

Old Suitcase

Text written by Louise (Regehr) Wiens, Leamington, Ontario, January 2014

Driving to my parent's home one day, I was turning onto their street when I spotted the familiar blue garbage truck ahead of me moving at a snail's pace. Impulsively, I passed, and noted that my dad had, in his usual impeccable fashion, stacked his garbage bins by the curb. I did a double take as I noticed he was also disposing of the old brown wooden suitcase. Frantically, I ran into the house and fired questions at him, only to hear him flatly respond, "Well I don't think that we need it anymore." With wide eyes filled with tears and anger I spurted back, "Well, then I am taking it home! It certainly DOES NOT belong in the garbage! You have absolutely no idea..." Although I knew in my heart that he most certainly did.

Along with several other old suitcases, this one was unique and sported several coats of barn red paint, and for many years it was protected by a hand sewn khaki green canvas cover, secured with hand sewn buttons and impeccably made buttonholes. The suitcases were all kept in the basement and were used for storage of bolts of fabric and an array of various household linens, a mix of both old and new. Sunday afternoons after "Festbar," the men would walk to the local car dealership to check out the new models as the women would congregate to discuss any household purchases they had made during the week. This often included deals they had found on bed sheets, aprons, various personal items, and usually always included some type of fabric purchase. After the women crowded around my mother's corner linen closet, they would then head into the basement to swoon over her growing fabric collection, as they measure out the meters. I would often follow them, since at the age of 13 I was already quite an accomplished seamstress. "Yes, take that zipper out and redo it," my Oma would admonish me. "Although nobody else can see your mistakes, you yourself will always know they are there," as I would begin to groan and start to rip out my stitching.

My daughter is studying for exams as I go into our basement and open a tote of school supplies which I am gathering for the school in Leipzig, Bessarabia, for the celebrations there planned for 2015. "Oh, I always loved math," my mother had relayed to me many times over the years, having attended the school same school in Leipzig, which still stands today. "It came so easy to me, and I wish I could have gone to school longer." My 89 year old aunt chimes in, "Yes, but after the primary grades higher education was only available in Taurino, and most could not afford it. It was not free." I reflect back on my childhood dream of becoming a history teacher, and my aunt's childhood dream of being a nurse, a dream which was crudely interrupted by WW2. Her dream is revived occasionally as I glance at an old black and white photo taken during her youth in which she is wearing some type of nursing cap.

On this snowy day in January 2014, which boasts the lowest temperatures in almost 3 decades, my daughter is on the computer with her math tutor on Skype. A straight A student, she is striving for an A+ as she prepares for her math exam the next day. Vying for a coveted spot in the over-subscribed nursing programs in most of the Ontario universities, she knows what she needs to do. As they discuss graphs and numbers and circles and equations, I hear bursts of friendly banter and chatter coming from the computer room. "Her Oma would be so proud of her," I muse to myself.

The major news channels are now regularly reporting on the upcoming Olympics in Russia and the ever emerging verbalized threats of terror. Prime Minister Putin tries to allay the escalating fears of foreigners, and downplay the fact that the city of Sochi is located next to Chechnya, a Republic ripe with violence. "Oh those Chechens, they are something else," my dad would say to me over the years, having not only lived close to them years ago, but now regularly reading Canada's *McLeans's* magazine and *National Geographic*. "They have always loved to fight." Watching another CNN report, my husband glances at me and exclaims. "And you want to go to Moldova with your German cousins? Really?" Another news report highlights a group of new Canadians at a swearing in ceremony in Ottawa. They have just become proud Canadian citizens and are wearing Olympic hockey jerseys as they smile broadly for the cameras. "Wow, we never had anything like that when we became citizens," I bemoan. "You? You had to become a citizen?" he asks, with raised eyebrows. "When?" I just moan again and shake my head. Coming also from a German Russian parents, his family has been in Canada for almost a century, and he is definitely not interested in history.

Some of my mother's aprons are now in my linen closet, crisp and new. Some never worn. Too many for me to use, as I have lately been contemplating who to give them to. This week I am at the checkout at the local bulk food store as "the Pie Lady" joins me in the lengthy line. We exchange greetings and I comment on the array of baking supplies in her basket. Not only does she have a booth at the Saturday Farmer's market in our town, but I know her best as a member of her church choir which regularly visits the hospital where I work, as they sing in acapella and in harmony. Their repertoire consists of German and English hymns, as they solemnly gather in the evenings at the end of the hallways. "Can't they sing more quietly?" a co-worker sighs, as I wipe tears from the corners of my eyes. "Perfect, I will give her some of the aprons," I tell myself, as the Pie Lady relays to me details of her recent trip to Brazil. "My son got married there to a lovely, lovely girl. A local girl that is. Brazilian. He's 35, so it's about time." I give her my congratulations as I look out at the snow and wonder how she can stand the cold wearing only a thin cotton dress and small head covering. "Yes, many of the Germans there speak Portuguese," she continues, as I start to laugh, and wonder how this new young bride will acclimatize to our sometimes fierce Canadian winters.

In the basement, I open the old brown suitcase and again examine the nails and the hand hewn hinges. "We used to store meat in it in Kazakhstan," my dad tells me, in response to my inquisitiveness. "Once a year we got a free pig from the collective farm and we would smoke it to make bacon and then store the bacon in there," he adds. Not knowing whether to believe him or not, he has verbatim repeated the same account to me several times in the past few months. The 2 blue and white stickers on the sides of the suitcase remain intact. It had come with us as we boarded an ocean liner in the port of Bremerhaven, Germany in 1961, bound for Montreal, Canada. One sticker with a large letter "R" symbolized our surname, I had always surmised. The other proclaimed the number "623" and was stamped with the "Seven Seas" logo, the name of the ship, which was owned by the Europe-Canada line and which regularly brought new immigrants to North America. The nails in the suitcase appeared to have been placed at perfect intervals and I noticed that the painted wood was chipping. Although I know that it is no longer fit for travel, I take some of the Moldova bound school supplies out of the rubber tote and place them into the suitcase. On top, I place a few on my mother's aprons, which I will take as well, I vow to myself, as I wistfully reflect on all the unknown places this suitcase must have been.

In Walmart, I run into a retired co-worker and we have coffee, and I devour a high calorie, low-fat muffin. Her husband, now deceased, was my high school history teacher, and I again recant to her how much he has influenced who I have become, and my ongoing love of history. The woman and her adult daughter, who is with

her, both smile as we then part ways. As I arrive home, my husband recounts that he ran into an old neighbor during the day, a fellow who works at the long term care home where my parents reside. "I asked him if he reads your monthly column in the newsletter there. But he hasn't. He didn't even know about it," my husband grins widely. "I told him that you think that you are a writer..."

My daughter will be the 17th nurse on my husband's side of the family. I am the first one on my side, having walked out the golden path of opportunity that my aunt never had. As my daughter studies her numbers, graphs, circles, and equations, I close the rusty hinges on the old brown suitcase, knowing that the circle of my life continues to come into fruition.