

Tante Hulda Turns Ninety

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

On a cloudless and humid summer's day last August, I nestled myself and my ninety-year-old aunt into the back seat of our van as we embarked on a planned and highly anticipated day trip. With my husband behind the wheel and my brother in the front passenger seat, we picked up coffee to go and headed two hours due north. My aunt and I soon began our usual friendly banter in a mix of English and German as I impulsively reached into my purse and pulled out pen and paper. Within minutes, with a sly grin, I heard my husband remark to my brother, "Yep, she's busy taking notes back there. You know, your sister, she thinks she's a writer. This will be in a newsletter somewhere by next month. Guaranteed." My brother chuckled in response.

We passed fields of tomatoes with harvesters slowly navigating the rows, shaking off the ripe fruit into adjacent wagons. With picking by hand now a rarity, I reflected on the hundreds of hampers of tomatoes my mother and I had harvested, oh so many years ago. She only wore pants in the field, my father's khaki work pants that is, as she never did own a pair of her own. She being more robust, they never fit quite right, but that never seemed to bother her in the least. I opened the window of the van a crack to inhale the familiar and comforting smell of the ripe fruit as I briefly closed my eyes and was thrust back in time. The tomatoes and sandy soil of our local rural landscape soon gave way to tall dark green cornstalks and spindly soybeans growing in cracked dry clay. They waved in the warm breeze, as my aunt, also looking out the window, appeared to be lost in thought. Once again, as she had hundreds of times before, she began to recall memories of years gone by. I sat in rapt attention as she slowly began her tales.

"Oh, we had such a good time growing up in Bessarabia. Food and clothes were enough. It was not all about money and fun, as it seems to be today. It was so peaceful. Christmas and all the holidays were such happy times for us. At Easter we planted grass seeds in pots and were so excited when they began to peek through the soil. When they were tall enough we hid eggs in the pots. At Christmas we brought a tree inside and decorate it with bits of greenery gathered from the yard and wrap them around the branches. It wasn't a pine tree. We also made decorations out of paper. At Christmas the school collected money or grains from each family to buy pencils, apples, figs, nuts and candy for the students. We all had a cloth pouch, which we made in school, with our name embroidered on it. At the Christmas Eve service we all recited Bible verses and could hardly wait to get our treats." She became a tad weepy as she continued.

"Plumenmus was a real treat and was made for celebrations. During the week we ate simply. Rice with milk and sugar and cinnamon. We smoked the bacon when a pig was slaughtered. We had cows, sheep and ducks. Goat cheese. You know, your great-grandfather, he worked in the fields well into his eighties, as most of the men did. He proudly brought home kernels of wheat to show us kids how well the crops were doing. Your great-grandfather and his wife lived on our farmyard, in the back, in their own home, as most families did. Most properties had two homes on them, as well as the outbuildings. They also fled with us from Bessarabia and ended up somewhere in Germany. They died there, but I don't know where. Everyone had a fruit garden. We had lots of melons, pears and apples and made Obst soup. We helped hoe the corn and helped with the grape

harvest. We had to ask permission to miss school to help with the harvest. Our back yard had a dirt floor. Large threshing stones were attached to the horses and the wheat was turned with pitchforks. Saturdays the local Jewish men came to examine the wheat and made offers to buy it. The local Jews in Leipzig kept all their lights off on the Sabbath, their holy day. They called the local kids to come and light their cooking stoves, called a "primus." They then gave us free candy, as they ran a shop or two out of large rooms in some large houses. They sold matches, sugar, gas for the lamps and so forth. Saturday nights after work, Opa and the boys went down to the river to bathe the horses. It was a small river nearby. Not the Dniester. On Saturdays we also cleaned the streets and spread sand on them.

"The school was located near the church, and a store. Our currency was called a 'lei.' Classes went to grade seven, after that there was higher education only in Tarutino. It was expensive and we didn't go. We had eight kids in the family. Most of the boys then went straight to work. Religion class was twice a week, with confirmation in grade seven. The girls dressed in white. There were two pastors, Reverend Rivinius, who was like a friend, and Reverend Adlinger. During confirmation they spoke on the scripture "I am the vine and ye are the branches." The youth sat in the balcony at church, and Sunday afternoon people visited while the youth met and played games. We stayed in the villages.

"We were taught the Ten Commandments in school. Our teacher, Mr. Knauer, was also the school director. There was a boy, Helmut Weller, who lived across the street from us. His family raised pigeons. He was the class clown, a real smarty-pants. He was always leaving the school. This made Mr. Knauer really mad. Helmut sat in the front bench, and so did I and my friends Hilda Werner and Hulda Pahl. The boys behind us would regularly pull our braids. When Helmut misbehaved, which was often, the teacher twisted his nose and ears or give him the strap. One day Mr. Knauer had had enough and told the students 'When Helmut comes we will send him to the store to get some mosquito oil.' It was April 1. He sent Helmut to the store, and when he returned Helmut announced 'The delivery man was late and they told me to return later.' Mr. Knauer then tried to embarrass Helmut further and said '*April, April, man schickt den Dummer wo man will.*' (Equivalent to "April 1 is past, you're the biggest fool at last.") One day Helmut came to school and announced, 'This is my mother's fur jacket. I wear it every day. My mother wears it on Sundays.' He promptly got the strap. I wonder what happened to Helmut. I think he fell in the war.

"Every older person in the village was referred to as an aunt or an uncle. We all believed in the Easter bunny and the stork. There was no discussion of sex. We were all content. Letters were posted at the town hall and the messages then relayed from house to house. No phones. We roasted sunflower seeds and made popcorn. The women learned to spin flax and wool into clothes and sacks. We did tatting. Opa Neumann built houses in Leipzig with the other men. Occasionally our parents would go to the market in Tarutino and bring us some candy. I left home at age fifteen to study to become a nurse, but that soon ended with the deportation from Bessarabia. There were a few Germans at the time who were married to local Russians and they stayed behind.

"The local Jews cried, 'As long as you Germans were here we had it good. We had bread. How is it going to be with us now?' We left all of the livestock behind. No money was ever given for it. That is why, to this day, I do not hold on to earthly things.

"From Poland we ended up in Germany, and from there, along with ten other families from Leipzig we were sent to Martuk, Kazakhstan. The Gieses. The Werners. We tried to stay together but never saw each other for the next ten years. Of course we had no idea of where we were going or where we would end up. I didn't know it

then, but Onkel Hans (her future husband) and his parents, were in that same cattle car, exiled from the Ukraine. We were all so scared.

"It was a very hard life, those ten years in Kazakhstan. Our boss sometimes gave us some kernels of grain, since he felt sorry for us going home without anything for the children to eat. He could have ended up in prison. 'Here, take it. Ssshh,' he would say.

"The inspector regularly came to the large limestone building to check our production; he never leaked why the quota was down. He befriended us. I was always afraid to take (steal) something home. I had my small cloth sack from Leipzig and every night your mother said to me 'Well, what did you bring home?? Nothing? Well, then you can starve!!' Your Oma would tell your mother to leave me alone. Oma knew I was afraid. I was younger. Only nineteen. But one day I also filled my small sack and hid it under my clothes. I was so terribly afraid. Proudly I gave it to Oma and she said, 'My child, so today even you brought something home!' When we arrived in Martuk, a local Russian, Maron, who lived near us said to us, 'You will stay here for some time and then you will return to your homeland.' After two or three years he said to us, 'When I think of how you girls looked then with your long braids when you first came here and how you look now....' His wife had mental illness and was unable to work. She spent hours gathering scraps of metal from the ground and sewing them together on a vest, pretending she was a decorated member of the military. 'This is my life,' Maron told us. 'She stands at one end of the adobe hut and I stand at the other.' In 1955 when we received permission to leave Kazakhstan for Germany, Maron assured us, 'You will have a better future.'

"Leaving Martuk in December 1955, we had a hot meal on the train. At the Russian-Polish border someone came on the loudspeaker and said, 'It's not too late. You can still return. You will receive everything you need.'" With that, my aunt sang an impromptu version of the Romanian national anthem, verbatim. I concluded to myself that my interview, at least for that day, was suitably over.