their blessing that we were now worthy German citizens.

Camp life tested the stuff we were made of. We went through a series of "put up, go through and make-over" situations. We managed to stay together and survive on the strength of our pioneer spirit. But the situation took its toll. During the time we were in that camp, 59 of our group died - 20 adults and 39 children. The older folks died of stress and age. The children, mostly babies, died from malnutrition and medical malpractice.

My family was on the first train to leave the camp. One day later, on March 26, 1941, we came to a resort site near Lodz, Poland. Officials assigned us to cabins but told us we could be moved on a moment's notice. The moment came on May 10, 1941 when a truck picked us up and drove us a distance to a farm whose previous owners had been evicted. Grandpa and others came with us on the trip. Before leaving the resort camp, we got a lecture on how to behave - what was allowed and what wasn't. The list was long. The Polish people looked sad when they saw us. We felt out of place. The former owners of the farm had left only hours before. From what we saw, they had not been given much time to pack. The farm and the animals were in good shape. To the officials in charge it was not more than a change in shift. The receipt we had received in Teplitz for our house, our animals and the other possessions we were forced to leave behind was cashed in on this farm that had been taken away from a Polish family. We felt like we were in a cockfight, and we were far away from the Fatherland.

My father was a maker of wagons. He was not a farmer and had a hard time adjusting to working a farm. The state assigned a Polish couple to us to work the farm. These people were not allowed to eat at the same table with us. We had strict orders to keep our distance from them, which was very hard. Our people had lived by the morality that all men are equal, that we should love each other in God's name. Man cannot find dignity when others are being discriminated against.

The battle over mind and conscience continued. Restrictions were placed on us that forced us to behave in a manner to which we were not accustomed. State officials gave each farmer a Code listing what percentage of the crops had to be delivered to the State. The requirement was in reach, but only if one really worked at it.

We all felt the effects of the war. Consumer goods became harder to find, even items that were rationed. My parents bartered food for goods. That was illegal, of course, but so was just about everything else we had to do. The normal morals of how to treat people went out the window. Again, we had to learn how to survive.

One night in the fall of 1942, my father got up gasping for air, then collapsed. My mother got up and called the maid for help. Between the two of them they managed to get Dad back up on the bed. This happened just after my sister Inge was born. The next morning my mother went for help for Dad. She went to a State official who called a doctor to check Dad out. The doctor came the next day to see Dad and try to find out what was wrong with him.

We knew Dad had a bad heart as a result of his having rheumatic fever in 1936. What the doctor found was more serious than we first thought. The doctor came right out and said that my father was in no condition to work the farm. The doctor then signed a paper to allow my parents to leave the farm. A State official stepped in to get us moved. We were given ample time to pack and prepare for the move. We slaughtered a pig and canned it, along with other foodstuffs from the farm. We packed up what possessions we had. When we left the farm, we were not given any receipt. We gave up any claim to compensation for the assets we had been forced to walk away from back in Teplitz, Bessarabia.

It was arranged for us to move to the city of Bromberg, which was an important military town and rail hub. We moved to Bromberg on October 18, 1942. Father found employment with the railroad doing woodwork. We got

an apartment in a row-house complex set aside for the railroad workers and their families. Our house had 5 suites occupied by Polish people. Ours was an upstairs apartment. The Polish family who had been in our apartment were evicted so that we could move in. The remaining Polish families didn't say much to us as we were moving in, nor did they lay out a welcome mat. We were told to keep our distance, and not discuss anything with our neighbors. We were tightly controlled as to what we could and couldn't do -- you might say our hands were tied. We were in an unfamiliar area, among people we didn't know. We were left to fend for ourselves. We had no telephone. All our communications were censored.

Some of the families in the complex were ethnically mixed. Two of the men had wives of German descent who had chosen to remain in Poland. It took some time to make friends with the people in the complex. My mother was an out-going person who was always smiling - she had no problem making friends under normal circumstances. Yet they had clearly been placed in a social straight-jacket. My parents didn't like such restrictions, nor did they want to pass such ideas on to their children. My dad and the man next door worked at the same place, and they got along well. There was one older couple in the complex whose son was a patriotic Pole committed to the freedom of Poland. This one couple avoided us.

The war was getting out of hand. People were weary. Freedom came at a price. Everything was rationed and in short supply. Money was plentiful but was useless. Stores were few and far between, and there were long waiting lines. To go to the big city to shop was a challenge. A person had to be street smart to manage. I was twelve years old and it became my job to make runs to the city to do the shopping. Dad was working and Mom was busy at the apartment with my younger brother and my baby sister. My parents would give me the ration cards and send me out to buy food. Anything that involved paper work became my job. I would go to the store to see what they had on the shelves. We particularly had a hard time finding clothing. I became a regular at the stores, to the extent that the store employees recognized me and knew what I was going to ask for. Being pushy didn't help - being persistent did. I faithfully did the job that my parents asked me to do.

We had enough to eat as long as nearly every dish contained a lot of potatoes. When possible, my mother would improve the taste of our meals with food grown on my grandfather's farm. We were not allowed to hoard food. People who hoarded food items were fined. We kids did well on the things that were provided.

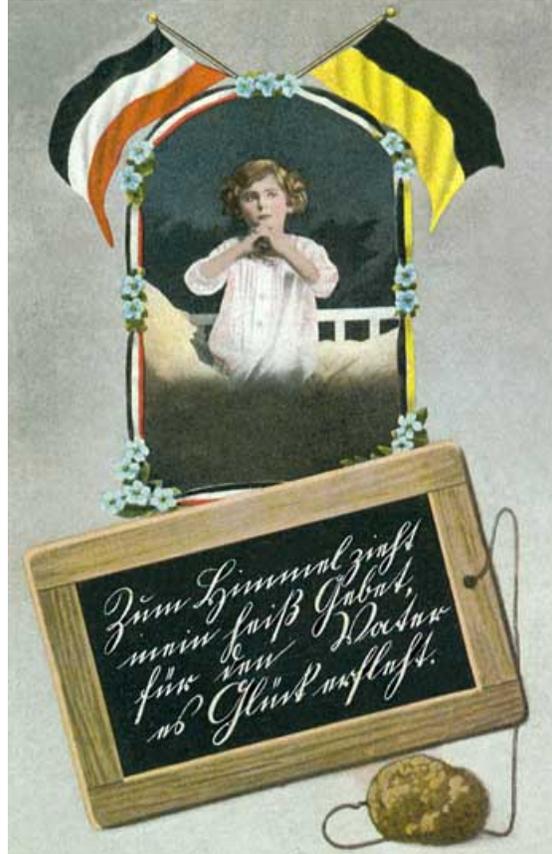
My grandparents were an hour away by train. I would go there at least once a month to bring food back home. With a packsack and two handbags I was so loaded on the way back that I had to walk bent over in order to keep my load balanced. I learned a lot of street smarts during those runs for food. To this day, I am thankful that my parents gave me that job - I learned skills that helped me survive and to get on in life.

By October 1944 the street was packed with refugees going west. We saw them traveling past our complex with horse and wagon, on foot and even pushing anything that had wheels. The street was packed with the military in defense positions. We obtained food from the limited amount that was available.

My parents sat and waited for word as to the next move. Without permission, we were not supposed to leave. The war was closing in. Dad continued to go to work. The Polish people could understand the Polish news channel, so they knew more about what was going on. In Bromberg, the Polish people had an efficient "underground" network going on the entire time we were there that was never shared with us. My father was faithful to his Fatherland - he trustingly believed what they told him. In the end, my father's trust was used up and spat out - what he got for his trust was a stab in the back. Dad was raised to walk a straight line -- to the end he didn't miss a step.



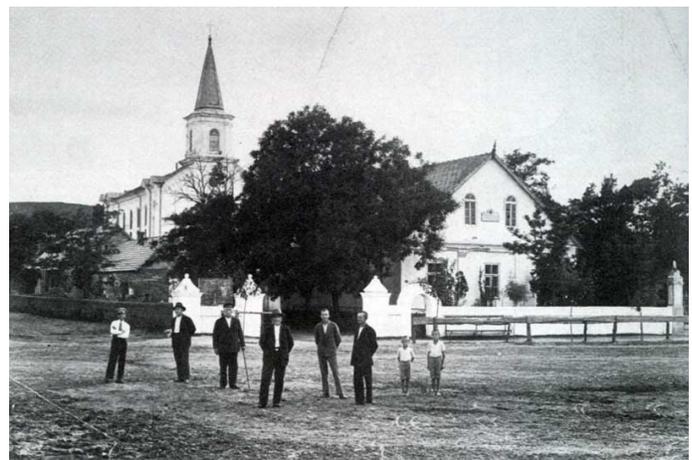
Andreas Opp family and Teplitz houselet, 1940.



Postcard c. 1916 "God and Country"



Inge Opp b. 1942



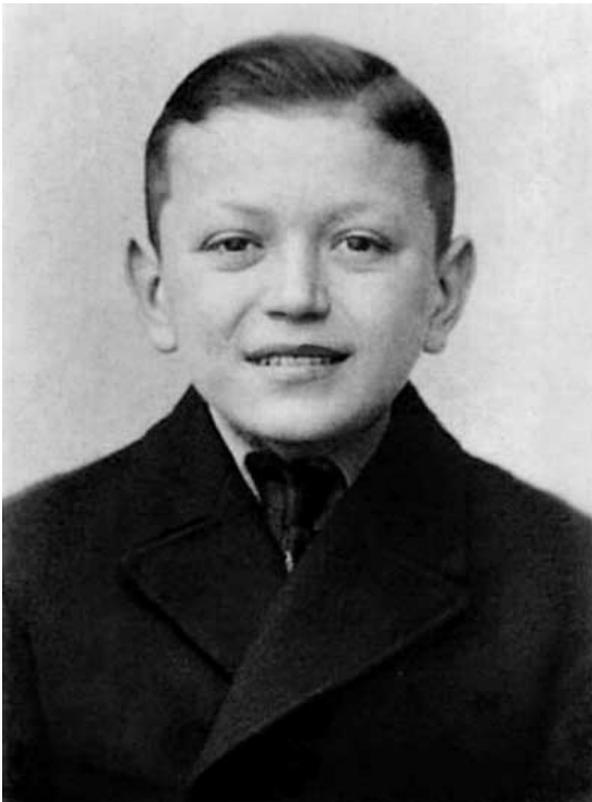
Simon Zacher, Mayor (center, forward) with Teplitz village officials, c. 1938



Andreas Opp family and Teplitz house, 1940.



Horses and wagon on Trek, September 1940.



Alfred Opp, 1946



Postcard c. 1916 "Aufwiedersehen"



**Simon Zacher, horse breeder, c. 1938.**