

## War Costs More than Money – Part II

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### **Katharina and Christian Erfle - The Tears Are Mine.**

Christian Erfle (1883-1916) was a close relative to us, through my /Oma /Opp. I was too young to have met him in Teplitz, but I met his wife in Germany after WWII. Christian Erfle married Katharina Harter (1883-1975) in Teplitz in 1910. Their two sons were born in 1913 and 1915. Katharina survived two world wars, which in itself is not an isolated case. How she stood up to it is, however, note-worthy.

Christian and Katharine had been married for about four years when Russia got involved in WWI. "Kathre," as folks called her, was the same age as her husband. When the Russian Government recruited soldiers for the army, they made no exceptions for the men in the German villages. To sort out the prospects, every man was tagged with a red, blue or white ticket. Decisions were made according to how able-bodied a man was. The initial decisions were made quickly, based simply on visual inspection. As one could guess, many of these men were not too excited about joining the military and used various excuses to get off. The Russians were aware of such tactics, and didn't listen too well. The only exception that was made was on the basis of poor eyesight. We had our share of vision problems, but there was no Optometrist in the area to produce professional glasses. The only option we had was to purchase a pair of magnifying glasses at the /Apothek /(drugstore). That was too expensive for most folks, and so they simply went without. My /Opa/ Zacher had a pair of these magnifying glasses that I still have in my possession. He used them later in life for reading, and they don't work too bad at all. /Opa's/ glasses are the type that clip onto one's nose. This gives a feel for the state of eyewear in our village.

From the start, Russia did not fare well during WWI. They blamed their failures on their German subjects. For that reason, many Germans were sent to the Turkish front at Erserum. It turned out this was not all that bad of an assignment -- most of the men ended up building roads and bridges instead of fighting. What killed many men in that area of the war was not a bullet but a deadly disease, mostly typhoid fever. Another disadvantage to this assignment was the difficulty getting mail to and from the front lines. This was compounded by the fact that many of the soldiers were not skilled at writing.

By the end of the war, Katharina had lost contact with her husband. Time went by, without another word about him. She heard stories that many of the men became sick and were left to die. Eventually Katharina was declared a war widow. Now she was on her own to care for the two boys and try and start over. Katharina never married again. She was able to draw a small war-widow's pension from the government. She and Christian also owned a bit of land from which she could derive a small living.

In 1940 Katharina went with the rest of the Bessarabian Germans on the Trek back to Germany, then on to Poland. As fate would have it, both of her boys were conscripted into the German army. She felt God would be lenient with her and not take away her boys - it was not to be. Her oldest son Rudolf lost his life in 1943 in Russia. Then she got a letter from the military that her son Gotthold was missing in action. This meant that he was either dead or in a war camp. She held out hope that he was alive someplace. In 1945, her hope of reunion with her son hit bottom when she had to escape to the west to avoid getting caught by the Soviets. She had lost

her family, her home and all of her possessions. Her heart was heavy with her losses and unanswered questions. She was then 72 years old. What should she do now? When she was at her lowest, God reached out to give her a life and a hope.

I heard about "Kathrebas" when I looked up my relatives in the town where she lived. My uncle and I talked about her, and we felt that visiting with her would bring her some happiness. How true that was! She was all smiles, and gave us a heart-felt welcome. She had so much to tell my about my family and our life in Teplitz. She expressed how proud of me she was, that I had the courage to go to America, and that I was taking care of my mom. She literally swept me off my feet. The time went so fast. I felt so taken by her that I asked her if I could see her again, although I was short on time to get back to Canada. She was delighted with the idea, and so I visited her again. This time when I went, she had a coffee table ready with baked goodies to make this a special occasion. I cannot describe the warmth that woman gave me that afternoon. She told me how good God is and how He made her life worth living. When after the war she found refuge in West Germany, a family took her in who saw in her an /Oma/ for their children. She took on that role, and truly it became so. That day, she treated me as if I was her long-lost son. We talked long into the day. The hardest part of her life had been dealing with the unknown fate of her husband and son. Still they were missing. I shared my life story with her, and we both felt good after that. She was so thankful for the time she had with her beloved husband Christian, and her boys. She couldn't talk enough about them. She shared her memories of her life with them - to the end. When I left, she gave me a big hug, wishing me well. She told me to be proud of my family and to always trust in God. She gave me more than I expected. Even if we fail in life, there is always hope for us - that is a lesson I have found to be true in my own life.