

## Interview with Helen Krumm (HK)

Conducted by Bob Dambach (BD) and Michael M. Miller (MM)

7 October 2001, Hague, North Dakota

Transcription by Lena Paris

Proofread and Edited by Beverly Wigley

Transcript starts at 3:20

**BD:** Helen, we're talking about your life in the village. Why don't you tell us about what it was like growing up in the village as a girl?

**HK:** Well, we started school when we were seven years old, and then you had to go to the eighth grade. First, we had German and then later on it was cut out and there was just Russian. But there was no religion taught in that school. If you wanted to go to higher education, then you had to go to Odessa, and you had to pay for yourself. *Unless* you wanted to be a party member or a doctor or a teacher, then the government paid for you. Otherwise you had to pay yourself.

**BD:** Did you learn religion though? Did your parents teach you religion?

**HK:** Oh yes, oh yes. See, we had it in church before church started or before church let out. So we had catechism.

**BD:** So you were able to go to church as a child.

**HK:** Oh yah, oh yah.

**BD:** How old were you when couldn't go to church any longer?

**HK:** You mean when Communists took over? It started in the '30s already, in the '30s when the starvation was. There was wheat and there was vegetables and there was everything growing, but we couldn't have it. They came and took everything away. So if you didn't want to starve, you had to go to *kolkhoz Kollektiv* (collective farm), you know what they said. Then you got your three meals. And when the year was out, you got so much a day - maybe a thousand ruble, not even that much. So you had to live with that. But we could have a cow, a couple of pigs, couple of chickens and a little wine garden. You know what we had vegetables - it's maybe 50 acres. That's what they let us have, you know.

In the '30s when the Communists took over that's when they took all the people away. First, they took the teachers away, then they took the people who was a little smart and helped other people. Then they took the priests away. My father died May 5<sup>th</sup>, and he was the last person that got buried in Strassburg. Then they took Father Kopp, Theobald Kopp, away. He was from Krasna.<sup>1</sup> And from that time on they started to demolish the church.

They threw the bells down, then the steeple down, the statue, and the big organ. Everything was hauled out and burned, and they made a show hall out of the church. Our church, I think, 600 people it holded with the pews. And then when the Germans came and took over in '42 they brought their own chaplain with them. Then they cleaned the church up, painted all new, brought some bells and hanged them up

in the church and everything. Those chaplains married people for three days. They baptized people for three days and heard confessions for three days. Because in '35 we had no church until the Germans came in. We were out of priests. People prayed at home, they buried at home, they baptized and married at home. So we made our own. But we had no contact with the outside world. There was only one radio station and what they told us. That's all. No newspaper, no nothing.

**BD:** For how long did you not have contact?

**HK:** *Seven years*, yah. From '35 when my father died till the Germans come in in '42. But see it was hard for the people. They had no contact with what goes on in Baden *oder* Selz *oder* Kandel. And a lot of people had relatives in Germany and in America. They got packages and they got all put away. *Every* night they came [to take people away]. "Joe take your cap and you go with us." "Well, where do we go?" "Well, you'll find out." And that's the end of it.

I think [it was] in the 90s [the number of people] they took away alone from Strassburg. Every night and that's the way they cleaned up. So they said, "If you want to live and don't starve, you go to kolkhoz," you know, Komsomol.<sup>2</sup> See what they called that - well, I don't know how to say it in German. They were all Communist parties or whatever they were. But when the Germans came in they helped us again, but it didn't took long. It only took two years. Germany lost the war between [the Germans and the Russians] and Germans had to leave again. They said, "You are on your own, there's nobody [that] can help you."

One day they came to the house and knocked on the door and they said, "Well, pack. March 23, 1944 - that's when we're going to leave." It was raining and snowing. Two-three families went together and put up stuff. What they had - a little *Rauchflasch* (*Rauchfleisch*, smoked meat), bread and a couple clothes. We didn't have too much clothes - all in one wagon and that's the way we start to driving. We were supposed to go way up [actually south] to Franzfeld. That's where the Dnieper River went through. From there we're supposed to go with the ferry over to Romania. It started snowing, the Russians came and they threw bombs and bombs and bombs. A *lot* of people didn't make it over, but my ma was such a feisty lady. She said, "We're going to make it. We're going to make it. We will stay a little bit behind and maybe the snow is going to quit." She was right, so we made it. But we couldn't take nothing, just what we had on our shoulder.

**BD:** How many people left the village?

**HK:** There was 1200 of us. And you could not believe it when you seen that the cats, the dogs stood and just when they cried, "Why you go? Why you go? Why [do] you leave?" The church bell was ringing and the Russian people from cross the river came over [saying], "Why do you leave? We were such good friends, why do you leave?" They couldn't [understand]. And we said, "You can go take our house now." There's nothing, you know. Most of our Strassburg stuff, like the church stuff, the monstrance and everything, that went all down with the ferry, because the Russians bombed it.

From there we went over to Romania. Akkerman was the first [place] we came there, but the people didn't let us go in the yard, not even take water. "What do you want with us? We don't have nothing," they said. So we had to go, we had to go. The horses had no more hoofs on their feet and *mud* up to your knees. We had nothing - hardly anything to eat except dry bread and stuff. So some of my sisters

and other people, they went in town and traded off some of their rings and stuff for a loaf of bread and a bale of straw for the horses.

From there we went up to Budapest, Hungary. Then another three weeks and the Germans finally said – because the horses did just lie down on the street and died. Every morning three or four people had to be buried on the road. Then the Germans came and said, "You're out on your own, but there's a big train going to come and in five days you're going to be in Poland." Well, we had nothing. Maybe I shouldn't say it, but the lice were crawling up on our shoulders. We couldn't wash ourselves or take care of ourselves. Then that big train came so they loaded us all in. I don't know how many we are. Some people went back. They didn't even want to go along anymore. They said, "We're just going to die."

So in five days we came to Poland. They unloaded us in Poland and put us in a - it's almost like a concentration camp. They deloused us and disinfected us and then they put us in a - just like you put a fence and put cattle in. We got three meals, and then we had go and work in the factory for the Germans. Germany occupied Poland that time through the war, so we had to sew clothes and different stuff, but in the night we had to go back to the camp and stay there. We were in Poland for - We were two months and six days on the road - walking. I said it's no wonder my knees given out. And then January 20<sup>th</sup> the Germans came and said we had to go. The Russians are only 20 kilometers behind. We had no more horses, we had no wagon, we had nothing - me and my mother. And the two sisters, they were working someplace else. How are we going to get together? The people went out and started to walk and walk. We were 16 days on the way till we made it to Germany. When you [exhaled, it was so cold] snow like ice came down, but nobody could help you. We could hear the Russian bombs and shooting and everything. We lost one of my sisters. She got mixed up with other people, then finally after three days we found her again. Well, we came to Germany - *all* the people did. It was just - you cannot imagine! People and people and people! Nobody knew where we [should] go or what we [are to] do or who's going to help us. Germany was in down in ruins too, because they bombed every night, every night. The Americans came and demolished all that was left of Germany.

**BD:** What year was this?

**HK:** In '44. And then my mother had a sister and she was married to a German [*Kriegs*] *gefangene* – How do you call it - from World War I?

**MM:** Prisoner of war?

**HK:** Prisoner of war, yah. And she said, "You know, we should go. Maybe we find *Tante* (Aunt) Josefa and maybe she can take us in. We were all set at the train, ready to go then *die Flieger* (pilots) came and they threw bomb. That car, where we were in, didn't get hurt. The back and the front [of the train] was gone. So my ma said, "We cannot go now and look for *Tante* Josefa." It was about 10 kilometer where there was a big farm, an orchard. Farmers came out and they said, "You need help? You want something?" Well, we were hungry and had no place to go. "Well, we could use some people to work for us." So they took us in, my mother and my two sisters. I was seven months pregnant with my first child. My husband was killed already *and* my brother was killed already in Budapest. So they took us in and we worked for those farmers for just cheap [wages]. They had nothing either, you know. I worked for them for six years.

And then, you know, the Americans sent those packages in, the CARE packages. Here in Hague there was Father Nebler, Josef Nebler and in Dickinson was Monsignor Aberle, I suppose you heard of him. They organized those CARE packages every month. This man who let me come (later on) did that. Every month he sent a package over, \$25 worth. A lot of people - and we got one of those packages and there was his address in and it was Josef Krumm and Katherine Krumm from Hague, North Dakota. And they kept on sending us soap and Crisco and needles and combs, whatever we needed. I went to work for those people. See, Josef and Katherine had no children. They adopted three, and they were all married already. Then he asked once, he wrote a letter and he said, "How about coming to America? My ma said right away, "That would be good! That would be good! You could make a life for yourself and Marie. (My little girl was six years old.) Here in *Deutschland* there is nothing. You'll always be a maid."

We kept on talking and talking, back and forth. Then I finally thought maybe I should go. And then I said to my ma, "Wouldn't you get homesick if I go away?" "I'm just glad when you got a happy home for Marie and for yourself." Then people said, "Yah, you want to go so far away?" I said, "I don't know Ma, maybe I shouldn't go." She said, "You go!" She was a feisty woman. She got us through all that stuff. This one lady I worked for, she was such a good lady. She said, "Yah, Helena, you want to go out to them *Amerikaner*? They catch people and they're selling people." That was the story from the Indians, you know. That's what they knew in Germany at that time, see. Then, well, my ma said, "Make up your mind." So I wrote, "I'll come." And then he said (Monsignor Aberle), "They're going to pay just from New York up to here, and the rest of it the Catholic Caritas paid for everything. So it took a year till I got all my papers and the shots and everything. Now on October 10<sup>th</sup> I had to leave Herr Matthausen, where I used to work, and everybody was crying. I said, "Oh, don't worry. Columbus took a chance too. Why shouldn't I?" So I went. We stayed in Bremerhaven till October 23<sup>rd</sup>, and then we got loaded in a big remodeled American warship to bring displaced people over here. We went in that boat, so we were nine days. In November 2<sup>nd</sup> we came on in New York, in the evening.

**BD:** What year was that?

**HK:** '45.

**BD:** November 2, 1945?

**HK:** 1945, yah. They said we have to stay overnight in the ship until the next morning. Then we see the Statue of Liberty and everything. When we looked up, we were just lost. We didn't even know how to say hello. I didn't even have a nickel in my pocket. We were unloaded, and they checked all out whatever it is. They put some tags on [that said] you go to North Dakota, you go to South Dakota, you go there. And this one lady said, "Oh you guys, you go to North Dakota? Oh, my God!" And that's all what she said! So, I wondered if that is the end of the world or not.

Now, first I have to tell you that they took us to a restaurant and gave us a *big, big* breakfast, hash browns and everything. Water glasses that big and we thought, "Should we just drink the water? Or is that coffee? (or whatever it was) Well, in *Deutschland* you didn't drink the water, because it has that alkali in so they drink all distilled water. We finally found out we could drink the water. They unloaded us then, and I went from New York to Chicago, and then back to Minneapolis, back to Fargo and then back to Bismarck with the train. Monsignor Aberle, Father Nebler, and Joe, that man who let me come over, they were at the train station and waited for us. Father Nebler said, "Is there a Helena Feist here?" "Yah, here she is." So we walked out and they brought me home. But when we got out of Bismarck, I

couldn't see nothing. It was all but snow and snow! And I said, "Oh, that's why that lady said, 'oh my God!'" [laughter]

So I went here, Marie started to go in the school, and I worked for those people. Joe said, "You don't have to stay if you don't want. If you want to find a job." I said, "No, it's good enough if I have a roof over my head and a meal." He was joking a little. The next morning he had a big bowl of cereal and a big spoon and I asked him why. He said, "I thought you loved cereal so much you should put a big spoon in it." [laughter] After two years his wife died. He had a sister who was a nun in Yankton, South Dakota. She came up quite a bit. And she said, "You know Joe, you should get married to Helena." And he said, "No, I'm 30 years older than she is." "What's the difference," she said, "if you only have 10 years together?" Well, they finally talked me in and they talked him in too. And see, they had no children. When we got married then we got seven on our own. He always said, "I didn't know when we adopted those three, I thought we had the world. But *now*," he said, "I got the world with those kids." He enjoyed them. He was farming, and he was well-to-do. We had no problems. I said, too, I would never go back. And I say to you two now, "I didn't have a nickel in my pocket but I had a roof over my head." Some of them said, "You should get married to a younger guy." And I said, "No. We cherish each other, love each other, obey each other. That's all what I need." And that's what that he needed too. From that time on, we raised the kids. They went to school, they went to college.

So I suppose you want to know from Russia how we went? When we grew up, we'd go out to dances with the young people. It was like that, too, we always were in groups. When one [group] got together then the other ones [joined them] but we got along.

Sunday was Sunday. But when Communists was, there was no Sunday and there was no Christmas and there was no Easter. There was only Oktoberfest and first of May, that would be the Labor Day. They marched and stuff like that. But otherwise- There was abortion [at] that time already in Russia. It's so hard when you have no contact from the outside world. We didn't know what's going on in Germany or over in Russia or across the street. You even couldn't talk to your neighbor because the walls had ears. When you had a holy picture in the house and one of those cams - comes, you better take that down. That was terrible. You always think, "We have it hard." Everything country or every community has something - not everything is perfect. But that was worse.

**BD:** Did you know what was happening? You said they were coming and taking people away from villages. Did you know what happened to those people?

**HK:** No, all to Siberia. They took them all to Siberia. They had to build roads, and they had to build different stuff, you know. They starved. They'd only last a year or two. You could not even ask [about them].

**BD:** So there's no letters coming –

**HK:** No, no. There was no nothing. There was no doctor. There was maybe a hospital 20 miles away but they didn't have the medication. All the babies were born at home. We had these old midwives who took care of them. The lifespan was maybe 55-60. That's about it. *A lot* of people died. Like with the food, too- we'd eat good and everything when we had [it]. We drank our own wine. We made no coffee or anything because we didn't have the money to buy [any]. We had the grapes so we made our own wine and our vegetables. [We] picked all the stuff, you know.

**BD:** Did you ever get to visit Odessa when you were young?

- HK:** Oh, yah. Oh, lots of times, yah. You could go with the train. It took about an hour. It was 65 kilometers from us. Yah, we visited Odessa, the Black Sea.
- BD:** Did you have any memories of that?
- HK:** Oh, yah. I know we went down to the Black Sea. When you look at the Black Sea, it's dark. But when you go look down, it's light. When the Germans took it over that time, they ruined it really bad.
- BD:** When you were younger, did you used to go swimming in the Limon?
- HK:** No, in the Dnieper. I almost drowned that time. That's why I never go. Every Saturday we went down. The Dnieper, you know, had this whirlpool. And we went in and fooled around. Pretty soon I went down and came up and went down. And the only thing I thought was now I wouldn't see my mom anymore. Guys were sitting up on the bridge and one dived in and pulled me by the hair and pulled me out. I said, "Don't tell my mom or else I can't go swimming any more!" From that time I never went swimming. But we could fish down there.
- BD:** Now what would've been the country just on the other side of the water?
- HK:** Bessarabia was over the river. After that would come Akkerman and then come Romania, then come Budapest, Hungary. But *nobody* let us in, nobody let us even get water or anything. Like you say, we felt so bad for the horses. It was just impossible.
- BD:** When you were growing up in Strassburg, were your family farmers or shopkeepers?
- HK:** No, my dad was a *Handwerker*, a craftsman. They made wagon wheels and they made wagons. They made coffins. They put wooden floors in and the roofs. There were so many who brought [the skills] back from Germany. They were all craftsmen, they could do anything. *Schuhmacher*, you know, made shoes. At that time you couldn't buy your shoes. You had to go to the shoemaker and he measured them on [your feet] and he made your shoes. The *Schneider* (tailor) did your coat – measured you for your coat and your dresses. I cannot really say, but there was *a lot, a lot* of craftsmen.
- BD:** Was he a carpenter then?
- HK:** Yah, yah.
- BD:** What's the German word for carpenter?
- HK:** *Schreiner*. See, his dad already when they came in from Elsaß-Lothringen (Alsace-Lorraine) - they were so overcrowded, they had no work [in Germany] and so they volunteered to go into Russia. And that's why they built it up. I know my pa said his dad said when they went out in the field they had to turn around right away so they found the way home again, so much it was overgrown with wilderness and stuff like that you know.
- BD:** So it would've been your grandfather that came from Germany?
- HK:** My great-grandfather. But I said, too, if it wouldn't be for the Germans, Russia wouldn't have made it. It's like here in America, too, if it wouldn't have been for the German-Russians, America wouldn't have made it. The Indians wouldn't build it up, and that's the way it was there [in Russia]. They built right away the church and they built the schoolhouse and they made roads. They just kept on going. And pretty soon Strassburg, Mannheim and Kandel got too big. The ones who came later on had to build

more out in those *Futter[wiesen]* (meadows cultivated for fodder). I said I would never go back to Germany but I would like to go back to Russia one more time but I think that's impossible.

**BD:** So you haven't been able to go back since?

**HK:** To Russia, no. I was in Germany three times. See, my mother lived in Germany with my two sisters. So I went back three times to visit them. My mother died now. My sisters are still living there. They got married to German boys, and they have their homes over there. We had my mom coming over for a year from Germany. She could not believe we have such wide roads! In Germany, you know, trees and everything is built up. She said, "Yah, you could seed some stuff in here!"

She could not believe one of my boys. Paul, he's such a little loudmouth. He always crawled up the tree. And she said, "Paul, you're going to tear your pants!" "What's bothering you?" he said. "Well, I'll have to patch them." "We don't buy patches for pants," he said, "we're going to buy new ones. Americans throw the pants away." Then she laughed and he said, "Well, if you don't like it here, go home!" [laughter] It was funny. She liked it here too, you know. Joe said, "Well, stay another year." "Na," she said in German, "*ein alte Baum, kann man nit verpflanze.*" "An old tree, you cannot transplant it," she said.

**BD:** How big a family did you have when you were growing up?

**HK:** Just one brother and my sister and me. See, when the Russians started the war in '41/'42, they took all those young men from 17 on, so my brother had to go.

**BD:** And your husband had to go too?

**HK:** That happened later on. Then later on when the Germans came in, they took the other ones when there was no [one else] - well, older men and little boys, I think. My brother didn't make it home, and my husband didn't make it home, none of them – got no contact with them – nothing. That's like here when they say somebody dies 'over there' (from the soldiers) [and] they're coming home. There was nothing like that, nothing like that.

**BD:** So you never really found out what happened?

**HK:** They know where it happened in Budapest. That's where the Germans had to give up, you know. But the Russians surrounded them so they let nothing in and nothing out. So that was the end.

**BD:** So did your husband fight for the Germans or the Russians?

**HK:** For the Germans, but my brother fought for the Russians. Then he sneaked away and sneaked over to the Germans. But then he got killed too.

**BD:** When you were saying that the Germans had taken over the Odessa area and they were withdrawing - When they were there, did they consider you Germans or Russians?

**HK:** They called us Germans, yah, they called us Germans. But just when we came to Germany, the Germans called us German-Russians. See, they said we're not citizens. We didn't belong to nobody. We left Russia for Germany, and Germany didn't make us their minds if they wanted us or not. See, so we were not citizens. What did they call us? Displaced people or something like that.

**BD:** Now, when you ended up in Germany, you said you worked for that farmer. Where was that farm?

- HK:** In Schwäbisch Gmünd, by (Schwäbisch) Heilbronn. You know, they only had 165 acres, and that's called a *big* farm. But they did do a lot, they had sheep.
- BD:** Now when you got over to here, in America, were you surprised at all the names you could recognize?
- HK:** Oh yah, yah. First you feel - I even got lost in that little town. I went to church one morning and didn't [find my way home]. Went all the way *und* I said, "Well, where do I live now?" Finally one lady said, "Yah, you live over there." [laughter] You know, when I came over here and I heard *them* talk German, they made everything up! They added on to their words. But when I was in Germany, like in Schwäbisch, they talked like we [talk]. Well, like I do now. But here they add some on, they took some away.
- BD:** When you found out you were coming to Hague, and then you passed by Strasburg, was that a surprise to you?
- HK:** No, it was too much snow! We not even could see out! And Father Nebler had to stop out and took my two suitcases, and Joe had to walk in the house. And that spring, then they had the flood where the Rice Lake filled up.
- BD:** But did you know when you were coming over here that the people that lived over here had relatives that were in the village where you grew up?
- HK:** Oh yah, oh yah. Yah, then everybody came from Strasburg and Linton. They wanted to know, "Did you know so-and-so? Did you know Michel Schmidt? Did you know the Sängers? Did you know the Fischers?" Yah, I knew a lot. And even now when I sit alone sometimes and I go down from one side [of the village to the other], I knew where the Wolfs lived and the Fischers and the Thomases. I knew all them, but then we got all apart and never got to find out anything anymore.
- BD:** Did you know what happened to any of the other people that left Strassburg and Russia?
- HK:** Right! I know what happened to them. See, when England *und* France and Russia and America came together -

**[Some dialogue missing due to tape change.]**

- MM:** In the early '50s -
- HK:** - with that horse that we had. She said, "Keep going! Keep going!" But it couldn't go anymore.
- BD:** Why don't we go back and just touch on a few dates here and Michael can help. Just from a date standpoint - When you left Strassburg in South Russia, when did that happen?
- HK:** 1944, March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 9:00 o'clock in the morning, and we only made 10 kilometer. It was rain and snow until – Well, we just slept under the wagon and the next day we drove to Franzfeld. That was about 50 kilometer too. And the horses, you know, it's impossible to go when it rains and snows. We had to feed them. We had to get straw and hay for them, but there was nobody there. In every town we came, everybody was gone already. Just the cats and the dogs were running around. From Franzfeld we went to Akkerman. That's where the ferry should take us over to Romania across that river. It froze and it thawed, and it snowed and it rained, then the Russians had a good chance to bomb. So they always came with the *Tiefflieger* (low-flying aircraft) and just threw bombs there. So people holded back, but



we had to go over anyway. They brought little ferries, but you couldn't take nothing with - just what you had - your coat or your blanket or something.

**BD:** When you left, you really don't have any pictures or anything like that?

**HK:** Everything gone, everything. In the early days they didn't take so many pictures like now, but once in a while a photographer came around in the community and took a couple of pictures, but that stayed all behind. We just walked out with *Brot* (bread) and smoked meat and stuff like that. There was no medication, there was nothing, nothing. We didn't have shoes like we have shoes here now, so there was nothing.

**BD:** When did you leave [Germany] and when did you arrive in America?

**HK:** I came in 1951. October 23<sup>rd</sup> we went to the Bremerhaven. The ship's name Stewart, General Stewart. Nine days we were on the ocean. The 1<sup>st</sup> of November we came to New York, the 2<sup>nd</sup> we got unloaded, and each one got his tag on where we [were to] go. They gave us \$5.00. We didn't even know what to do with it. But in the train we could get food to eat. On the 5<sup>th</sup> of November I came to Bismarck and that night, the 5<sup>th</sup> of November, came right here to Hague.

**BD:** You were traveling with your daughter, weren't you?

**HK:** Yah, she was six years old. Then she started school here. The sisters gave her extra school so she learned the English right. See, here the Germans - they talked English, but it wasn't right. The sisters took her in and taught her how. She graduated from high school and she married a farmer.

**BD:** Did she help you learn English?

**HK:** I learned on my own. I had the radio going, and I knew how to write and read. I was what you call a bookworm. I loved to read, and I learned myself. Joe had the radio and you could get Yankton in South Dakota, Lawrence Welk, and that's how I learned my English. A lot of people say, "Did you went to school?" I said, "Yah, I went to school, but a Russian school not the English school. But one thing I regret, I should have learned spelling. The German spelling and the English spelling is different. You lose so many *Silben* (syllables) and then you add an "r," and when I write I always have to have the dictionary so I don't make a mistake. [laughter]

**BD:** Could you describe your house in Strassburg when you were a child?

**HK:** Yah, I could do it. We had a nice home and there was a *Viertelstube* (a front room) and a side room. Ma used to sleep in the front room and we girls. In the middle was the kitchen and then the entrance. We had two rooms at the back, one for Joseph and one the younger girls was sleeping in. Behind that was the barn. There was the chicken coop, and the two cows we had and the little pigs we had. I would say it was about 75 feet this way and it had a sandstone entrance. *Der Giebel* (the gable) used to be with stone. There was a *Mauer* (wall) around with stone all the way, and in the end where you come in, where you put your trash in and stuff like that.

On the way down we had a garden, an *Obstgarten* (orchard) - all kinds of apples, *Pflaumen* (plums), peaches, and what they used to call *Helmehitsche*, where we had the straw and oats for the cows and for the horses we had. But then later on when Communists took over we couldn't have it - just one cow, that's about it.

- BD:** When I visited over there I've seen a lot of the houses have summer kitchens. Did you -
- HK:** Oh yah, summer *Küche* and the *Keller* (the cellar) where you went down. Ours was about 10 feet down, 10 steps down where we had all our watermelon, apples, sauerkraut and cucumbers and everything for the winter. That we had all down there. The smoked meat we hung up in the attic, you know. We made our own [dried] fruit by cutting apples, pears and grapes and laid them on the roof and let them dry. Then we put it in sacks and we made compote where they cooked the fruit.
- BD:** Did you have one of those ladders that went up to the attic?
- HK:** Yah, yah. We had one with steps that went way up.
- BD:** Tell me a little about the summer kitchen. What would you do in the summer kitchen?
- HK:** Nobody wanted to clean the big house over the summer. There was kind of flies too around, so we had the summer kitchen, and there was the *Backofen* beside there. You baked your bread in there. You eat in the summer *Küche*, but you only went to sleep in the big house. So that's why we had the summer *Küche*, yah. The well was beside there. We dug the well. It was about 20 feet deep where you got the water out.
- BD:** Now my memory is that the houses were long and narrow.
- HK:** Yah, narrow. And you know, when the war was (I forgot to mention this) - Before the Germans came, Russia made us all paint our houses black with ash, the whole houses, so the Germans couldn't see where the village are. That's what they told us. We had to take wood ash and mix it with water and then you took the brush. They had the spray there. And the houses - you know, we always schmeared our house with *Lehm* (clay) and then we painted it white, but it took forever to get it off – that [black ash]. It looked terrible. When you got out at night you could see nothing. But the Germans were in town already, and so why? Yah, but that's the way they did - the Communists, you know.
- BD:** When we visited over there – actually, the houses right now are pretty colorful.
- HK:** Oh, yah.
- BD:** Were they colorful when you were growing up?
- HK:** Oh yah, oh yah! We had flowers around *und* like in Germany they have the geraniums on the window. That's what we had too. A lot of flower gardens - raised our own flowers. The vegetables and the fruit, like the apples and pears - The Jews came out from Odessa in spring and they contracted your garden, whatever you had. And there was so much you'd get. All you had to do was deliver it to them in time, and that's the way we got rid of our [vegetables and fruit]. But they were good to us, and there was no problem with them, you know.
- BD:** Did you have fences in front of your houses?
- HK:** Yah, yah. A *Mauer* around and come Saturday we had to sweep the yard. Everything had to be cleaned up - no shovel out, no rake, nothing outside.
- BD:** Where was your house in relation to the church in Strassburg? How close were you to the church?

- HK:** About two blocks maybe, and we walked. Later on we had some bikes and the boys rided horses, but mostly we walked. There were some people that came from 20-30 miles to church yet, and then they took their shoes off and walked barefoot till they came to church and then they put their shoes on again. They took them off again to save the shoes because we only had one pair of shoes, one kid from the other one.
- BD:** When we were in Strassburg, I think the school was about two blocks east of the church.
- HK:** Right, right. It's the same school and the first teacher I remember was Schiller. He was from Germany. Him and his wife teached school there, but then they took him away too.
- BD:** What would you have done for fun? What sort of games did you play?
- HK:** Oh, we danced, we singed and we played tricks to each other. In fall, like here we have Thanksgiving, we had *Fasenacht* (Mardi Gras). We had a big dance and put different clothes on. Like when a couple got married, we stuffed [clothes of] a man and wife laying in the bed. It's all kids' stuff but was it fun. It was fun. Each group had her leader and he could play the organ or the violin. Singing is the most important [thing] what we had down there. Our choir in our church had 60 singers. And our *Schulmeister* (schoolmaster) was Ferdinand Kraft. Michael, you know the Kraft from Strasburg that had a store? That was his uncle. We had a choir and *everything* Latin we had to sing, everything in Latin. But then, just like in Christmas you sing, "Stille Nacht" or "Komm Christkindlein," that was in German. But the other ones were all in Latin.
- BD:** How did you meet your first husband?
- HK:** We were just almost neighbors, yah, and went to school together and stuff.
- BD:** What would your wedding have been like? What would be a traditional wedding in the village of Strassburg?
- HK:** Three days. [laughter] The first day they had it in the house were the bride was. They didn't send cards out like they do now. They had *Ladmadle* and *Ehevadder*- they drove around with the horses and the buggy and said, "You are invited to the wedding to so-and-so in the church." So they went from house-to-house. The dinner was done always with noodle soup and chicken, ketchup sauce, kholodetz, you know what I mean, "pigs feet," salad and *Kuchen*. And wine, you know, they set it with the pitcher on the table. Then when they all had a good time - when they cleaned out the *Hinterstube*, where the beds were in, and then the dance started. You know, at that time there was a 'ground' floor. There was dust and everything! But they danced and drank their wine. Then when they ate supper, they stole the bride. So the bridegroom had to pay to get his bride back. It was a lot of fun too. He had to pay but the money went back to him and her. The next day they cooked a big kettle of vegetable soup and all the stuff what was left. Then everybody could come and had a good time. They danced almost three days so it was fun.
- BD:** Would there have been a honeymoon like we have here?
- HK:** No, no. They had a little house that was saved for them. They moved in and started their work. There was no honeymoon, and there was *no* divorce. We didn't even know nothing about that.
- BD:** I was wondering, would you have been able to see a movie over there when you were a kid? Did you ever go to the movies, motion pictures?

- HK:** No, no. No, we didn't have that. Only what we learned in the school and the paper. There was no newspaper or nothing. But later on when Stalin got in, the propaganda came, and they drove around in the yard and all over. They had a loud speaker and said we had to vote for Stalin. There were old people who couldn't understand. And how can you vote for someone else when only his name was on [the ballot]? So you had to vote for him. They had always someone standing looking over your back. If you didn't vote, you know what's coming for you.
- BD:** Would there have been Communist radio stations then?
- HK:** No, nothing.
- BD:** So did you even know that there were things like motion pictures?
- HK:** No, nothing. Well, from the library where people sent books in, but that's all. We didn't know what was going on outside.
- BD:** So no letters from America?
- HK:** No, no. Until the war broke out - when Hitler took over. I think the Russians were not even ready because they didn't even know what's what. But they started way up in the Volga when they took those people first out, they knew more than we did. But down here by the Black Sea we didn't know much.
- BD:** You said you had gone to Odessa, but there must have been a point when you couldn't go any longer.
- HK:** No, we couldn't. We only could go so much, maybe two kilometer out of the *Dorf* (village). No, no place, no.
- BD:** This would have been in the '30s?
- HK:** Yah, yah. And even they came and said, "What are you thinking about? We should raise some money." And if you say you didn't have any money, "Well, it's good for you what the country does, so you better give what you have." They came and took everything we what had. We had a loaf of bread in the cupboard, they took that one out. Nothing, nothing left.
- BD:** And you were old enough that you really noticed there was a difference, didn't you, between when you were younger and -
- HK:** Oh yah, oh yah. And I said, too, you know we did everything on our own. We made our clothes or we had our clothes made by the *Schneider*. Communists wouldn't allow us - I think people said they knew that worse was going to come, that's why they wanted to keep us down. Stalin said, "If you want to live, you go to *Kollektiv* (collective) or [if] not you're going to die." And that's why people layed on the street, and they blowed up like that - starved.
- BD:** We talked to you a little bit earlier about you were fortunate enough to get over to America, to the United States, but some of the people who left Strassburg weren't as fortunate as you were.
- HK:** See the problem was when the war ended. America and those four countries - they gave Russia that spot where all those people had traveled, and he unloaded them right there back into trains and took them back to Siberia. Each one got 20 years of labor, *hard* labor. That's what we found out now from relatives who come from Russia to Germany. See, me and my ma, we went away. That happened to my aunt but we weren't in that group. But the other ones, not just Strassburg, it was all the Germans. They

said they loaded trainloads and trainloads and trainloads and took them all back. They said, "You were the enemy of the Russians." And that's what they did. But now there's a lot of them in Russia. They are in Russia, but not all can come out to Germany. Well, it's almost 50 years. They have maybe kids up there. So I don't know, maybe they didn't want to go out.

**BD:** When you were growing up in South Russia, did you think of yourself as German or as Russian?

**HK:** German, oh yah. But see, through the First World War and the Second World War we couldn't speak German. No, we couldn't speak German, no way.

**BD:** So Russian was almost your first language?

**HK:** Yah, but among us and at home we talked German, but when you go to government offices you had to speak Russian. They brought all those peoples in from different places to show us how to live in the kolkhoz, what they called *Kollectiv* and stuff like that. No, you couldn't speak a word [in] German.

**BD:** Have you ever run into anyone that left Strassburg when you did?

**HK:** Yah, when I was in Germany. I had a couple of cousins who made it out too. They used to live close by Stuttgart.

**BD:** When you came here in the '50s and you settled in Hague and Strasburg, North Dakota area, did some of the food seem similar to you? The foods that the people were making and eating that they called German-Russian food, was it similar?

**HK:** Yah, but not compared to the German food. The people I worked for, they ate a lot of pork and cooked a little different. But here, too, they switched - like with the language too, you know, like "washing dishes" in German they say "*Spüle das Geschirr*." It's a different language what they had, but I liked the German food. They drink that apple cider. *Apfelsaft*, that's what we used to drink. In Germany they make their own whiskey. They have all their own fruit and make their own whiskey. When I was with those people when the Germans gave up, and the Americans had so many black guys there. They came and got the whiskey from those people and it just went like that. They didn't know what it is, those black soldiers. We had a hard time at that time when the Americans came in. We had to wear old clothes and smear our faces up. They raped a lot of girls and we had to be really careful.

**BD:** When you look at the German foods that we have here or that they serve at the Hague Cafe, are there some things you would have made in Russia?

**HK:** That's the Russian food what we made like cheese buttons or those strudels, yah, potato salad or knepfla soup. That's the real food.

**BD:** So you would have had knepfla soup over in Strassburg?

**HK:** Yah, [laughter] a lot of knepfla soup. We made our own sausage, *Blutwurst*, *Schwartemagen* and all that stuff.

**BD:** What was your favorite meal when you were a younger child?

**HK:** I want to tell you what my mother learned me. I didn't like *schnitten* (cut) noodles, those fat noodles with potatoes in. I never liked it. She said, "Helena, you got to eat it. That's all what we have." I was sitting out on the steps with my little dog, and the other three kids were in and they ate their noodles.

She came out, she took that bowl and hit me over the head with the noodles, and the dog started licking the noodles up. She said, "Now you how it is. We're poor. We cannot afford that." And to this day I just don't go for those *schnitten* noodles! I just can't look at them. [laughter] That's the way my ma was, but it was alright, you know [that she] hit me over the head.

**BD:** As a child growing up, would there have been any sweets that you would have been able to get?

**HK:** Well, that time there was nothing about ice cream. We didn't know about ice cream. We had our grapes, and we made our homemade candy, but no ice cream. When we came to Germany, then they called it *Eis*, and then we got *Eis*.

**BD:** How about Christmas or Easter traditions?

**HK:** Oh, that was great! Easter, and Christmas too, but we had no Christmas tree. We went out and cut a dry branch off and took it in the house, colored some onions and little colored paper and popcorn rolls and hung it. And that was our Christmas tree. Then the *Christkindl* came, and we all had to sit in a row. "Was she good, was he bad?" "*Yah, der ist bees (böse, bad) und der ist gut.*" She had a little thing, and she hit us a little a bit. And Ma was standing behind the *Christkindl*, and she'd hold a doll or whatever she had to give us, you know, and that was the *Christkindl*. Then we had ham, potato salad and wine and baked our own cookies. Strudels and rolls; we did it all our own.

**BD:** How about Easter traditions?

**HK:** Easter, too, the whole week was Holy Week. I remember Good Friday when they put Christ in the tomb and the *Mesner* (sacristan, sexton) had to stay posted there for a couple of hours. Every three-four hours then they changed it again. [*Sie*] *haben gewacht am Heiland, sein Grab*. That was real nice too. Then we colored some eggs. We dug little houses beside the house and put a little green grass in and then the *Oschterhas (Osterhase)*, what they call the Easter bunny, came. Ma was out early [with the eggs] and she always put them in there so that was nice.

**BD:** We are doing another documentary on the iron crosses in the cemeteries that you see, like in the Hague cemetery. Did you see anything like that when you were growing up over there?

**HK:** Oh yah, yah. And my dad made his own iron cross when he died. He had it made, not as fancy as the ones you see now. I remember when he died we put it up.

**BD:** Were the iron crosses common then?

**HK:** Oh yah, yah. There was a lot of blacksmithing, and they wanted something to do. And they did fancy work. Now I wanted to tell you something quick. When the revolution started – it's [in] one of those books from Dr. Height. They rounded all up some rich people and took them all to Selz. They took them out a little ways in the prairie, it was a valley. It was 120 people. We had two from Strassburg and the others were from Franzfeld and - They took them all and the priest was in between those people and they shot them all. The priest got up and gave the blessing yet. I bet to this day there is not one [blade of] grass growing in that spot. It was just like a blood bath in that valley. That happened in Selz. That's the way they got the people.<sup>3</sup>

**BD:** Now would that have been below Selz?

- HK:** It was in Selz territory, but they took them out in the fields. They rounded them up. They were all kind of rich people. Even we as young kids went up and seen it, and it was brown - nothing grewed there.
- BD:** Now when we go to visit the villages we see things that are very unusual for Americans to see, things like the common area for the cows. When you were growing up was there a common area where the people would come to milk the cows?
- HK:** You mean your own cows *oder* (or) -? See, we had cows in the earlier days, but there was a *Kihhirt* (*Kuhhirt*, cowherd), the one who took the cows in the morning out in the pasture and in the evening they brought them back. Each cow knew her way to go to the yard and then we milked the cow and tied her up. The next morning the *Kihhirt*, he came, and you let your cow go and she'd go out.
- BD:** Now the villagers, especially the Beresaners, at noon they all come together around the well.
- HK:** Yah, there were big wells. You know they took them around, they dranked and then they milked the cows there.
- MM:** Remember when you came to Hague, were the people speaking English or German?
- HK:** At that time they hardly knew any English here. The church was German, and then later on it switched in the '60s. They switched everything to English. There were a lot of farm kids out there who came in the Hague school, they didn't know English. They had to learn. They spoke German all the way, yah. Oh yah.
- A funny thing, you know, there was a couple of ladies they always thinked they were a little bit above [everyone else]. I was at home once and Joe and his wife went someplace. They came and knocked at the door and I said, "Come in." They said, "We are so-and-so." They said their names. "We came - we wanted to see if you are *so Frau bis wie mir*." They wanted to see if I was just a woman like they are. [laughter] At that time they had still here had no permanents in the hair. I had permanents already so that they wanted to see "*so Frau bis wie mir*." [laughter]
- BD:** Did you get a German newspaper at home?
- HK:** Yah, Joe had the *Dakota Herold* and *Josephs Blätter*, they used to call that, was the Catholic newspaper.
- BD:** Is religion an important part of your life? Did you have it when you were a child and then you sort of lost the daily religion or - ?
- HK:** No, not really. I always preached to my girls to keep this old tradition up. Go visit your friends and don't say, "I'll come tomorrow or when I am done." Go now when you want to go or visit your mother. I teach them that and don't let them forget the way. They doing pretty good so far, they're doing real good. I had five of them who went to college. And then somebody said, "How come you send them to college?" I don't want them to have a hard life like I had. They still can go back, whatever they want to do, but let them have a good education.
- BD:** Were your children interested in your life? Did they ask you a lot of questions?
- HK:** Oh yah, yah. They asked me a lot of questions, the little ones too. This one said to her ma, "How come Grandma talks so funny English?" [laughter] Because of my accent, you know. "How come Grandma talks so funny English." Then she said, "Well, Grandma came from Russia and then to Germany and then came over here." So now they know.

- BD:** I would think they're pretty proud of Grandma, don't you think?
- HK:** Yah, special Sundays they come after church for caramel rolls. One day I didn't get them right. I didn't put enough caramel on. My Franz is the youngest one, he said, "I don't know Ma. You lost your touch." I said, "No, I didn't have enough cream!" [laughter] The kids tease each other. Like I said, I had a good time and a bad time but I went through a lot. Like my son, the youngest one, he was a welder, and he worked down at Eureka for a welder. He was on top of a big truck and wanted to move a tank and touched a wire. He thought that wire hit the man who sat in the truck so he jumped down and wanted to save that man, and that wire just fell down on him. He lost his leg here and got no toes there, but he is a farmer and has five kids. He won't stay out of the weather, and he runs half of Hague and everything. Then I lost Kathy. Then I had one girl who got hurt with the lawn mower and lost her eye. Different stuff, but I said I'm still lucky.
- MM:** What about, Helen, those from Strassburg? Many were sent to Siberia. That's interesting for us know. Do you ever have correspondence with any of them?
- HK:** No, no, Even when I talked to my sisters in Germany, they couldn't get no answer, no contact, nothing with them. Once in a while when one came out from Siberia now, but they are not from us, from the Strassburg area.
- MM:** So now you haven't met anybody? Nobody is corresponding with you?
- HK:** No, huh uh.
- MM:** Do you still write letters in German?
- HK:** Oh yah, yah, to my sisters - both of them, yah. I always said I want to go home one more time, but then I had colon cancer surgery so I had pushed that out. Then three years ago I had a valve replaced, so I said one more year. But now the Moslems came in so I don't know if I'm going to make it one more time or not. I hope so, I don't know.
- BD:** Sometime we ought to see if we can get some of the pictures we took of Strassburg and in that area. Was it three years ago, Michael, that we went over and took some pictures?
- HK:** Yah, that would be nice.
- MM:** I told her I would send her the map from the Schwans, Eugen Schwan. I am sure you don't remember them, but they were all living there when you were there.
- HK:** Yah, there was a lot of them there. There were the Krafts and the Sängers, but it's a long time ago and I was young at that time.
- BD:** Well, that was super! Thank you very much.
- HK:** Yah, you're welcome.
- BD:** This was very interesting!



<sup>1</sup>According to *Zeugen Für Christus, Das deutsche Martyrologium des 20. Jahrhunderts* [Witnesses for Christ, A German 20<sup>th</sup> Century Martyrology], "Reports indicate that Father Kopp was still performing his priestly duties in 1928 as Curate in Straßburg. However, in 1934 he was dragged off to points unknown."

<sup>2</sup>Komsomol, *Kommunisticheskii Soyuz Molodezhi* Communist Union of Youth, a Russian Communist youth organization.

<sup>3</sup>Also according to *Zeugen Für Christus, Das deutsche Martyrologium des 20. Jahrhunderts* [Witnesses for Christ, A German 20<sup>th</sup> Century Martyrology], "Klemens Weißenburger was born on 11.23.1892 in Selz (Odessa area). His father was a farmer. In 1912 W. attended the fourth year of the seminary for boys. He completed the seminary for priests in Saratov and received ordination to the priesthood in 1917. He started religious service in the fall of 1917 as Vicar in the community of Köhler (Volga area) with Fr. Martin Fix [the pastor]. Between the fall of 1918 and April of 1919 he worked as Vicar in his hometown of Selz (Odessa). This proved to be the final place of work for the 26-year-old priest. The waves of terror during the Russian civil war began to reach even as far as his home village of Selz.

Military units of the Red and White Armies alternately trooped through German villages in the Black Sea area. They were usually followed by Machno's anarchistic gangs, as well as by nationalistic Ukrainian groups. They confiscated all the grain, horses and equipment they could lay their hands on in the German villages. Not only the Ukrainian and Russian farmers, but German farmers as well, resisted and attempted to defend themselves. On Sunday, 8.4.1919, a unit of the regular Red Mounted Army of General Kotovski attacked the German villages of Straßburg, Baden, Selz and Kandel with heavy artillery. People were gripped with fearful panic and sought to flee to the fields, to the reedy swamps and to a neighboring Ukrainian village. The aggressors broke into homes, robbed everything they could, raped women and girls, arrested defenseless men and women and locked up 87 hostages inside the church in Selz (Odessa). On Monday morning they led their victims through the main village street to the vicinity of the cemetery, where they intended to execute them. As the people marched past the parish church, young W. joined them, intending to be of help to his faithful.

Upon reaching the execution site, a firing squad was assembled to execute the innocent people. The victims protested, vowed their innocence, and demanded just proceedings. In the hope of saving his faithful from certain death, most of them men with families, W. made a heroic attempt of offering himself as a substitute for them. He said, "All these men are innocent! I am the one who encouraged them to revolt. Have mercy and compassion with these innocent ones." The commander's reply was ruthless, "If you did that, then you are just as guilty as all these others, and you'll have to pay for it with your life."

W. tried to console the women and men, "Dear brothers, I am going to leave you on this sacred ground on which your ancestors lived and worked and in which they were laid to rest. You have fought for your honor, love, and homes – all the basic rights of each person. Our Father, Who art in Heaven..."

Two Red guards shot into his raised hands, another stuck a bayonet into the priest's chest. With blood streaming from his body, W. dropped to the ground as machine guns mowed down 87 innocent people -- a gruesome picture of blood-streaming bodies all in a heap."

Lit. Ref.: Height, *Paradise*, 326ff.; Schnurr, *Kirchen*, 57, 191, 257, 372; Bosch-Lingor, *Entstehung*; Dzwonkowski, 510.