

That Old Schnaible House

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Our ancestors in the colonies of South Russia kept close contact with one another and with their relatives. They talked about the good times and the bad times. In the early settlement years, times were so tough that many of the colonists thought often of their homeland, and even entertained thoughts of going back. But this was next to impossible. Mom often told me how her grandmother told of the hard life of the pioneers and how people became so homesick they often cried for days. Because of their longing for their homeland, it became very important to save every memory and pass the stories down for later generations. These stories were told and retold at the social gatherings and formed a large part of the strong bond that developed between our people. As a result, our ancestors well knew where their families had come from. In addition, some families kept in contact with friends and relatives back in the homeland.

In Bessarabia, as in the other German colonies in South Russia, the church kept records in remarkable detail about the life events of the people in each village. Families also kept written records to the best of their ability. Today, I have in my possession the family Bible owned by my grandfather. On the back pages he made notes of important dates in the family.

When the Soviets moved into Bessarabia in 1940, they took over everything. The first thing they confiscated were the church records and other historical documents. We were allowed to copy our own information to provide identification to clear us for transit to Germany. The original records themselves were taken by the Russian officials and filed away as official documents. While this deprived us of our records, in a sense it also preserved them. Many of the records carried by our people back to Europe were lost in the turmoil of the war. After the war ended, Russia gave East Germany copies of some of these records. They became generally available when Germany was again unified, and are available on microfilm in an Archive in Leipzig, Germany.

Those of us who lost everything in the war began to search for a new place to start over – a place where we could feel we belonged. Part of this search for belonging involved seeking information that could answer the questions about one's heritage. People who were native Germans became involved and helped the immigrants. At that time the churches in South Germany still had their old records in-house. While giving us a history lecture, the Pastor of our church in Alfdorf showed these old records to us. Some of them were badly faded, but others were remarkable well preserved. To see these old documents in the Pastor's old home and in the old churches was a moving experience for me. I had always felt close to home and to God while sitting in these old churches. These old buildings had been witness to so much history, both good fortune and trying times. Some of these buildings were where my own ancestors gathered to worship and pray during their hard times. Just the history alone seemed to make the walls talk. I could not walk away from the thought of the dire circumstances that pushed our ancestors to leave their homeland, and how their ties to the "Vaterland" made leaving home so very hard. And here I was, after all these years, to find that home once again.

After Helgard and I were married, we settled in Canada. We both love our homeland dearly, but we felt America had the space for a better future for us. Over the years, we have made many return trips to Germany.

After the war, Helgard's parents moved to South Germany to get established. They too, wanted to be in their ancestor's homeland. After a successful career in business, they sold out and moved closer yet to where one of their ancestor's once lived, in the Black Forest. To get property there was not easy. They were told that the land belonged to the Schwarzwälder (people who had lived in the Black Forest for generations), and a foreigner was not allowed to invest. After proving to the authorities that their own ancestors had moved out from the area over 150 years ago, and this was to be a home-coming of sorts, that was enough proof for them to get permission. They eventually were able to build a nice house in a very picturesque location. There they lived for 20 years. On one of our visits, Helgard's Mom told us that in her search she had discovered the village where one of our ancestral families once lived. The village was isolated from all the tourist traffic. One day we looked the place up, and when we got there the locals told us proudly that in their area stands the oldest farmhouse in the entire region. It turned out it was the house built by our Schnaible ancestor! We found the house and what a good feeling we had as we looked it over. The Schnaible name had died out in the area, but a distant relative was allowed to take over the property on the condition that he would not alter the site nor tear it down. The Schnaible house was built in 1583, and this young man was enthusiastic about restoring it. To help with the expense of the work, he received money from the German government Heritage Fund. From what we saw, he has done a good job. The building sits on a reddish-brown sandstone foundation – a common building material in the Black Forest. The bottom floor housed the animals, and on top was a frame structure typical of its time and similar to what can be seen on many buildings from the past. The upstairs had a large living room, two bedrooms, a kitchen, and a Speiss (pantry for food storage). A ladder took up us to the unpartitioned loft where there were two bed for servants and room for hay storage. It was most interesting to note how low the doors and ceilings were. People must have been shorter in the olden days! Outside, we saw many grave markers leaning against the outside wall, some of them going back 300 years. The man told us that the town was cleaning up the graveyard to make room for new graves. The man had plans for preserving the grave-markers, and was very helpful in answering our questions.

Most of the land in the Black Forest is steep hillside and covered with trees. One could see the struggle the Schwarzwälder had to carve a living out of the small parcels of useable land. The people had to be inventive to produce a cash income, and became known for their skills in crafting wood into clocks and musical instruments. The people also produced charcoal and made a type of lubricant from wood-sap. In the city, charcoal was used as a long-lasting heat source, and was also used to heat irons for ironing fabric. Anyone who has used a charcoal iron knows that it took a trick to keep everything hot and working. Swinging these irons from left to right stirred up the charcoal a bit and helped to increase the heat the charcoal produced. I remember my Oma Zacher using such an iron in Teplitz. Mother used such charcoal irons well into the 1950's.

Since the Black Forest can support only a limited number of people, many families emigrated out of the Forest over the years. Wherever they went, they carried their traditions of diligence and hard work with them. As with many areas, the Black Forest has made adjustments over the years that are for the good of the people who live there. But the beauty of the people and the land remain as wonderful memories for us. Whenever we returned to the Black Forest we found Unser Leute (our people) and felt that we belonged.