

## Interview with Alfred Opp (Part 3) – Teplitz Community Life

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*Now we're going to talk a little bit about the town of Teplitz in your childhood. Briefly describe how your town was set up.*

Actually, by the time we left in 1940, the town had a population of about 2,600 souls. Our town was set up with a main street that was about 60-70 meters wide, with two rows of houses going up and down. And over the years they built an alley on after that. The town was a nice town, with a lot of greenery - trees and so on, although not too many bushes - but trees. That was good, because in the summer time they gave a shadow. But we had dirt roads. I mean, the main street and the sidewalks were all dirt roads. All our footwear and everything we wore if we were going out of the house had to be adapted to it. We had no cars - I mean we had 2-3 cars in town, but other than that, everything was horse and buggy. So the people dressed themselves up in what is called a dustcoat - a duster. It was the same as in the early times here with the automobiles when they had no roads. They went out with a duster on, with a cap over them. The ladies, they too dressed accordingly. That was the way of our town.

Also, if you were going to somebody else's property, it was the same thing - all roads were dirt roads. When it was the rainy season, there was mud all over the place. So every house had a mud scraper. What this was is a piece of metal with two posts on it. You'd ram it into the ground, and you'd clean your shoes before you came into the house. That's how much mud we had. Well, we had those by the door, and inside we had a scraper mat that was made out of any kind of material - mostly of corn husks - and we braided them together and made mats out of it. Whenever they got used up, we threw them out and made new ones. Usually the boys and girls did this craft in school, or sometimes poor people made them. They also did basket weaving, the poor people did, and sold it for a few cents to the public. That's what the town was.

But the town was very, very clean. I have to say this. Every house that you looked at, the people had done it with whitewash. The window frames or around the window - a lot of the window frames were done in white oil paint. Or the frames around some of them had blue, and some of them had green paint on them, to point out the window. The windows on all those houses had ornamentation on them - the better houses had such decorations so that the house looked a little better.

Every house had a wall up at the front of it, with two pillars, and there was a little bench that people going by could sit and have a chat. This was very, very good, because the one end of the town to the other was over 2 kilometers. Now my dad had a step-sister that lived right at the other end of the town. So when you walked along, especially the older folks, they could sit down and have a rest, and then go on. And some people came out and had a chat with them. The town was very social, very social that way.

*Tell us about some of the leaders in your town.*

Well, the leaders were always chosen from within - that was usual. They were the smart people, and the well-educated. In the beginning, before 1900, a lot of people couldn't read very well. They managed to read the Bible, but after that a new schule - school system - came in. The Russians - that was still the Russian time there - forced the school system onto the people. The people had to go to school and learn a little bit more. That helped a lot. But the leaders were always chosen from within. They were always voted in anywhere from one to two to three years. And usually they were respected, aggressive people. They were good people and good farmers, you know - they had a very good reputation. The main thing was they had to give a good account of their work.

So when anybody made a deal, or said something in trust, you shook hands and that sealed it - ein Mann und ein Wort. That means "a man on his word - it's good." That was highly protected. My grandfather was very strong on that, even though he sometimes got the short end of it when someone didn't keep his word. Usually it was not people from in town, but rather people from out of town. He figured, Well, he's just as honest as we are - but they weren't.

They voted on who was to be the Schultz - in Germany this is called the Bürgermeister. We called him the Schultz, that is the Mayor. Now the Mayor up until 1918 held all the authority. Every decision had to go before him to be approved. Or if anybody did something that was wrong, that person had to see the Mayor who decided how many straps he gets. So how it was, he had to come over to see the Mayor, and the Mayor gave him a lesson that what he did was wrong. And usually that was just bad behavior: drinking in public, or acting mischievous, or the guy got a little drunk in public and sang a song loudly and made a nuisance of himself. Or maybe an older person was poor and had a few kids and stole a little bit - things like that. The accused had to go over to the hall, and there he had to lay over a little stool, where the Mayor took either a rope or a stick and he gave him what he had decided - usually 25. He called it a "twentyfiver" - twenty-five. In some cases, when it was a repeated sentence, the guy was then told to go home and come back a week later to thank the Mayor and to say, "I deserved the punishment that you gave me." Believe me, that hit home. Because even the pain you got on your back was not that bad, but to walk around town with everybody looking at him saying, "He's one of those" - to walk with shame and die with it was very sad. And the folks in town never let him forget. Even my mother - she lived to 90 1/2 here in Vancouver - she always said that if a boy was ever to get married, folks said, "Oh, his dad had to go to the Kanzlei - to the hall - and get a beating." Or his mother or grandmother was a slop - meaning when she put the washing out it was not quite clean, or she was not good in saving or running the household, and so on. I mean, the gossip in all the town - you wouldn't believe it! So that's what kept everybody in line. Really! It was an unwritten law, but it was a law. You didn't want to be an outsider looking in, or live being called on something.

So the second thing was that the Mayor had Beisitzer - people sitting with him - usually about three or four people. They were advisors that he had asked about various matters. And then we always had a court, which was a very good thing, that we had a court. But the court was different than you might think. It was not for when a guy stole, or a guy beat up on his wife or whatever it may be. The court was to settle an estate. Now those people - my great-grandfather Erhard Mueller was one of them - what he did, for instance - if somebody got married in our time, he or she had to go to the hall and report what he or she is going to bring into the marriage: so many Dessjatine - a Dessjatine is like a hectare or acres - so many Dessjatine of land, so many household items, three sheep, one cow, one pig, five chickens. All of that had to be put on paper before they got

married, so there would be no dispute or anything else. And the court had to look after the orphans. They had to look after the people that had no children or died. All the estate had to be looked after. Oh, they were very good at it. None of them was a lawyer. They always had to go from experience. But what those people had! The knowledge! They really had the knowledge of what was needed in town. Oh, sometimes they put out a sentence, or made a decision, that most of the people didn't understand. But the result worked! There was often a twist to it, to avoid trouble from any disagreements. They always added a twist to it to make it work. But our people were very good at it. And not only that, when they brought us all back home to Germany, we found that's the way they did it in some of the small towns in Germany. And everything worked! Why did it work? Because everybody listened and showed respect. Respect was number one in our town: to the parents, or to a person who was ten years older. If you went down the street and there was a person you met, you took off your hat. You had to take your hat off. This was showing respect. All you want is respect, honesty and dignity - everything else falls into place. So that's why all the people were happy. There were the odd ones that it may not have worked out quite well, because all the character of the people was not the same - we're no different than the rest of the world. But what worked for us was respect, dignity and honesty. And that's what our people lived by.

And then, to bring it together, we have the Bible on one hand, to read up on it - the Bible was the textbook on morals. Now, I want to tell you something about the Bible and the law and the Ten Commandments. My great-grandfather was very, very strict. Very strict. His twenty-three year old son came home one day and said, "Dad, I want to get married. My girlfriend is expecting a baby." That really took the lid off of him. He was so mad, he went outside, wet a rope, came into the house, and told his other three boys, "you sit down here." He took a chair and put it in the middle of the room - don't forget the son was twenty-three years old - and told him to bend over. He took that wet rope and beat the guy up until he urinated himself. Then he held the rope up and said, "That is a lesson to you guys. Never, ever - you put the family to shame. I'm ashamed." But he took the law into his own hands. And that poor guy died five years later. He married his girl, had three kids, and died of kidney failure. It was murder. But it wasn't, because he took the law of God in his own hand. That was so instilled in him. That is, "I have to live by morals, bring my family up morally, lead on with morals, to be honest, to be good. This is a sin!" But you know, to have a human heart is not a sin. His son was just like we all are. He had a feeling, but he was punished for it. And that's the way life was.

*When there was some really big news in your town, how would that get communicated across the people?*

That's a good question. The news in town was communicated by the town crier. Anytime that they had a meeting - a town meeting on community matters, say - all the fathers, the elders, were called in. These meetings were held outside the hall. They were all standing around, and the Mayor stood four steps up and he made a count to see - usually he could tell if everybody was there. Now some of those that were there were also widows - ladies - they were standing behind. They didn't have to, but that's the way it was. They were standing behind, or they had maybe their brother or their uncle, or somebody else doing their voting for them. And then the town crier swung his bell, then he said, "Hear you, hear you!" or "Hear me!" Then he read out what the discussion was about. Well then everybody that was there, raised their hand, yea or nay. And that way he could count the vote. And that's the way it was done. Nobody from the back - the bystanders - were allowed to shout in or participate. But they were allowed to observe the meeting.

Other news was communicated by the town crier also. He was the Mayor's voice. He always went ten houses and rang his bell and then read out whatever there was to be reported or to be done.

Now for instance, I'll give you an example. We had quite a few ground squirrels. They were always doing a lot of damage to the grain that we planted. So the town had to get together and get volunteers out with a hook and a pail of water, to take the squirrels out and kill them, because we had that many.

Or there was some community work that had to be done. Or news was coming out, such as any news that the public had to know.

But the other thing was, when somebody died for instance, the church rang one big bell. And if that was outside the time for church (the church bell rang out warnings) or for prayer meeting, people knew somebody had died in town. On the next day, there was a piece of paper sent out that came around, with, let's say, "Jakob Hohloch died. His funeral will be on such an hour and such a date." So that went from one door to another. But the funny part was, when they started this out, it went door to door, from one lady to the next who usually had greasy hands. She wiped her hands on her apron, and then read the paper. And then it went on to the houses up and down the street. Sometimes neighbors would stand there an hour talking about the person who died, discussing the whole thing. By the time the note got down to the end of town where my mom lived, you couldn't read the paper. And the stories from that! It's amazing! Like a dog chasing a cat! I mean, it's absolutely amazing what came out from that! But still, that's the way that they did it - from house to house. You might tell me something, or your kids might say something, or relatives would go to the other end of town to tell somebody else some news. But for the general public, it was from door to door.

Now we had no radio. We had two telephones - one in the hall and one in the store. The store was a general store - I want to mention that. You could buy anything, pretty well, that one would need. But you could not buy ready-made clothes. For that, you had to go to a bigger town. But you could buy yard goods - that's all the ladies wanted - buy yard goods, buy different threads, needles, and so on. Their whole life they had no electricity. All they bought was coal oil, salt and pepper, and so on. You could buy maybe a pair of shoes - just the basics.

But the news got around. But also, so did the gossip! You know if there is talk, somewhere there is gossip. Oh, how people really made a big deal of that - they had this fault - to make an elephant out of a mouse. I mean, that was absolutely crazy at times - and also there were suspicions, and things like that. I want to tell you something. The thing with suspicion and witchcraft goes back hundreds of years - something that our ancestor brought with them. Now they lived very strictly religious lives. But sometimes there was something that prayer didn't quite help, or so they thought. Then we had these Gypsies who were going through town quite often with their wagons. The Gypsies were good at reading your hand or the cards to tell your future. They would help you with whatever sickness you had. They always had a little bit of powder in the pocket, or a rub remedy, and people thought that would help. Believe it or not, sometimes it did. But even if it only helped one out of a thousand, people still went for it. So if somebody had a real serious problem, that's when people went to see the Gypsies, looking left and right to make sure no one sees them. The Gypsy woman then mumbled something - making a prediction - from her cards or from reading the palm of your hand. And then they walked away with the cash. Now why they did it I couldn't tell you.

My mother had a very interesting story. We had a cow once, and the cow was not feeling well. It had a cow disease of some sort. Who knows from where Mom got this idea! She went a few houses down to somebody who had a healthy cow, picked up the healthy cow's manure in a little box, came home and smeared it over the top of the entrance that the cow was in. So I asked my mother - she told this story a couple of times - I asked, "Now, how in the heck did you ever get that idea? Why did you think it helped?" She said, "I don't know, but the cow got better." Now you ask me! The cow got better! There is not the least chance for me to know - Oh, the little stories that got around! And it only needed one, or someone had one, and the people fall into it.

*Tell us about some of the other superstitions you might have had in . . .*

Oh, well, I didn't have any, but my mom and grandmother would always tell me some. For instance, someone didn't want to go at night by a particular house. Because at that house somebody committed suicide or had an accident. So they didn't go down on this side of the road. They went all the way across the street and walked up that side.

Some of them carried different things in their pocket - all that believed in ghosts - to scare the ghosts away. They have good ghosts and bad ghosts. That's what they believed - but not all of them, just some of them. So they put something in their pocket - I don't know why they had all these oddities in their pocket - so that when they walked beside this house, or that one, they figured, well, that would chase away the ghosts. Now what was in their pocket, I have no idea. Now my mom believed, mentioned, about old bread. Now I cannot relate to it. I just mention it to give you some of the ridiculous ideas. But something to do with the bread - very, very, very dry bread. She mentioned something about that bread in the pocket of a particular person.

Now, we were in a small town, and nobody went out of the town much, and you know it created a culture of its own. And people come up with different ideas - from hearsay. It does not always work out nice, or look very nice, but that's the way a little town was.

*Tell us about some popular health remedies.*

Oh, gee whiz - to tell you! Those people had health remedies for people and animals just the same. A lot of that stuff was brought in way back from Germany, and a lot of that was how you believed in it. Now this was the thing - we had a very high rate of death with children early on. Hygiene was not practiced that well. In other words, you wiped your hands down on your apron - that was more or less all the disinfection that was known to them. That's why a lot of people - little children - died, even in childbed and of various other things. Now if a mother died while giving birth to a baby, it was often in an abnormal position and she couldn't give birth - this you understand was in rural countries that did not have access to full medical services - and the mother died with the baby. But a lot died with Gelbsucht (Jaundice) - they turned yellow, like my mother with her second baby - my brother next younger to me - he died of that sickness. And my mother was yellow - she was yellow in the face, but she didn't die. She was alright because she had a strong body - her body was strong to resist these things. So a lot of children died, until 1927 and then we had a doctor. Now the doctor cut the child deaths right down by 50%, by educating the people. But do you think this doctor could get the women into his office for their own needs? No way! They would not go in. Like my mom always said, "You think I'm going to let him feel me up? No way!" It was like live or die by it. My great-grandmother died because she didn't want to see a doctor!

She had a gallstone problem. She didn't have to die. But she didn't want to go to a doctor, because she didn't want him to touch her up somewhere.

But the worst sickness we had was tuberculoses, because the men making wagons in sweaty shops worked hours on end, laboring hard. No fresh air. They later realized the vitamins and the minerals that the body needs for such work was not recognized until this doctor, Andreas Franck, came in. He tried to teach the people that they had to go on a different diet. But to convince those people that this was helpful - that took a long time to come.

And also, in the late 1850's, to tell them - the farmers or the people, "Your child needs an education" - because they sent them to school whenever there was time or they felt like it - that was hard to change. Then they made a law, and you had to go to school from six or seven, otherwise you paid a fine. And it worked!

Now with the health, it was the same thing. The people didn't go because naturally they had to pay. We had no health system like today, so they had to pay. And a lot of people, you understand, didn't want to go because of the cost. But the ones who could afford it - or really had to go, money or not - some took a while because they thought, Well, the old wives' tale - remedies - work just as well. So what they did was a lot of massaging. They did a lot of things with cold compresses, or warm compresses. That means wrap a big towel on your chest or head. They had no shots or pills. Forget about that! They didn't have that. What they did when somebody had back pain, they put some glasses on it. They had an ethyl-alcohol burner, and they would heat the glass up and put them onto the back - six or eight of them, and when you looked at the glasses, you could see a little bulge in them. So they believed it pulls the pain out. My mother believed it worked. It may work or it may not. Like I said, "If you believe on it, it may work!" But the rubbing of their muscles, rubbing your feet, hot and cold tea, helped. Also they believed in soups. They believed in a diet that was very good. I have to say, even with my mother caring medically for me, those diets, those soups, those teas, and those massages - they worked!

Especially if a woman was expecting a baby, she was not allowed to get out of bed after childbirth for ten days. Matter of fact, she was not allowed for three days to even move her leg. You know how bad that is with modern medicine. But what my grandmother did with my mom, she would massage her legs - that was good! And after three days she could get up and go - use the pot, you know. We didn't have any toilets in the houses. There was a pot underneath the bed with a nice lid on it. She put that on and lifted it up and the pot underneath and she did her thing.

I want to mention about the lids on those pots - they looked quite fancy in some people's houses. And there was one for Sundays, and one for visitors, and one for everyday. You may laugh at it, but it was very important. During the weekdays we put the old one on. When somebody came to visit and happened to spot the pot underneath - there was a nice lid on it.

*Whose job was it to empty the pot?*

Well, naturally, the man never did it! It was the woman's job.

Now this is not something that they would just open the door or throw it out the window like they did in the middle ages. At my house, at least, my mom took two and three of the pots - like the kids, and my dad had one, and my mom had one - she put it all into one pot if there was enough room. She would put it out in the

outhouse, or put it out in the garden, although our garden didn't need any fertilizer or anything like that. Everything - there was plenty - so she put it in the outhouse, and my grandmother did too. I never saw it emptied in the yard - I didn't see it.

*I'm wondering about some of the social events in your community.*

Well, you know the older people - their social thing was getting together to have a prayer or singing carols. That was the old folk. When they did that, it was quite a social event. The younger people came together for talks. Like my folks, they visited; his brothers and sisters, my mother's sisters - a lot of that was just to visit each other.

We had, as far as the young people were concerned, we always had a big Maypole. That was quite something! The young boys and girls got together to set the pole up right in the center of the town - sometimes if the town was long, they had two Maypoles - and the boys and girls decorated it. There were two or three rings on it, all larger and larger, with trinkets and ornaments on them, or wreaths on it. There was a string around, a colored one - there was also a rope around. The rope was something for the little kids to swing around. The nice thing was, there was always a guy in the middle, a young person who could play what we called a Wehner, or Harmoshka in Russian - it was an accordion that looked like this. Now this one here, my instrument came from Russia. I bought it from a guy whose parents immigrated from the Ukraine. I had it assessed - it was built in 1914. It's a Hohner-type button accordion - but it was built in 1914. Those boys came around and played the accordion. And then we had a big drum. They made it themselves out of a skin - I think it was a sheepskin - over a ring, and tied it down tight. And then they went like this - played it like a drum. And the guy played his accordion. And the boys and girls were dancing - they were dancing around in a circle.

The thing was, the girls were seldom allowed to go anywhere on their own after dark - the parents were so strict so that the girls wouldn't get into trouble. But they were allowed at the Maypole. My mother was just as lively as I was - hands and feet, talking fast, and everything else - she was always in the middle of anything. So my grandparents figured, Well, she's going to get into trouble. But my mother wasn't going to! Mom told me there was a guy that had a little fancy on her, and he gave her a kiss, and oh, did she ever like that! She talked about that kiss till the day she died - about that first kiss she got. Something else mother told me - about a guy who invited her to a wedding and this guy she like very much. He was a rich boy - but he was related to the bride and my mom was related the groom. When he took my mom home he gave her an orange. Now that was something else, because you had to buy it, and they were not available all the time. So she had that orange - she took it home with her and put it under her pillow, and kept it until it just about rotted. And she cried over that orange, she said, because the boy never asked her out for another date. And she always remembered that. But that came from that Maypole thing.