

The Briefcase

Text written by Louise (Regehr) Wiens, Leamington, Ontario, October 2015

In 2012, I had sold my parents' home and was cleaning out one of the bedroom closets when I reached up to the top shelf and retrieved one of my father's prized possessions, his brown leather briefcase. I had always known it was there, and as I pulled it down and held it close, nostalgia once again swept over me as I inhaled the musty smell of the now faded and worn leather. I quickly snapped open the gold latches of the case knowing exactly what was inside. Or rather, I thought I knew. I had seen the contents numerous times before over the years and as my father aged he would often gently remind my husband and I, "In this briefcase are all of our important papers. Everything is in here. You won't have to go looking for anything." With tearful eyes I emptied the contents onto the floor: several expired Canadian passports, several German passports and documentaion of my birth in 1955 in Gottingen, the day after my parents had arrived in Friedland after 10 years of exile in Kazakstan. There were immigration papers stamped in Montreal, Canada after our voyage across the Atlantic on the "Seven Seas" in 1961, and a handful of Russian documents, paper now yellowed and brittle. There was a letter of reference for my father from the VanDelden Textile Company in Gronau dated 1955 which enabled him to continue working as a machinist in Canada for many years. Many of the documents in the briefcase bore my fathers signature, which was impeccable, even though he had received only minimal education and had edured a horrible combine accident in Kazakstan which had left him with a severe deformity of one arm. There was a little instruction booklet for our Singer sewing machine which my parents had shipped to their new homeland, and which had not only served us well for years, but now proudly sits in the corner of our living room. Then my eyes suddenly fell on an unfamiliar document. Folded in half and dark blue in color, it's thin edges fraying, I quickly opened it. "Aussiedlerpass" was engraved on the front, as well as the symbol of the "Deutsches Reich". Inside was a photo of my mother, age 23, wearing a dark suit, black hair pulled back in a tight bun, with an identification number assigned to her in Leipzig, Bessarabia. I studied it for while and then set it aside. Oh, I knew all the stories. I had heard them for years. Or so I thought...

Growing up in Canada, I always knew that our family was somehow different. With a dark skinned mother from Romania and a blonde Mennonite father from the Ukraine, we spoke several dialects of German in the home; mostly High German, but also Low German, a dialect common to Mennonites from Russia. I loved to sit and listen as my father and my uncle conversed for hours in their native tongue. Yet often my parents would automatically switch to Russian to discuss personal matters which they felt didn't concern my brother or I. To confuse me even more, when relatives from Germany arrived they spoke another dialect called "Schwabisch". As my friends went camping or took swimming lessons during summer holidays, I spent long days working in the fields beside my mother picking tomatoes and numerous other crops. My parents quickly made friends with other German families in our town, including several from Bessarabia. They also visited several times a year with Emma and Heinrich Giese of St. Catharines, and as they sat into the early morning hours reminiscing daily life in Leipzig, there were many tears as well as sudden bursts of laughter.

In the mornings as my friends ate cereal out of a box with milk in their homes, I would sit at our table with my mother eating hard boiled eggs and thick homemade bread with jam, served on a bread board, while my mother gave me my daily history lesson. With a far away look in her eyes she would recall daily village life in Leipzig, a

life interrupted by the horrors of WW2. Daughter of Gottfried Neumann and Julianna Tietz, the household was a happy place with 8 children, who, after a long day of work in the fields, would sing together in the kitchen as they helped their mother clean up after the evening meal. With windows open wide, the neighbors would often comment, "Mrs. Neumann, you must be so proud of your children," as she beamed with pride. After the children were settled in their straw beds, their father and grandfather would sit and stoke the fire in the next room and discuss the Bible late into the night. Life centered around the church with an Easter sunrise service on a nearby hillside, Christmas Eve programs for the children, and annual May Day Celebrations. Sundays the youth socialized as they wandered out in the pastures or gathered in various homes to play games. I heard about the fields of sunflowers and grapes, the stork nests, chimney sweeps, and the great flood of 1927, as the chickens fled to the rooftops. I heard about the church bells of Leipzig and how the number of times they would toll signified a birth, death, or an emergency. The Lemke family owned a mill and they also owned a car, and my mother loved to get a ride to school with Lilli Lemke. Hulda, Elsa and Alma Werner were neighbour girls and often at the house. When sister Emma Neumann married and moved up the hillside to Kulm, the siblings all cried thinking they might never see her again. Most were born and died in the village.

I had heard about the evacuation to Poland, then to Germany, then back again to Poland, and then to Kazakstan. The bombs, the hunger, the constant fear. I heard how Opa Neumann had loaded his wagon, packed feed for the horses, and leaving most of his earthly goods behind, led his horses out of Leipzig, as the barnyard animals yelped in the background. Down the dirt road to the waiting ships, where he would cross the Donau and hopefully be reconciled with his family. Sometimes he walked, sometimes he rode, my mother would relay to me.

The family reunion was brief. Brother Emil was sent to the Arbeitsdienst and spent time as a POW in Texas in the USA picking cotton. Brother Helmut died in a freak accident in a Lager in Pokland. Sister Emma had surgery there and died. And then father Gottfried was taken by force. His last comment to his wife and children was, "When they come for old men like me, we can rest assured that we have lost the war." He was never heard from again. My mother (now widowed with child), sister Hulda, sister Ida (with child), and mother Julianna were sent to Siberia where they spent 10 years on a collective farm before being allowed to return to Germany in 1955.

These days it is I who will generally start and carry the conversations on my frequent visits to my parents at the nursing home where they both live. After reading several pages from the "Leipzig Heimatbuch" by A.Lachelt, and then asking my mother several questions, she will generally now just shrug her shoulders. "There is nothing more to say. Everything has been said," she responds.

My parents no longer speak Russian. I now only hear the Low German dialect at the hospital where I work, as it is also the dialect spoken by the Mennonites from Mexico, many of whom also live in our town. My mother still wears her hair in a tight bun. As I gently finger the intricate lace on a large black headscarve which I found in her closet, I recognize it as the one she is wearing in the old black and white photo taken in 1952 in Martuk, Kazakstan, as she stands at the grave of her son Egon Lieske.

My father laughs as he recalls catching Russian steppe hares with a slingshot and roasting them on a fire. My mother points to her chest as she says to me, "Every day God puts a song inside of me and my heart still sings. Who would have thought that at my age I would still have it so good..."

I wish I had asked more questions...