

## Voices from the Past

In 1901, my great-grandparents David and Marie Lundgrin left Russia for the United States. They were German Russians whose families had lived along the Volga River for more than 100 years. I wondered how they felt when they said goodbye to relatives and friends, not knowing if they would ever see them again. When audio tapes of family interviews from the 1960s surfaced, my questions were answered.

“You bet your life!” Marie replied when asked if her journey to America was difficult.

Marie’s daughter Ella asked questions and recorded her mother’s conversation.

Marie recalled the long arduous trip from Russia, never revealing that she was six months pregnant with their first child. She said they were nervous as they traveled in cattle cars and endured cramped conditions in steerage across the Atlantic.

“We came from Dreispitz, that’s where I was born,” Marie said in a thick German accent. “David was from there too.”

Dreispitz was a small Lutheran village established along the lower Volga in 1767. It was colonized at the invitation of Catherine the Great, who promised immigrants free land and exemption from military service while maintaining their language and culture. Marie and David followed traditions that had been passed down through generations of their families. Eventually, Russian nationalism ended their freedoms with the creed “one czar, one religion, one language.”

Marie said that David was drafted and served four years in the Russian Army. After he returned from required service, they were married in 1899 by Reverend Behning. Ella asked her mother to tell the story of what happened after they immigrated through Ellis Island.

“In New York, we had to take a train,” Marie said. “Dave said ‘nix’ and would not get on.” She explained that the passenger train looked too fancy, but somehow the conductor convinced them to board. Just as they were settling into their seats, Marie said they heard the news – President McKinley had been shot.



*David Lundgrin, Marie Herbel Lundgrin and Fredrick Herbel in Russia*

“We were scared,” Marie said. “We thought they would make us go back home.” But the assassination did not hold up the train and they arrived to their new home in Kansas. They were greeted by Marie’s uncle Fredrick Herbel who had immigrated to Durham, Kansas several years earlier. He had paid for their passage to America.

“We worked on Fredrick’s farm for two years to pay off our debt,” Marie explained. During this time, other family members followed David and Marie to the United States. David’s younger brother George settled in Oklahoma. Marie’s sister Margaret joined them in Kansas, but died in childbirth soon after she arrived. Marie somberly recalled memories of those times when she also lost an infant son.

David and Marie moved to the farming community of Lucas, Kansas. There they raised eight children with the core values of hard work and a strong faith in God. They were proud of their German Russian heritage, but grateful to have a family of first-generation Americans. They learned English and attended church in their new hometown. When the townsfolk called them “Russkies” they shrugged it off as they had been treated much worse in Russia.

Letters from relatives still living in Russia told of deteriorating conditions. German Russians faced persecution and starvation as the Bolsheviks stripped away farm lands and cut off food and medical supplies. Those in America tried to help family members get out of Russia. In 1922, David and his brother George sent money to their mother for safe passage.

Their mother Katherine and nephew Reinhart were among 133 villagers who escaped from Dreispitz on a freezing winter night. On the perilous journey, 19 people lost their lives including Katherine. Upon arrival in America, Reinhart told his family that Katherine had fallen off a wagon while crossing a river, caught pneumonia and died. After entering Poland, they buried the bodies in a mass grave.

When Germany invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, German Russians were sent to forced labor camps in Siberia and Central Asia resulting in the deaths of an estimated 1.5 million Volga Germans. Entire villages were deported including Dreispitz. David’s brother George recalled those times.

“The whole settlement was loaded into cattle cars, standing with their arms tied back to back,” George said. “There was so much weeping.”

Their older brother Gottfried, his wife Molly and three children still lived in Dreispitz. When they were deported, Gottfried was separated from his wife and children. He was sent to Siberia where many perished along the way. No one ever heard from Molly or the children again. The letters the family received from their brother were heartbreaking:

*Dear Family,*

*It is very hard here at the labor camps. We have little to eat and the cold is unbearable. Our beds are boards placed on soap and lard kettles. We manage to heat the kettles for some warmth at night.*

*Your brother, Gottfried*

*Dear Family,*

*Do not send any more money. We do not receive it and our captors make food packages impossible to afford. Bloat has set in and we are starving. You will probably never hear from me again.*

*Your loving brother, Gottfried*

After the Volga Germans were deported, their villages were bulldozed down to the ground. Marie said that her hometown of Dreispitz was wiped off the map.

“There was [sic] no houses, no buildings, no nothing,” Marie said. “So much violence, so much dying.”

It was difficult for them to comprehend the betrayal by their Russian homeland. Many men in their community

had served in the Russian Army. Now ethnic Germans were banned from the Soviet military and tens of thousands of German Russian soldiers were sent to Gulag labor camps.

Although David and Marie lived safely in America, they could not escape the reach of World War II. Just as David had been conscripted into the Russian Army, his sons were drafted into the United States Army. Their youngest sons, Godfrey and William, were sent to fight in

France. William was killed and Godfrey was shot and nearly lost his life.

After the war ended, the family strived to make a good life in Kansas. David was a wheat farmer with smart business skills. His sons farmed alongside him, starting with a horse-drawn combine and progressing into modern machinery. David preferred to work with his draft horses while the boys learned to operate and maintain new tractors and harvesters. Those experiences helped their oldest son Rubin start a farm implement business.



*Marie and David in Lucas*

When their children were grown, many stayed in western Kansas to become teachers, carpenters, business owners and dentists. David and Marie were pleased with the educational opportunities that living in America had provided them.



*Lundgrin farm site just north of Lucas*

Yet change didn't always come easy as they attempted to keep some of their traditions alive. Marie disliked television and called it the "devil's box." She certainly didn't allow one in her home. At her children's homes, she always sat with her back to it.

Marie preferred to visit with family and friends, tell stories and teach German phrases and prayers. She passed along cooking, sewing and embroidery skills to her daughters.

Traditional recipes such as bierocks, sauerkraut and sausages, kuchen and vareniki became family favorites.

In 1963, ten years after David had passed away, Marie received an unexpected letter from Russia. It was from David's brother Gottfried, long thought to have died. Gottfried's letter said he was alive in Siberia and now 88 years old. He wrote that times had been hard during their banishment and there were not enough words to tell of the suffering they had endured. While Gottfried never saw his family members in person, he was able to reunite with them by phone.

"It was such good news," Marie said. "David would have been so happy."

Marie died a few months after her stories were recorded. The tapes were packed away and passed down to my dad, who is Marie's grandson. In 1995, my dad traveled to Russia for genealogy research. He cruised down the Volga River and visited Dreispitz, now known as Verkhnyaya Dobrinka, to walk the paths of our ancestors.

After my dad passed away, I received the audio recordings from nearly 60 years ago. I think that Marie hoped that her stories would help people appreciate their freedoms in America. We can certainly honor our ancestors by making sure their stories stay alive for generations to come.