

My ancestors proudly owned their land - and so do I

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Our ancestors used their willpower and smarts to reach their objectives in Russia. They all made their start on the same platform, with a homestead of about 60 desjatines (65 hectares) of land, a building lot, a handful of tools, some livestock and a good hold on the Bible. With these they stepped forward. Many stories have been written or passed on by family and the stories are all about the same. The accounts give a good record of what happened to our family and what became of their lifestyle and culture.

Our ancestors who came to Russia brought their traditions and customs with them. This enabled them to live a unified life. They came for the land, and they received land - lots of it. The ownership of land was the asset that secured one's position in life. Then it was a great help to have a large family. One hand washes the other, but in the end it all had to be shared.

My ancestor Heinrich Opp moved from Gluckstal, Kherson Province to Teplitz, Bessarabia in 1837 - 20 years after Teplitz was established. Heinrich was a Blacksmith and, in his trade, he made wagons and repaired various kinds of farm equipment. He soon was in charge of the community workshop that made and repaired equipment needed for farming. He worked in this capacity for five years, by which time he had saved enough money to buy a homestead in 1842. This was a good move - he then farmed in the summer and was a wagon maker in the winter. His income and position were secure. Although he died young in 1849 at the age of 39, he had set up his son to be self-sufficient by teaching them the trade of wagon-making as well as farming. The family's success at the trade

continued, but the farmland was divided by inheritance. When the homestead was purchased in 1842, it was already of reduced size - not a full 60 desjatines. By the time it was my Dad's turn to inherit land, his share was down to three "gwand" (plots) that totaled 6.75 hectares.

My Zacher ancestor also was a latecomer to Teplitz. He purchased a full homestead - both houselot and farming acreage - but this family also was not able to hold the homestead together. By the time my grandfather Simon Zacher inherited land, his farm (including what my grandmother brought into the marriage) totaled 28 hectares.

My ancestor Gerber was able to double his land holdings through smart moves, including purchasing land in eastern Russia. But the land that he owned in eastern Russia was lost to the Bolsheviks, and his land holdings in Teplitz were divided among his many descendants who ended up with small parcels. Some ended up with no land at all. This was typical of most families in Teplitz - our population was growing but the land was not.

By 1940 Teplitz had only 12 families who owned full-sized homesteads. The rest had been depleted through the heritage mode. Over the years, things got very tight in Teplitz. A way out for some folks was to work at a trade. That worked for a while until too many people flooded into the same trade. Other people found relief by renting out their small pieces of land. These small pieces did not justify keeping horses and equipment, but were rented

out on a 50"50 harvest take. Farmers, who rented several of these small plots, could then improve their own position by working a total amount of acreage that could be competitive. This type of cooperation was helpful all around.

Our traditional way of life in time gave way to progress. Industry was very slow in developing, and for a long time this held down employment opportunities. But eventually we could no longer hold on to our antiquated system. Poverty started to set in and so did the effects of inbreeding. Some folks gathered their courage and moved on to America. Others waited until time made a change in direction for them. For 126 years in Bessarabia we managed to protect our family and culture. We lived peacefully, focused on doing well to provide for our future. All of that came to an abrupt end in 1940. Our hard work and good will came to disappointment. It is difficult to describe the sad feelings of those of us who were ripped away from our adopted homeland that had given us life, had cared for us, and that we so dearly loved.

As we left, we paid respect to the graves of our ancestors. Along the road we said good-bye many times to newly dug graves. Eventually we arrived back in the land of our ancestors. While we were homeless as we left Bessarabia, we were not poor - we carried on in the strength of the spirit of our ancestors. What a great feeling it was when we could once again feel part of life. I can still feel on my shoulders the hands of my ancestors pushing me on. In their hard work for success in their new life in South Russia, they had been thinking of us, their grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Now it is our responsibility to think of them as we lead our children on to a good life - a life where you work for what you get and you are thankful in God's name.

My ancestors believed that owning land was essential to prosperity. By owning land they were able to feed and bring up their families. I agree with that philosophy. Of the inheritance my family once owned on paper, nothing is left except the spirit - the ideal. I find myself fortunate to own a 60 x 130 foot lot with a building on it. As a former refugee kid, that is huge. Owning our home has enabled Helgard and I to bring up our family, give them a home, feed them, and provide a solid foundation for their future. In God's name, I cannot ask for more. Come time, even though my grave will not be next to my ancestors, I will be next to them in my eternal life. Every prayer they prayed was a step closer to being united with God and to have peace. My thanks go out to them.

May you all rest in peace.

Estate Sharing

As far back as our memory takes us, the father was the head of the family and the mother was the caregiver. The children obeyed their parents with utmost respect. That was what our ancestors knew best, and in Russia they survived by it. To have a large family was a blessing, and in the strength of the family our ancestors succeeded in establishing a strong foundation. Even though in the beginning their life in South Russia was bitter and disappointing for many reasons, they didn't quit. Piece by piece they shaped the land into their home. My mother's mind was sharp to the day she died at age 90. Her love for her parents and for Bessarabia was with her to the end. Over the years she told us many stories about her life in Teplitz. They expressed such deep feelings that we remember these stories to this very day.

From their arrival in Russia, our ancestors planned for the future, both for themselves and for their children. They always considered how to move ahead in the best way. As land was divided through inheritance, the plots

became smaller and smaller. One way out was for the sons to learn a trade, but since our people were farmers and valued the land, even working in a trade was not always looked on as the answer. When it was time for the older children to marry, the parents always looked for suitable spouses that would bring land into the marriage. They wanted their children's marriages to be as "economical" as possible - that the marriage would give their children a better advantage economically. The youngest son then was given the "Hof" where the parents could stay on in their "ausgeding" (retirement). The parents often retained the upper hand in the household, even after the youngest son brought home a wife. This was the position of the parents - to guide their children through life. This system was in use in old Germany, long before our people went to Russia. It remained the custom for many generations in Russia. As time went on, the custom shifted. "Times change," and time changes things.

I will now tell the story of two families, Zacher and Opp, and how they sent their children away to married life. My Zacher grandparents had three daughters - each rejected the idea of getting married to a farmer. In this they had their parent's consent and support. The youngest daughter, however, did eventually marry a man with lots of land - and servants. My mom married a tradesman with very little financial backing but who did have a good reputation, who was honest and hard working. Mom's other sister was not interested in a farmer nor in a blacksmith - she never married.

My grandma Opp was a widow with three boys and two girls. She had very little money, but her good name in town was like money in the bank. The Opp boys worked in the wagon-making trade and also did roof framing. The latter occupation was not always paid in cash but rather in bartering goods and services the Opp's needed. One important barter resulted in obtaining a team and wagon for hauling goods or for transportation. On that system my dad built a home and shop. He did end up taking out a small loan, but it was an amount he could manage.

When my dad's older sister married, she received linen, bedding and some furnishings that helped her to set up house - this was a dowry befitting a low-income family girl. Dad's other sister wasn't interested in marrying a farmer either - her mother knew the feeling. Not finding the right man, she started a business sewing bedding.

When Mom and Dad got married, Dad was "set for life" as far as housing was concerned. This was a better beginning than many. My mother contributed the following to her marriage: 1 dairy cow, 5 sheep, 12 chickens, 6 geese, 6 ducks, 2 piglets, dishes and cutlery, linen, bedding, a sofa and lots of good advice. More things came into their possession as goods were left behind when somebody died. Nothing was set aside because it was not modern or up-to-date. When you have little, everything fits in and looks good. That to us was the good old times.

Savings & Thrift

Every parent in Bessarabia worked and saved toward their children's well being. A primary consideration for the family was to provide a good start for the children. Goods and property changed hands, but not always for cash. Often livestock was given in order to produce and reproduce in order to sustain the life of the family. A look at the livestock my mother brought to her marriage exemplifies the trend. The livestock was meant to reproduce and also produce goods that could provide food, clothing, bedding and income. Every animal played a large part in our existence.

The sheep in Bessarabia were an important source of wool for clothing, milk for nourishing cheese, and meat for food. Chickens supplied food, ducks and geese supplied both feathers and meat. If ducks and geese were kept for more than a year, their feathers were plucked in between winters, the same as you shear a sheep. A growing family always needed feathers for bedding, and this required collecting a lot of feathers year in and year out. To this day we still have feathers collected by my grandma Zacher in Teplitz. They have been cleaned over the years and are still in use today in small pillows. Beside yielding feathers, the geese were also force-fed to fatten them up, and then their meat was smoked. This was a great delicacy.

In those times, a woman was kept busy all year 'round to keep the chain going. She collected eggs from her birds to have them hatched come brooding time. This was done without a mechanical hatching apparatus. When the time was right, my mother prepared for the nesting time. She set up a place in the attic where there would be privacy and quiet - and no chance for quitting. There she placed the birds - hen, goose or duck - and the eggs onto the nest she had set up. She catered to them carefully until the chicks were hatched. This type of attention is typical of all the things that were needed to sustain life.

With good management a housewife was able to cash in her surplus products from her livestock. The milkman came daily to the door collecting milk. The egg buyer came on a weekly basis to collect eggs - often they would purchase extra chickens also. Dealers came around to buy all varieties of feathers, wool, hair (mainly hog-hair), scrap metal, and so on. Nothing was wasted. We used the wings from geese and ducks for a "Federwisch" (whiskbroom) - these were so handy, one could find them in every corner of the house and shop. The money a housewife earned from selling surplus items was used to purchase mercantile goods such as thread, needles, buttons, etc. But not cosmetics - such things were unheard of. A woman's red cheeks came naturally. And they had little time to spend doing their hair - they combed it in an old-fashioned knot at the back of the head.

Over the years, our every-day look came to be more and more like the Russians. But come Sundays, we looked transformed in our German-style outfits.