

Memories of Elizabeth Klein Keck and Jacob Keck

Transcription by Janice Neuharth Gruhn

The following transcript of a recording made by Elizabeth Klein Keck and her husband Jacob Keck details some of their memories of life in Russia and North Dakota during the years of emigration and settlement. The recording was made in 1987, when Elizabeth was 87 years old and Jacob was 84. Jacob died in 1994, but Elizabeth survives at 97 years of age in Startup, Washington. Elizabeth Klein Keck was born on February 7, 1900, in the village of Eigenfelt near Odessa, Russia. Her parents were Ludwig Klein (1869-1942) and Elizabeth Lang Klein (1870-1961). Her memories on the recording begin in Russia, continue during the ocean voyage to America, and conclude with settlement in North Dakota. Jacob Keck, who speaks briefly on this recording, was born on January 2, 1903, in North Dakota. His parents were John Keck (1862-1936) and Pauline Schlichenmayer Keck (1868-1955), both immigrants from South Russia. The transcript of the recording was prepared in 1997 by their niece, Janice Neuharth Gruhn, 13125 Gulf Circle, Anchorage, Alaska 99515.

The Memories of Elizabeth Klein Keck

I am Elizabeth Klein Keck. I want to tell you what I can remember from my early childhood days while we lived in Russia yet. I was 7 years old when we lived there. My parents farmed. They raised grain and also livestock and poultry. We had a house made with mud bricks or blocks. The blocks were made with clay and straw, which was dried before they used it to build. Then they used clay and water to smear the house outside. They used some kind of lime or calcimine to paint the house outside. They did that every year. Inside the house was no wood floor, just a dirt floor. Mother used clay and water to smear the floor and scattered sand over it. There were three rooms to the house--front room, kitchen, and hinter stube (back room) where the beds were. There was a wall between the back room and the barn where the horses were. The house and the barn were all in one building. We had a cook-stove made with bricks. They used straw and manure for fuel. I remember I put some straw on the fire in the cook-stove and my dress caught on fire and I got a big burn on my leg. We also had a summer kitchen. They used it during the summer only. They had a separate stove made with bricks to bake the bread. It was with bricks. They used straw for fuel to heat it. Then they took all the ashes out and put the bread in to bake it, always whole-wheat bread. For fuel they used straw and manure to warm up the house in the winter. They had a big basket to bring in the straw to the house in the winter. They dumped it in the corner of the kitchen. They also used a lot of manure. We had no wash machine, not even a wash bowl. They washed the clothes by hand. They carried the water in buckets from a long distance away. They had to heat the water on the stove--no running water.

Most people made their hired man sleep in the barn with the horses. Some people fed the hired man in the barn. They put his plate with food on a post, and that is where he ate. My parents did not do that. The hired man ate with us at the table. I also remember that we did not eat until we had all said our prayer, Dad first and then the children, the oldest first and down to the youngest. We all had our prayers, if it was only, "Abbe Liebe Vater, Amen." I was very young but I can remember that my Dad started a Sunday School with a few children we had in that village of about six or seven families. We sang a few songs. Then he told us the story about Jesus.

And I was very interested in hearing about Jesus and had a longing to be with Him. For Christmas they scared the children when the Santa Claus came and went after the children to frighten them. He usually put a fur coat inside out. Then after that a woman came covered with a sheet on a burro. And they called that the Christ Child. Then the children were all frightened. Then they gave us some nuts and candy and sometimes an orange--no gift whatsoever. No greeting cards were sent. I never saw a Christmas tree in Russia. They celebrated two days for Christmas, and two days for Easter also. Good Friday was always a holiday. They came together and worshipped the Lord Jesus. My mother knitted all our stockings for all of the family. We all had homemade socks. we had many geese and in the summer when they had a lot of feathers, they were put in a bin and were caught one by one, and my mother and the hired girl picked the geese feathers. All the soft, short feathers were picked off. The poor things walked around like they had gone through a tornado for days. Then the feathers were used to make bed coverings. They were 8 inches thick. Each bed had one to cover us up. And they also made some to use as mattresses, and some people made some and filled them with straw for mattresses.

We had no cream separator. Mother skimmed the cream off the milk with a ladle. They made a lot of butter and cottage cheese. That is the way they sold it. They had to haul it to Odessa by horse and wagon to sell it. Also eggs. I remember how they harvested the grain. They did not have machines. They cut the grain with a scythe by hand, and then they hauled it home and shocked it in the yard for some time. Then they spread it out on the place prepared for it. Some people had stone rollers rolled over, pulled by horses. Others just used the horses to stamp out the grain. Then the women usually did a lot of work by hand. The grain was worked by hand. They used the chaff to feed the stock and the long straw was used for fuel. They also used a lot of manure for fuel. When we lived in Russia, we did not have electric lights, no telephone, no radio, no TV, no car--but just horse and wagon. That was our transportation. And when the people do not know all of these things, they are satisfied and happy.

Now in 1907 my brother Daniel was about the age to be drafted into the Russian army. Then he told my father, "I will not go into the Russian army. I will go to America." And when my father heard that, he said, "If you go, then we will all go." So after harvest they had an auction sale and got ready for the long trip, six children and the parents. We all had to have a physical before we started on our trip. My sister Rose had bad eyes and had to have eye surgery. She had to go to Odessa for that. That is where the doctor was. She had quite a time. Her eyes were all swollen shut. She had to stay there for some time. One day my father drove to Odessa--40 miles--to see her and she cried and wanted to go home with him. Then when he came home, he said, "I wish I would never have started that, to go to America." He felt so bad. She was 9 years old then. Before we started, mother sewed dresses for us five girls, all the same pattern: long, dark green, with black lace on the yoke. Then they started to pack up, beddings in big bundles tied together with a sheet or something like that. They stuffed big grain sacks full with clothes and other things. They also took a teapot along and some tea and some bread, and also a little potty for the little children to use, as they did not know if there was a toilet close by for anyone. They were prepared for that. The teapot and little potty were tied together. And when the stuff was all sold and everything was packed up, then there was no place to stay. Then we all went to Grandpa Klein in Schampoli. we stayed there a few days. I remember they had a boy who stayed there with them. His name was Arnold. He was about 8 or 9 years old. One day Arnold was not home when we had our meal, and after that meal Grandma Klein took a bowl and scraped all our plates that we had left and put in the warming oven. And when Arnold came home, that was his meal. I never forgot that, how awful that was. One day they took pictures, Grandpa, Grandma,

Uncle Dan, Uncle Adam, Uncle Jake, each family separate. They spread a big shawl out and hung it up against the mud house for a background. The parents had to hold Bibles in their hands. Now the time came we had to leave. We went by train as far as Germany. There we had to wait for our ship. We all were together in one large rooming house. We stayed there nine days. We had to sleep on cots. That house was full of bedbugs. I can remember that Dad did not sleep for a few nights. He took a shoe, and when he saw a bug he used the shoe and--bang!--the bug was killed. By morning the house had a lot of bug spots. Now before we left, Mother put two skirts on, and she sewed some money in her underskirt, and Dad also sewed some money in his clothes. They took cash along and kept out as much as they needed on the way. The passport too. Some other people came along with us. Aunt Pauline, Mother's sister: she was on the same passport as a daughter. Also John Schock, a cousin: he was on the same as a son. My Aunt Rosina and her husband, Philip Wittmer, and Herman Bradmeier. They all came together. Finally we went on our ship. It was a large, old battleship. It moved very slow. We were there about ten days. Then the ship tossed back and forth. We all got seasick, except Rose did not get sick. She took care of us all, got us some food and water. Some dishes rolled from one side of the ship to the other. It went on for days like that. I can still see Uncle Philip Wittmer standing and holding onto a post and saying, "My God, if I were only back in Russia again." Now on the ship we had black bread with a kind of vegetable soup or stew. We were all vaccinated on the ship before we left. We all got over it except my sister, Louise, the two year old. She got an infection on her arm, and it got worse by the day. We were on the ship 18 days. My parents thought that they would never see land anymore. There were many Jewish people on the ship. I can remember how they were standing and praying. They had a band around their forehead with a little box on it. I think it was the Ten Commandments. They prayed often and long prayers. Now came the time that we landed at the Statue of Liberty. We all had to get out of the ship. What a commotion! Each family had their baggage with them. We were all put in one large room with our baggage and sacks. There we sat around with that stuff day and night. By that time Louise was very sick and had to go to the hospital. Now who would go with her, was the problem. Mother could not go because she was pregnant. Then Aunt Pauline and Daniel went with Louise to the hospital ship. They were there two weeks with her. Meanwhile, we could not stay there much longer because Mother was close to give birth to her child. We were all checked for disease by the doctor before we could move on. I don't remember why we had to stay there so long. No one could say a word in English, and no one could understand a word that was said. Then Father met a minister there that could talk German, and he asked the minister if he could see to it that we could move on to North Dakota. Then the minister saw to it that we could go on to our place. While we were there at the Statue of Liberty, they had long tables nicely set with good food for all the people that were there, but some people were so selfish. They went ahead of all the other people and picked up all the butter from the tables for themselves. Finally someone reported them and they had to stop that. From the Statue of Liberty we went on a small ship to New York and then we took the train to Ellendale, North Dakota, where Father's sister lived. Finally we were at our place, one mile from my aunt, Schmierers, Father's sister. We were there about three weeks and then my sister Lydia was born. Aunt Pauline, Daniel, and Louise came two weeks after we were there. We were there on the road six weeks from Russia to America. I thank God for my parents that took the risk to come to America. Otherwise, we would have lived under the Russian Communist government. Thank God that we live in a free country. We lived in Ellendale one year. My parents bought a place in the Washburn, North Dakota, area where I grew up. There would be a lot more to say, but these are the most important that I can remember. Now children, I don't know how long I'll still be here on this earth. I am 87 years old now, but I want to tell you be true to the Lord Jesus and true one to the other. Always do what is right. If problems come up, don't try to solve them yourselves. Go to the Lord for help. He will guide and help you when you trust Him. I want to meet you in heaven where there will be no more parting. God be with you all is my prayer daily. I love you all. Now Dad wants to say something.

The Memories Of Jacob Keck

When my parents came from Russia and they landed in New York, they had five children. Dave, my brother, was the youngest at that time. He was telling us how they came to New York. The kids had to carry the teapot and the little potty tied together and the strings were so long that the pots bounced on the sidewalk as they walked and it jingled. And the people heard it. My parents lived by Eureka, South Dakota, for some time. Then my father, my brothers John and George went up to the Washburn, North Dakota, area where they homesteaded 160 acres. Then they plowed up sod and cut it 16 x 12 and laid them like bricks. A four-room house was built. Then they went back to South Dakota and got the family. They moved up with the covered wagon. They took two cows, some chickens, with five children. Then north of Bismarck about four miles the hitch of the wagon broke, and Father took it out and walked back to Bismarck to have it fixed. And the family had to wait until he came back. When they got to the house, Mother knelt down and said thank you to the Lord for a home. She took the butcher knife and cut off the long grass inside. Then it was smeared with clay and water. No wood floor--just dirt floor. They smeared it with clay and water. They moved up in 1902 in the fall, and I was born in 1903, the first one born in the sod house. When I was very young, we had a lot of horses and cows, and in the winter all the manure was hauled in a pile and leveled out. In the spring the whole family had to be out to chase the cows around to pack the manure. Sometimes we used the horses and tied them together and circled them to pack it, and it was packed. We had to spade it and let it set for a week or more. Then it was put in small shocks until it was dry and then hauled to a place and put in a stack and smeared over so the snow would not blow in. And that was fuel for the winter along with some dry logs from the wood, and that was the winter fuel. Later there were some coal mines opened for fuel. When I was about ten years old, I had to take the cattle out every day to herd them because we didn't have enough pasture for all the horses and the cattle, and sometimes I didn't have shoes to wear and had to go barefooted. But we always had to go to church. In the spring when all the horses were worked all week, then on Sunday we walked to church 1-1/2 miles. The oral histories end at this point and together they both sing, "Gott Ist Die Liebe" in German and English.