1781 - 1941 A Walk in the Shadow of Our History

By Alfred Opp, Vancouver, British Columbia
Edited by Connie Dahlke, Walla Walla, Washington

For centuries, Europe was a hornet's nest - one poke at it and everyone got stung. Our ancestors were in the thick of it. They were the ones who suffered through the constant upheavals that tore Europe apart. While the history books tell the broad story, they can't begin to tell the individual stories of all those who lived through those tough times. And often-times, the people at the local level had no clue as to the reasons for the turmoil nor how to get away from it. People in the 18th century were duped just as we were in 1940 when we were promised a place in the Fatherland to call home.

My ancestor Konrad Link went with his parents from South Germany to East Prussia"Poland in 1781. Poland as a nation had been squeezed out of existence by Austria, Russia and Prussia. The area to which the Link family migrated was then considered part of their homeland - Germany. At that time, most of northern Germany was called Prussia. The river Weichsel "Vitsula" divided the newly enlarged region of Prussia into West Prussia and East Prussia. The Prussian Kaiser followed the plan of bringing new settlers into the territory to create a culture and society that would be more productive and successful. The plan worked well for some time. Then Napoleon began marching against his neighbors with the goal of controlling all of Europe. His forces arrived in Prussia and, fearing the Kaiser, Napoleon drew the Prussians into a situation that was to the German's disadvantage. Napoleon won this important battle. The Polish people rose in support of Napoleon and got their land back. Only a small remnant of the area, east of what was now called Poland, remained as East Prussia under German control. The Prussian plan for the area now known as Poland came to an end. The German settlers that had been brought in by the Kaiser suddenly lost all of their rights. Left without Prussian support, they were quickly driven off their settlement land. Unwanted in Poland, many German settlers moved on to Russia. This is what my Link ancestors experienced. While in Prussia, the settlers had worked hard to build homes, schools and cultural centers. Their work left a memorable trace on the land and the culture of the area. They had lived in Prussia for generations, and when they were pushed out of their settlement areas their life work did not pass unnoticed.

But Germany was not done with Poland. The reprieve ended in 1939 when Germany attacked Poland to re-establish a land bridge with the cut-off area still known as East Prussia. History was about to repeat itself. Again, my family would feel the effects of a conflict not of their making.

When we left Bessarabia in 1940 on the Trek back to Europe, it was not Poland, nor Prussia, that lured us but rather a united Germany. As "Auslandsdeutsche" - Germans living in foreign lands - we were brought to the area to again open up West Prussia for Germany. My ancestor Konrad Link came to the area voluntarily, not understanding the politics. My parents left Soviet-occupied Bessarabia for what they thought was freedom to start a new life, not knowing they were pawns of a Nationlistic regime to "free Poland for Germany." In 1941 my parents were resettled in Poland, near a small town in the new West Prussia called Suchenheim - "Suchary." The farm and house assigned to us had a furnace covered in tiles that were decorated with German-language slogans. Similar decorations were found in other houses nearby. One day, my dad was making repairs in the

front room of our house when he found some old news-print behind a wooden frame - it was in the German language. My Mom later told me that it was very old. Dad took the piece of news-print and gave it to the local authorities. We thought nothing of it - this was Germany in our minds. As we would visit parks and cemeteries in the area, we noticed cast iron benches and gates that had German-language inscriptions and insignias on them. At the time, we gave this no further thought because our knowledge of the history of this area was limited.

Again the Polish people worked against the German occupiers, Germany got beaten in the war, and Poland got its land back. We got the boot and were sent back to Germany - again we were unwanted. When we later read about the history of the area, we wondered if we had been where our ancestors might have previous lived. Perhaps the Link family once settled in the same district, the same town, perhaps even in the same house we lived in! Who knows? My Link ancestors did not know what they were getting into, neither did my parents. Now we know. History has taught us a valuable lesson.

The shadows of our history remain with us - and we were the ones swinging the brush.

Poland's Time-line - assembled by Connie Dahlke
- 900's A Slavic tribe, the Polians, united other tribes under it
- 1400 Poland and Lithuania formed an alliance
- 1600's Prussia won the area of East Prussia and West Prussia from Poland - these were lands bordering on the Baltic Sea. German settlers from Brandenburg were brought in to take the place of the population that had been decimated by the war.
- 1740 Friedrich the Great seized southern Poland from Austrian control.
- 1760's Friedrich annexed the Polish area that stood between East and West Prussia.
- 1772 Poland lost about a third of its territory and half of its population - some to Russia, some to Austria and some to Prussia
- 1793 Russia took over the eastern half of what remained of Poland, and Prussia took another small chunk of western Poland.
- 1795 Half of the remaining area of Poland went to Russia, and the remainder was split between Prussia and Austria. About 75% of what had been Poland was now part of Russia. Prussia controlled about 15% of what had been Poland.
- 1800's Most of the northern half of modern Germany came under Prussian rule, including the Danish provinces of Schleswig and Holstein. This was an area to the west of the original Prussian area.
- 1871 Germany became a united confederation, led by Kaiser Wilhelm of Prussia.
- 1919 The treaty that ended WWI gave the Polish corridor back to Poland, providing Polish access to the Baltic Sea, but dividing East Prussia from the rest of Germany
- 1921 The Treaty of Riga forced Russia to give back most of the Polish territory it had taken in 1793. Poland was split politically into more than 30 political parties.
- 1930's Violence escalated between Poles and ethnic Germans living in Poland.
- March 1939 Germany demanded 1) control of Danzig, Poland; 2) German transport rights between West and East Prussia (crossing the Polish corridor on land); 3) protections for ethnic Germans living in Poland.
- Sept 1939 Germany annexed the Polish Corridor and Russia invaded East Poland.
- Sept 28, 1939 Russia and Germany divided Poland - Russia gained control of eastern Poland and Germany gained control of western Poland. June

- 1941 Germany expelled Russia from Poland and thereby gained control over all of Poland. Germany began settling ethnic Germans (brought from Bessarabia) into occupied Poland.

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Alfred Opp is the author of "Pawns on the World Stage" - the memoirs of his childhood in Teplitz, Bessarabia and the experiences of his family in war-torn Europe (Poland during 1941-1945 before they fled to East Germany in 1945, then the reconstruction of West Germany 1945-1955).