

The House My Parents Built - My Teplitz Home

By Alfred Opp, Vancouver, British Columbia

Edited by Connie Dahlke, Walla Walla, Washington

In 1927 my father Andreas Opp was 25 years old when he was dating my mother Anna Hulda Zacher. The marriage of the two at the time was not a “done deal” since the Zacher family was a notch up the social and financial ladder above the Opp family. But each family had respect for the other. In the village culture, it was the responsibility of the parents to arrange a marriage for their child that would represent a “step up,” no exceptions here. Neither did Mom have her heart particularly set on Dad, who seemed to be a simple individual, and not very out-going. After a time of considering the options, both reached out to the other and made the decision to marry. Both families were well respected in the village, with no obvious flaws – the main difference was financial. Here is the story of how my parents built their marriage:

Since Dad’s mother was a widow, Dad and his brothers went to work to give the marriage a respectable start with a plan to build a house for the new family. What the Opp family lacked in cash they made up for with a line of credit with work they did in roof framing. The Opp’s were wagon-makers by trade and had earned a good reputation in that trade. They did not always receive cash for their work, but rather were paid back in services, goods or a helping hand when needed. This bartering system was used by our ancestors and was a major ingredient of success when money was short.

The building lot Dad could afford was at the end of town. It was a narrow lot, but well-suited for people who were primarily tradesmen, and not farmers. Once the land was purchased, Dad worked with a builder who came up with a plan and an estimate. The builder was not a local villager, but he had the reputation of doing good work quickly and for a reasonable cost. There were a few people in the village who were in the building trades, but mostly they specialized in small out-buildings, constructing wall-type bake ovens, hearth repair and the like. So Dad pulled all the pieces together and launched into the project. First he had someone dig a well on the property. This was a beam and fulcrum well, with a rock that weighed down one end of the beam and the pail on a chain to dip into the well on the other. This was the easiest and the standard way to get water out of most wells of the day. We had no communal power, water or sewer systems in Teplitz from its founding until we left in 1940.

Then the builder came in with his crew to prepare the ground. This was a simple process that did not take long since there were no water pipes, drainage pipes or power lines to install. In the mean-time, Dad had all the building blocks (local sand stones), sand and mortar mix, lumber and equipment brought onto the site. The lot was now ready for the house to be built. The building was planned according to the standard design. Because the lot was narrow and long, the gable end of the main house faced the street. The masons went to work with plenty of helpers assisting. All of the work crew had to be fed, and the responsibility of providing the meals fell on Grandma “Regge” Opp and her helpers. This was not a small order, to say the least. Grandma Opp arranged to do her cooking at the neighbor’s place whose house was next to the new lot, and set up in the neighbor’s summer kitchen to prepare the meals. No one questioned whether or not this was possible —everyone just went to work and held together to accomplish the task. That was the beauty of the community spirit in Teplitz.

The whole project was timed to not interfere with the busy harvest season. Mom's parent got into the act as well. A pig was slaughtered for meat, and so were chickens. The neighbor's summer kitchen was equipped with a large pot that was used to do the cooking. Except for the hired masons, all others had to bring their own plates, cups and utensils from home. Relatives prepared baked goods at home and brought them to the work site. Dad supplied the customary wine. The masons worked fast and the walls were up in good time. The plans called for the main house to be built higher off the ground, with the winter kitchen three steps down from the main house, and the workshop, horse stable, barn, chicken coop, cow barn and pig sty attached onto the house at ground level beyond the winter kitchen. A detached summer kitchen with cellar and fowl shed (for ducks and geese) was built square in the back of the Hof (lot property) to complete the project. Now it was time to rest!

But Dad and his brother took no rest! They went to work putting up the roof frame. When that was completed, the traditional Richtfest was held, celebrating that the building had been erected. Grandma Opp baked some Kuchen pies and called in a village Elder to bless the house. Then Dad and his brothers installed the roof tiles. Dad's brother-in-law Johannes Handel build and installed all the windows and doors. A window was installed in each gable to let in light. A local mason came to build the chimney, hearth and heating furnace, which was the traditional masonry unit built into each interior dividing wall, of which we had two. By this time Dad was running short on money, and so the building activity took a breather.

While Dad had plenty of people who owed him labor, it was the needed purchased items that ran up the numbers. In those days, people did not think of turning to a banker – rarely was there one! But there were private individuals who would lend money, and eventually Dad made a visit to A. Böppe. Mr. Böppe made no hesitation to lend Dad the modest amount of money he requested, since the Opp family had the reputation of paying debts on time and the lender did not have to fight to get his money back.

The house was now enclosed, but not finished. Some of the finishing work simply had to wait until more money was available.

The main house had wooden floors and plastered walls with painted doors and wood trim. Due to the restricted budget, Dad did most if not all of the finishing work himself, over time. The first jobs to be done were those things that did not require spending money. First, the floors of the ground-level kitchen and workshop were finished with a layer of clay. Even the attic floor was finished with clay. This was a fun job for young and old, and there was no shortage of volunteers for the Boden legen und schmieren (floor work in smearing mud). Teplitz had no shortage of clay pits, and good use was made of them - sun-dried mud bricks were given many uses. What was done for the clay floors was to first mix clay and fine-cut straw. This was laid down over the dirt as the base-floor for strength and also for insulation. After this layer was well-dried, a smooth clay mud was spread over the top of the coarser layer to finish the surface and fill in any nicks. This same smooth clay was also used to plaster the surface of the stone walls inside the smaller out-buildings. These were then later white-washed.

To obtain the clay, a group of men with a wagon went up to the clay pit and hauled in enough material for the job at hand. The clay was spread out in the yard for mixing. Sometimes a horse was used to mix the clay to the needed consistency, but often a group of people kneaded the clay with their bare feet, and that is what happened with my parent's project. After the clay was the right consistency strong-armed helpers carried the mix to the barn staircase and up into the attic to be spread out on the attic floor. The same work proceeded in the rooms below. In the workshop and stables the floor remained dirt, but the clay mud was smoothed onto the walls by experienced hands. Good food, wine and even music were provided, and everyone had a good time as

they worked. Dad and his brothers were never cheap – they knew how to throw a good party! Willing hands went to work and they did a fine job. When all was done, Dad and his many helpers sat down for a feast ending with a party.

Even though the kitchen floor was made of clay, it was swept on a daily basis, and on weekends Mom spread yellow sand over it to keep it looking nice. The stone walls of the house were whitewashed, inside and out. Our people made the best of their hard life, with the limited resources they had. They always managed to get the job done and to live a decent life. So often I heard them talk about how good life was in Teplitz – very little was said about sore hands. They took satisfaction in work, in a job well done. They focused on their achievements and remembered the happy moments. Just to be part of the unity achieved by helping others, gave them – and me today - a proud feeling.