

## **My Past Meets My Present: Leipzig, Bessarabia 2015**

Text written by Louise (Regehr) Wiens, Leamington, Ontario, October 2015

Bouncing up and down involuntarily in my bus seat like a wind up jack-in-the-box, my inner man quickly confirmed my intense dislike of carnival rides. Valeri, our Ukrainian driver, who repeatedly referred to all of the former German villages by their original German names, had already proven himself to be an expert navigator as he traversed the dusty, pothole-riddled roads, many of which would have been deemed impassable in North America. Traffic and road signs were almost nonexistent as was any other vehicle traffic.

The roadway shoulders, if you could even call them that, were covered with dry, dense scrub and underbrush, and the once rich, black soils of the fields appeared to sport more hectares of rocks, weeds and craters than the crops of yore that otherwise would have been the fall harvest. Through the swaying window curtains of the streamlined luxury bus, I had been anticipating my first glimpse of the notorious sunflower fields my mother had so often told me about. Rows of tall, woody, thick green stalks, standing erect like soldiers in rapt attention, their supersized blooms all facing one direction, "as far as the eye could see," she would reminisce. But on this sweltering day in late August, my eyes failed to behold not even one carpet of precious yellow, but rather countless kilometres of dried brown stalks, their yellow halos dried up and withered under the relentless, hot Ukrainian sun.

We were told this was the failed sunflower crop of 2015, a result of a long two-month drought. Even the cool air circulating in the streamlined bus seemed dusty and I could taste it on my parched lips. The vineyards heavily laden with fruit appeared mostly unattended as plants hung low to the ground in heaps, lacking the strong wire supports needed to keep them erect. Periodically and pleasantly interrupting the mostly boring and dominantly brown palette of the countryside were fields of colourful melons, fully ripened and basking in the afternoon heat. Some locals had informed me that my lingering indigestion was probably caused by some watermelon seeds I had ingested a few days prior. One would never know for sure, I surmised.

The 200-kilometer trip to Leipzig took a drawn-out four hours as we lurched back and forth, holding on to sidebars of our seats for support. We all knew we were approaching our destination once it was announced that we had reached Kulm. "Yes, our older sister Emma married and moved up the hill to Kulm," my mom would tell me. "We all cried. We thought we'd never see her again." These days, there is not much left of the village and the pride of Kulm, its monumental church, is long gone. Once again I felt sad.

The "Boroske Brothers Three" of Germany, who were sitting across the aisle from me, chatted excitedly about their parents' life in Leipzig up until the resettlement of 1940. It was definitely a word in due season and comforting to my ears as I smiled to myself and reflected on the commonalities that we shared. Again, it truly confirmed what a diverse and eclectic group we all really were. The oldest member of our group was an eighty-seven-year-old retired nurse from Germany, who easily kept up with the rest.

Then, suddenly, through the rows of wild birches and omnipresent weeping willows which lined sections of the meandering and deserted road, we caught a sweeping view of the serene valley below which encompassed the village of Leipzig. I blinked hard. Once. And then twice. My cousin Martina and I exchanged sentimental glances

and began dabbing at the corners of our eyes, shaking our heads and bouncing around in our seats. As our bus began its descent towards the nestled village, I began to picture the resettler wagon trains as they ventured forth out of Leipzig towards the Danube and into the unknown, the outcome of Hitler's invitation to return to the "homeland" in 1940. "Yes, your grandfather sometimes rode and other times walked beside his horses," my mother often told me.

Although I felt fully prepared for what my eyes were about to behold, I sat stoically along with the rest as we entered the village's *Untere* (lower part) and Valeri prepared to park the bus. Grabbing some water bottles and our hats, we anxiously exited as I once more launched into kicking myself for forgetting all of my eight enlarged copies of the original village map of Leipzig drawn by A. Lachelt in 1982. We quickly separated into small groups and spread out in various directions, each one hoping to connect with his family roots and in a meaningful and tangible way to carry home some indelible, long-lasting impressions.

As Martina and I began our jaunt in the 40 degree Celsius heat (104° F.) which almost overwhelmed us, we nimbly attempted steering clear of paper litter, animal excrement, household garbage and empty liquor bottles that covered the road. We kept our distance from flocks of geese and chickens as we periodically sought shade.

Again, the lack of summer precipitation was apparent as my sandals filled with dirt. As we wandered along and surveyed the dilapidated homes with various layers and colours of peeling paint and broken timber, I pictured my Oma sweeping the street in front of her home on Saturdays. Many of the outer white cement walls which ran parallel to the street remained in place, although they too were crumbling and in disrepair, as well as the adjoining original iron gates leading into the *Hof* (rear yard). Local folks quickly exited their homes and approached us as we meandered along. It seems they were more than well-accustomed to busloads of German visitors scouring the villages as they "searched for their roots."

After spending the night in nearby Tarutino, where my cousin Martina was caught on tape graciously dancing with the *Bürgermeister* in his elegantly draped outdoor disco, our group returned to Leipzig the next morning for the 200th anniversary celebrations. Loud orchestral music blared from the speakers as the notables gathered at the schoolyard's newly erected outdoor amphitheatre. Locals began to arrive dressed in their Sunday best. Some women had even donned long evening gowns. A man in a rusty van parked under some shade in front of the school and began to sell watermelons out of his vehicle. Excited children shrieked as they swung on the new wooden playground equipment which was decorated with colourful balloons. Two school girls were selling postcards as well as bars of Halva and chocolate with wrappers that sported a photo of the Leipzig of years gone by. Pastor Mattias Zugutt of Germany opened the festivities with a sermon based on Luke 11:28. "Blessed are they that hear the word of God, and keep it." As familiar German hymns were sung I kept my sunglasses on so no-one could see my teary eyes.

Several hours later, albeit tired and hungry, we all filed back onto the bus as it rambled slowly along and departed down the dusty village road out of Leipzig. Nonetheless, we had one more memorable stop to make before this day would be forever etched in our memory. Arriving at the "drift" (a small side road), Dr. E. Kelm exhorted my cousin Martina and me to start counting the houses. As we spotted number seven, my cousin and I jumped out and approached the front gate of the property. Our translator Valeri was already one step ahead of us as he called out loudly over the front wall, whereupon a young man presented himself to us, along with his wife and son. After a brief introduction they agreeably posed for a photo with Martina and me at the entrance of their property.

And so, as quickly as it began, our expedition to Leipzig was over. I was more than pleased to have met and greeted the owners of my mother's childhood home. And the owner was more than happy with the pack of cigarettes Valeri had given him.