

## War Costs More than Money – Part I

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### Anna and Johannes W.

Anna was 22 years old when she and Johannes W. were joined in marriage. The “Brautpaar” settled down at his parent's place. The family did well making a living from their small farm and a trade. Not long after the wedding, Russia began mobilizing the nation for war. When the news came of the conscription underway, the community was horrified. Able-bodied men had to report for military duty immediately, including Johannes. The men selected were given three days to get ready. On the day of departure, a meeting was called for the villagers to say their good-byes to the troops. Bystanders and friends were all in tears. The pastor did his best to console the crowd, but the scene was heartbreaking. As the line of wagons carrying the men began to move away, Anna ran alongside the wagon carrying Johannes, holding onto his hand until she could no longer keep up. The last words the men heard were from the Pastor - "In love we part until we meet again."

Standing by was the recruiting officer, who told the crowd not to worry. Russia had the advantage and would make short work of this war. Everyone, including Anna, went to their homes to pray for the safe return of their loved ones. Daily chores soon demanded the attention of the villagers, and life resumed its routine. Weeks passed, and then letters from the men began to trickle back to the village. The news regarding some of the men wasn't all that good. Anna received a letter from her husband saying that his unit had encountered the Austrians in a bloody battle. He expressed his sorrow that so many of his friends had been killed. He assured Anna that he, however, was fine and hoped to soon be coming home.

After that first letter, Anna received no more letters from Johannes. However, she continued to write to him faithfully. Soon she told Johannes that she had just discovered she was pregnant with their first child. There was no response from Johannes. Eventually she wrote Johannes that their baby boy had been born and she had named him Johannes after his father. Still there was no answer. Anna became very worried about Johannes, as did others, but life must go on. Then they heard the war had turned ugly and Russia was loosing everywhere. The Russian government began to blame its own citizens who were ethnic Germans for their failure in the war. Hatred of the Germans in Russia began to be felt from the highest government level on down. The German villagers felt they were hemmed in on all sides. With the war going badly, communications from the front became nearly non-existent. On top of the war in Europe, Russia was being torn apart by a revolution at home. Everything seemed in disarray. The German villagers tried to be patient, but when they heard nothing about their loved ones in the war they became very concerned.

Eventually some death announcements arrived by wire at the village community hall. No word was given about the missing or wounded. Then the news stopped coming. From the highest levels of the Russian government the German settlers were being accused of spying for Germany and sabotaging the war. German villagers who kept pigeons were fined. The Tsarist regime was weakening and the Bolsheviks were gaining in strength. The common people were tired of it all and wanted the fighting to end. Russia ended her involvement in WWI by signing an armistice agreement in 1917. But the revolution in Russia raged on. Soldiers who had been fighting on

the Russian side in Europe were faced with a dilemma. Some ventured to try to come home despite the revolution. Others had to wait in Europe until the war was over. Those who made it back to their homes in Russia were the healthy ones. Johannes did not show up. Anna asked every one she could for news about Johannes, but no one could tell her anything about her husband. Johannes was not the only one missing. The reported dead and those who had returned did not account for everyone who had left. There were reports that at least four of the men from the village were seriously wounded or sick. The stories the returned soldiers told revealed how bloody the war had been. Anna didn't know what to think.

In 1918, Russia gave up Bessarabia to end the war with Rumania. When the treaty with Rumania was signed, our ties with Russia ended. Joining Rumania was a benefit to the Germans in Bessarabia. Our new landlord made some adjustments, and so did we.

Anna also had to make adjustments to get her life back in order. Her in-laws, who had stood by her all this time, had to make changes as well. A younger brother of Johannes stepped in to handle the business affairs of the family. Now a widow on paper, Anna moved back to her parent's home and took up sewing to earn a living. Anna was in no hurry to seek a new relationship for herself, not yet.

One day a farmer came to see Anna. His name was Jakob and he was a well-suited widower with three children. He came to ask Anna to be his wife. Anna told the man she wasn't ready to make such a decision yet, but she said she would give it some thought. Jakob was a kind, older man. The next time they met, she said "Yes." They got married and had two children together. Anna and her oldest son, Johannes, both took the surname of Anna's new husband. The two families blended well into one family.

When Russia took back Bessarabia in 1940, everything changed for the Germans of Bessarabia. The Germans knew they had to leave. Instead of being settled in Germany, we were taken to German-occupied Poland. We didn't know what to think, but settled in as best we could. Anna and her family also were resettled in Poland. Johannes Jr. became engaged to a young woman, but before the wedding could take place he was conscripted into the German SS and was sent to the Russian front.

World War II went from bad to worse. People in the east fled westward in droves to get away from the Soviets. Anna and her family did the same. After weeks of travel by horse and wagon, the family managed to reach South Germany. The family lost contact with Johannes Jr., called by the nickname of "Hans" was wounded while on a reconnaissance mission. The medics patched him up and sent him to the rear for further treatment. He was taken to a military hospital in Germany where emergency surgery was needed to save his life. By the time he was released from the hospital, the war was all but over. The military released him to go home, but Hans was in no shape to travel. Despite his frail condition, his mind was fine. He kept his wits about him and made no mention that he had been born in Bessarabia. This kept him from being sent back to Russia.

The military found a recovery camp in the Alps, located in a small Austrian town. This is where Hans was sent to recover. When the Allied forces arrived, the camp was disassembled. Everyone was told to leave, and most took off toward home. Hans still was in no shape to go very far. He was lucky to find a family in town where he could stay until he could locate his own family. The people gave him a warm welcome, and felt they saw in this young German soldier a little bit of themselves. Hans was still not well. The people took care of him as best they could. They asked him about his family and where he came from. Still he revealed nothing about Bessarabia or Russia. He told the people that he was a farmer's son from West Prussia, and his father's name was Jakob M, his mother's name was Anna. He was one of six children. The family he was staying with were farmers also, by the

name of Hannes and Maria W. The family had two boys in the army and a married daughter who lived in their town.

Hans' condition worsened, and adequate medical care was not available. The couple took turns taking care of him. Hans grew weaker, and one day he passed away. The couple were saddened to see him die, as they had come to look on him nearly as a son. They laid Hans to rest in the local graveyard. With a wooden cross on his grave, and an official death certificate the chapter on Hans came to a close.

Anna in the mean time made contact with the Red Cross to find her son. She received a report from the Red Cross stating that Hans had died, and listing his place of burial. Anxious to go pay her respects to her son, she found travel to that area was not yet allowed. As soon as travel restrictions eased up, she made the trip. Anna arrived at the specified town late in the afternoon. Not knowing a soul in town, she took a room for the night in the local Inn. The proprietors of the Inn gave her directions around town, and told her where she would find the graveyard, and who to see for more information regarding her son.

Early the next morning, Anna walked over to the graveyard. When she got there, she was surprised to find the grave neatly decorated with plants. Anna sat down to think about Hans. A considerable time passed. Then she decided to visit the home where Hans had died. Arriving at the home, she knocked on the door and met the lady of the house. Anna introduced herself and explained who she was and why she was there. The lady of the house was all smiles and said, "I'm Maria. Please come in." Anna was ushered into the comfortably appointed parlor and both women sat down to talk. It was an emotional time for Maria as she told Hans' own mother about Hans' last illness and death. Then Maria excused herself to go prepare lunch.

Anna, alone in the parlor, began to look around at the appointments and knick-knacks. It was then that she noticed a framed photo of a couple hanging on the wall. On closer inspection, she recognized Maria in her wedding dress with . . . Oh, God, No! . . . It can't be . . . Johannes her husband. When she recognized Johannes she felt like she was falling into a deep hole. Anna was so stunned she didn't know what to think. She remembered her frantic worrying when she heard no word from Johannes, the pain she and the family had gone through. How could this happen . . . Why? Anna had to pull herself together - this was no time to be overcome with emotion.

Maria came back into the room to set the table for lunch. As she turned to go back to the kitchen, she told Anna that her husband had gone out on an errand, but would be home soon. Soon both women sat down to eat lunch. Anna steered the conversation into broad areas - talk about children and life in general. Anna managed to keep herself calm.

Up to that point, not much had been said about marriage. The conversation again came back to Hans. Maria mentioned how much they had come to like Hans. She went on to say that her husband had cared for Hans as though he was his own son. Anna then said, Hans is his son. What did you say? This can't be true Is it? Oh, yes, it is. Anna then told Maria the story. Maria sat there for a few moments, collecting her thoughts. Emotionally touched, Maria reached out to Anna, took her by the hand, and both women began to cry. At that moment, Johannes walked in the door, said Hello, and asked What is this all about? Maria calmly said, The lady here has something to tell us. Anna stood up and faced Johannes squarely; unsure, he looked at her. Anna then said, "I am Anna - the young man you buried was our son. I am pleased to know that his soul was touched by his father - one he didn't know he had. I thank you for all that you have done. May peace be with you both." She then said Good-bye and began to leave. Johannes stood there, stone-faced. As Anna walked to the door, Johannes

followed to have a word with her. Anna stopped, and told Johannes that she is now in peace; he should not take that away from her again. Then she left.

Anna went back home to her family and never returned to the town where her son was buried. She outlived both of her husbands, and died of old age. My grandmother knew Anna from her school days, before she moved away from our village. After the war, she learned of the story at one of our first Bessarabian reunions in Germany.

In wartime, some families manage to hold onto each other, but other families are torn apart. Living through the horrors of war while separated from one's home and family is hard. The war dealt heavy blows to peaceful people who tried to carry on. Some were successful - all were changed. Most people can adjust to losing the material goods of life. To lose a family member is often too deep an injury to heal in one lifetime. So often the war took away the sense of humanity, and even the sense of bond with one's family. This was the ultimate loss. So many children today are being destroyed by a different war. These wounds linger on.

Both my mother and my grandmother talked about the ravages of wartime on everyday people. Each story may have different details, but the overall effect is the same. It is a sobering thought that wartime can disturb one's soul to such a depth. It takes courage to get up and resume life.