

Grandma Helena and the Miracle of “Our Daily Bread”

A Story by Maria (Wohn) Appelhans

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Note: This story won First Place in the recent 2024 AHSGR Storytelling Contest. Exactly twenty years ago, Maria (Wohn) Appelhans also won First Place in the 2004 AHSGR Storytelling Contest.

My dear Grandma Helena has been gone for nearly eighty years. But I don't have to try too hard to remember what she looked like. All I have to do is look in the mirror.

From the time I was very young, there were those in my family who told me I was “the second Helena.” As a small child, I wondered what in the world everyone was talking about. My name was Maria, not Helena. And I was a child, not an elderly woman. But now, all these many years later, I do see the resemblance. Because I knew her so well, I am proud to favor my Grandma Helena. And I loved her very much because she always was so kind to me.

Grandma Helena was an only child. This was very unusual back in our Volga German village of Rothammel, Russia. Most families had many children, sometimes ten, twelve, or even more. Grandma Helena's parents, “Skadatzges” Michael and Eva Frank, found it difficult to have children. And so they prayed and prayed. After years of fervent praying, they told God they would be satisfied with just one baby—even “a little-bitty baby.”

On a hot summer day in 1878, that “little-bitty baby” was born. It was a daughter, and her proud parents named her Helena. Although born premature, she eventually grew up strong and healthy. When she was in her teenage years, many young men in Rothammel sought her hand. She could afford to be particular and waited for just the right fellow to come along. In 1896, she married my grandfather, “Michels” Johannes Wohn. In the ensuing years, Helena gave birth to a dozen children, including my father, Alexander Wohn. He was one of two identical twin boys.



A portrait of Grandma Helena Wohn. “Although she looked very stern, Grandma also could be very loving and kind.” This picture was taken in the 1940s, when Helena was nearing about sixty years of age. (Photo courtesy of Maria Appelhans)



The author's paternal grandparents, Helena and Johannes Wohn in Minsk, White Russia, circa 1940. (Photo courtesy of Paul and Doris Appelhans)

Grandma Helena was so pleased to have a home bustling with children. Growing up without any brothers or sisters, this change was a joy she had never known. But the joy of a happy household was not to last.

After the Russian Revolution of 1917, came the long years of a bloody civil war. The Reds and Whites clashed often, sometimes in our very villages. Then came the famine of the early 1920s, followed by an even worse famine in the early 1930s. I was born in Rothammel in January of 1930 and I survived that terrible time. But for many months, I was just skin and bones and nearly died. My poor parents had to leave our starving village and go begging. At one point, a kind Ukrainian family took us in and literally saved our lives. I sometimes think that family was a group of angels sent by God. They were so good to us and they nursed us all back to health.

When we returned to our village of Rothammel, we were relieved to see that Grandma Helena and Grandpa Johannes were among the living. They were both weak and gaunt, but they survived. In later years, there still were many times we went hungry. Yet when there was enough flour, my Grandma Helena would bake bread in an outdoor oven.



Surprisingly, the old family home of Helena and Johannes Wohn was still standing in the Volga German village of Rothammel, Russia, as late as the 1980s. But the structure no longer exists today. This was the house in which the author was born in 1930. Grandma Helena Wohn assisted with the author's birth. (Photo courtesy of Theresia Dähn)

But where, I often wondered, did Grandma Helena ever find enough flour to make the bread? I am not sure if she saved or begged or traded or what, but when bread-baking day came, it was such a happy day. To me and the other members of our family, it was a "*Wunder*," a miracle, to have enough flour to bake a few precious loaves of bread. A miracle!

Grandma asked me to help her with the baking, but I am not sure how helpful I was. Dressed in her head shawl, dark dress, and a long white apron, Grandma Helena would form round loaves of rye bread. I would watch her and oh, how my eyes would grow big and my mouth would water. With Grandma Helena, baking bread was not just a mere task, it was like a solemn religious ritual.

As my grandmother worked with the bread, she moved her lips in constant prayer. When praying the "Our Father" in German, she would pause and bow her head while saying the words "*unser tägliches Brot gib uns heute*" (give us this day our daily bread).

Prayers were only one part of the whole process. Grandma also blessed all the loaves with the sign of the cross before she put them in the oven. And then, before slicing each loaf, Grandma would carve three crosses on the underside. This was to remind us, she often explained, that we always had to show thanks to God for the miracle of "our daily bread."

Grandma Helena also did something else that I did not expect. With the leftover bits of dough, she shaped a small loaf of bread and then she told everyone in German: "Now this loaf of bread is for my helper, Maria. No one else can eat this bread but Maria. It is hers."

Oh, the mere shaping of that little loaf made me feel so good and so special. I cannot adequately express how meaningful that simple act was. And yet it was just a small loaf of bread. All these years later, it still brings tears to my eyes. (In those days, we Volga German children in the 1930s seldom received gifts of any kind. We were happy just to be able to have a place to sleep and a roof over our heads.)

When my small loaf of bread was baked and it had cooled a little, Grandma Helena blessed it with the three carved crosses and then sliced it for me in the old, old way. She did this while standing up. She took a knife and held the little loaf against her heart, and she cut the bread by slicing toward her aproned chest. This is the way all the older Volga German women sliced bread. It may sound a bit dangerous to us today, but those women made it look rather easy and quite normal.

To me, it did not matter how the bread was sliced. Grandma could have sliced the bread standing up, sitting down, or being upside down. The warm rye bread was delicious, especially with a cup of buttermilk.

In the summer, when the watermelons were ripe and "*feier-roht*" (fiery red), we always had to eat some bread with the watermelon. In our village of Rothammel, it was unthinkable to eat a slice of watermelon in one hand—without a slice of bread in the other. Even today, I still like to eat watermelon and a piece of bread at the same time. That is how I was raised, and the old ways die hard.



The underside of a loaf of rye bread, carved with three crosses. A little loose flour was added so that the crosses are visible. (Photo courtesy of Rosalinda and Timothy J. Klobberdanz)



Grandma Helena (at right) with her daughter-in-law Lena Wohn and little granddaughter Rosa, circa 1943. Note that Grandma Helena holds a prayerbook and a rosary. And on the table behind her is a bottle of holy water. (Photo courtesy of Maria Schneider)



One of the last-known photographs of Grandma Helena, taken about 1945. The hardships of hunger, war, and constant worry are reflected in her face. (Photo courtesy of Maria Appelhans)

Our days in the Volga German village of Rothammel eventually came to an end, after my parents and grandparents decided to seek jobs in the big city of Minsk, in distant White Russia (Belarus). And the distance was great, nearly a thousand miles away. My parents had relatives in Minsk and a small settlement of Volga Germans had become established on the outskirts of the city.

At first, life in Minsk was difficult, and there were times I and many other Volga German children had to go begging. At night, we talked about how good it was back in our home villages on the Volga. But deep in our hearts, we all knew better.

After the German *Wehrmacht* suddenly invaded Russia in 1941, those of us Volga Germans in Minsk were sent west into Poland and Germany. The German soldiers had the words “*GOTT MIT UNS*” (GOD IS WITH US) on their belt buckles, and we hoped that was true. But due to the constant moving and wartime chaos, many of us family members became separated.

One hazy morning, my dear grandparents were nowhere to be seen. Soon it was just my mother and two younger sisters and I who dragged along our suitcases, as we walked and walked for countless miles. With all the bombings and mounting casualties, we saw things no children should ever see. There were days it seemed like we had gone from Russia’s frying pan into the flames of Germany’s fire.

Later, when the war was over, we learned that Grandpa Johannes Wohn had fallen ill and died in the eastern part of Germany. And poor Grandma Helena, suddenly a widow, was among those captured by the Russians and forcibly returned to the USSR. Imagine! Grandma was forced back into Stalin’s Soviet Union, a place that she had tried so hard to leave!

Some relatives told us that Grandma Helena and other members of her family were exiled to Kazakhstan, in Central Asia. And it was there, in such a harsh and unfamiliar land, that Grandma Helena eked out her final years. But since she was a woman of deep faith, I know she did not despair.

I like to think Grandma Helena died while praying in German to “Our Father Who Art in Heaven.” No doubt, even there on the cold steppes of Kazakhstan, she remained ever grateful to our Heavenly Father for all His many blessings, including the miracle of “our daily bread.”



The flower-strewn grave of Grandma Helena Wohn was marked with a simple wooden cross. Kazakhstan, Easter 1948. (Photo courtesy of Maria Schneider)



The author and storyteller, Maria (Wohn) Appelhans. She passed away in the summer of 2024. (Photo courtesy of Rosalinda and Timothy J. Kloberdanz)

