

Chapter 1

Life in Russia

In Kukkus, a small Russian village, on October 19, 1879, a baby girl was born. I was that baby born on a cool October morning to German immigrants, John and Elisabeth Becker Debus, their firstborn child.

When I was six days old I was baptized Elisabeth Catherine Debus in the prayer hall (*Betsaul*) in the center of the village. I was named Elisabeth after my mother and Catherine because my parents were so grateful to Catherine the Great,* a German princess who married the Russian Grand Duke Peter, who became Czar Peter III.

Before the reign of Catherine in her own right (1762-1796), attempts to settle the fertile Volga Steppe had failed. In 1762 she issued a manifesto, which was published in newspapers in Europe, inviting people to settle in her new country, Russia. She promised the people free land, deferred taxation, and numerous other privileges, including exemption from military duties. Religious freedom was one of the most important factors in all the phases of immigration.

In 1762, Germany had been at war for six years (the Seven Year War ended in 1763.) The country was in shambles; work and food were in short supply; poverty was everywhere. The taxes were so high in Germany and my ancestors were so poor, that they moved from Germany to the great plains near the Volga river. Catherine gave the German people free transportation to the Volga area.

Catherine specified that people of all professions could settle in Russia. Fifty percent of the immigrants were farmers or farm laborers and forty percent were craftsmen. Catherine gave them each a strip of land to farm, so some of the craftsmen had to learn farming in order to survive. It took years for them to prosper.

This story was passed down to me from my grandparents. They traveled almost two thousand miles by wagon and ship to reach their new home. My father told me that when our people first came to Russia

**Catherine was born in Prussia in 1729 as Princess Sophia of Anhalt Zerbst (she changed her name when she converted to the Orthodox religion). Catherine was sent to Russia at age 14 to marry her second cousin, Peter of Holstein Gottorp (aged 14), grandson of Peter I of Russia. He was named heir to the Russian throne as Peter III. Catherine was popular with the people, but Peter was not. He was probably insane, and in 1762 several groups plotted to dethrone him and proclaim Catherine empress. Peter was arrested and died a few days later (murdered by some of the officers watching over him, including the brother of Catherine's lover, Grigory Orlov). Although there was no proof that Catherine ordered his murder, Orlov's brother was involved, and it was a convenient solution. She must have had some idea of what was happening.*

they found a wilderness; as far as they could see there was nothing but prairie grass. It was the great plains, or "steppe" as we came to know it.

Some of the immigrants wanted to go back to Germany, but could not because they had no money or food. Catherine had promised them wood to make houses, but before the wood arrived, almost a year later, they had to build sod houses to live in, for the winters were so harsh.

Almost 27,000 people, primarily from southwestern Germany, migrated to Russia after 1763 in response to the promise of local self-government. They established 104 settlements on both sides of the Volga River near the city of Saratov. Of the colonies, 30 were Catholic, 54 were Lutheran, and 20 were Reformed church.

In 1767, there were 181 Germans — 100 males and 81 females — who settled in Kukkus. Livestock in Kukkus that year consisted of 96 horses and 75 cows and calves. Thirty-two houses were built, and granaries for grain.

Kukkus is a small village (*ein kleines Dorf*) in the province of Saratov, also known at various times as Neu-Braband, Wolzka, Wolskoje, and Priwolskoje. It was named for Abraham Kukkus, the first mayor (*Bürgermeister*). Kukkus was founded on June 26, 1767, as one of the 16 colonies established by Agent-Directors LeFoy and Pictet. These villages formed the district of Tarlyk, or Warenburg, on the meadow-side, the so-called "*Wiesenseite*," on the east side of the river. The *Wiesenseite* is level prairie land. On the opposite shore of the Volga, the west side (*die Bergseite*) the land is hilly with steep slopes leading down to the river.* Since 1941, Kukkus has been known by another name, Priwolskoje.

The village of Kukkus is about 150 kilometers north of the Caspian Sea. A village (*Dorf*) could be several kilometers in diameter with short distances between individual farmsteads. In the center of the *Dorf* was a prayer hall (*Gebetssaal*) which was used as a church to hold Sunday services, baptisms, and weddings. It was also used for church school. The one I attended with my parents was the Reformed church (Calvinist).

Near the prayer hall was a general store, which supplied a few necessities for daily life, a town hall, granaries, some stables for livestock, a blacksmith shop, and a tailor shop.

When the first colonists arrived, Catherine gave them a land allotment of thirty *dessiatines* by the Decree of March 19, 1764. One *dessiatine* equaled about 2.7 acres, so my grandparents had about 81 acres. Every time a male child was born the family was given another piece of land, called a *Datscha*. So the families with male children were thought of

*Literally "*die Bergseite*" means the hillside, and "*Wiesenseite*" means meadowside.

as prosperous folks because they had more land. Usually the German-Russians married young and would move in with the husband's family, so with the *Datscha* system there might be three or four married sons with their wives, all living at home. The women would be in charge of caring for all the children, baking, and cooking. Those not needed for household work would work in the field.

In my village, Kukkus, the houses were mostly wooden with straw-thatched roofs. The farm land was quite a distance from the village and sometimes my father would be gone for several days working on the farm, especially at harvest time. Often the women and children would be left alone while the men were in the fields. Perhaps that's why the dwellings were built close together.

Over the years the privileges Catherine the Great had given the colonists were gradually taken away. The final blow came in 1871 when Czar Alexander II revoked exemption from taxation and the German boys were no longer excused from military service. The first soldiers were drafted in 1874, and from that time on migration to North and South America began.

On August 12, 1883, Mother and Father had a baby boy whom they named Conrad, after my grandfather. My brother Henry was born July 24, 1886, and soon after him came another boy named John. My mother was a small, frail, sickly woman, who had to rest every afternoon.

As I remember, we did not have a good water supply, especially in the winter. My father would have to go to a small stream in the meadowland to get water for us. *Flie ssendes Wasser* — the small stream — worked its way to the mighty Volga River. In the winter the stream would freeze and then Father would have to go to the Volga for our water. Usually a group of men would go together to get water. One early spring day in 1888 we were out of water and father went alone to replenish our supply. Sometimes the Volga River would rise thirty feet in some places in early spring. The water was high that day, covering the flat bridge the men had built to stand on to draw the water. Father misjudged the location of the bridge and fell into the water. The swift current carried him downstream. Men on the river bank heard his cry for help and rescued him, but he almost drowned. The men helped him to get back home and mother put him to bed immediately.

He coughed all night and was so terribly sick. Mother made a mustard plaster for his chest and I, being the oldest at almost nine, stayed up with him all night. Two days later my father died. I remember feeling sad, but it seemed my sadness was for mother and my brothers and not because my father was dead. He was very hard on me; I often worked harder than mother and always worked harder than my brothers, because

I was the oldest. My father always had good things to say about my brothers, but I never got credit for any of the work I did.

I can still hear him calling "Alla* Lizzie!" — everyone called me Lizzie — "come help me a minute." Because Mother was so sickly, I had to do most of the cooking and laundry. The male children in a German family were a treasure because they gave the fathers more land when the official census was taken. I was just another mouth to feed, while my brothers gave my father three *Datschas* of land. So I did not grieve much for my father.

In Russia the German-Russian family was male-dominated and male-oriented. My father was an authoritarian and I feared him more than I loved him.

In the shed behind the sawmill in the village there was scrap lumber from the mill. Anyone from the congregation (*Gemeinde*) could use the scrap lumber to build a casket, so my uncle got enough material for a casket. He built it himself for my father because to hire a carpenter would cost one ruble.

The day of the funeral my mother and brothers cried at the prayer hall and at the cemetery. Everyone was grief-stricken. I never shed a tear, and when we got home my mother was very angry with me because I did not cry. She sent me to bed without anything to eat for supper. She said that it did not look right and that I had embarrassed her by not crying.

That was only the beginning of our hard times. I thought it was bad when Father was alive, but after his death it got worse. Mother had no way to take care of us financially or physically. According to custom, the mother no longer had rights to her children. She would marry again, sometimes the only solution for widows. My mother was to marry Mr. Felsing, whose wife died and left him with five children. He could keep his children, but my mother couldn't keep hers. I don't know if that was a German or Russian rule, or a rule of the church. I think it was the rule of the church, but at that time we children were all separated. Henry and Conrad were given to Uncle Philip and Grandma Becker, and John was given to Uncle Peter. The uncles did not want me because I wouldn't bring them more land. I was given to guardians, a Mr. and Mrs. Schreiber, who were not relatives of ours. Because I was a girl, no relative wanted me.

The church sold my father's land, house, and everything he owned and all four of us received 1.45 rubles each a month. Mr. Schreiber received my portion.

*"Alla" is a word from another German dialect (Pfälzer). It is added to give emphasis to what you are saying. Apparently it became a kind of nickname for

At the age of nine I went to start a new life with the Schreibers in a different village, Stahl, which was quite a distance from Kukkus. My mother pressed a white handkerchief of hers in my hand. She took a few of my belongings and tied them up with some string and off I went with my small bundle of belongings under one arm. I cried and begged her not to send me to strangers. She said that she had no choice but to let me go. Thinking back I don't think she cried for me. Maybe it was because I hadn't cried for my father and she was still angry. The day I left the house with the Schreibers was the last time I ever saw my mother.

The first week at my new home was traumatic. I was so homesick for my mother and brothers that I was actually sick. I ran a high fever and could not eat. In two days I was so weak I could hardly walk. I lay on a straw mattress and cried into my mother's handkerchief. The handkerchief was wet most of three days, from my tears. I overheard Mrs. Schreiber whispering to Mr. Schreiber that perhaps they should take me back for a visit. Mr. Schreiber spoke with cool authority, "No, she will be all right in a few days." I thought, 'God must be punishing me for not crying at my father's funeral and that's why I was sent away from my family.' Mr. Schreiber had an air of authority and the appearance of one who demanded instant obedience. He reminded me of my father in every way.

Mr. and Mrs. Schreiber had three girls, Margarete, Katarina, and a little girl about a year old named Helen. Mrs. Schreiber was in the family way with another when I went to live with them. I soon learned that life with them wasn't going to be any better than the life I had at home. Helen was to be completely in my care. I must sleep with her and take full responsibility for her, plus carry in all the water, gather fuel, cook, do laundry, and bake bread. Mrs. Schreiber was so happy when she found out that I knew how to bake bread, soon I was doing it all. A servant was what I had become. I soon learned that making and baking bread was easy compared to making *Mistholz*.

One of the most important Volga-German innovations was the use of a heating fuel known as *Mistholz*. This "manure wood" was barnyard straw and animal manure that was moistened with water, mixed, and dried in the sun. After curing, this mixture was cut and stacked in the same way we stack firewood today (this practice had been passed down since the Germans first came to Russia). *Mistholz* had a high heat value and was necessary because of the treeless steppe.

Margarete was about six years old, and sometimes she would come over to the great stove in the kitchen where I was making bread and watch me. She always wanted to help, but I talked her into watching Helen for me so I had more time to do the baking. Mrs. Schreiber

always said that my bread was better than hers, and she was right. She made bread occasionally when I was out tending to the sheep.

Mr. Schreiber was one of the few who owned sheep. He made his living from the sheep and was also the elder (*der Küster*) of the Reformed church. An elder was in charge of worship service and baptisms, but for weddings or communion we had to wait for the pastor to come out to our *Dorf*. The pastor was in Saratov, where there was a big Reformed church. He would make his rounds to all the *Dorfs*, maybe getting to Stahl once a month.

The prayer hall was not a church. It had no steeple and no resident pastor, but was served by an elder, like Mr. Schreiber. He held church services every Sunday in the absence of the pastor. Mr. Schreiber was quite active in the church. He spent all of his time tending to church matters and raising sheep.

The Schreiber's home was quite different from the one I lived in with my parents. My parents lived close together with no garden spot by our house. All the produce and grain was raised on a strip of land out on the steppe. The Schreibers had a large garden spot next to their house and a shed in the back for the sheep and one cow. Their house was larger. I guess they were wealthier than the other German-Russians. Mrs. Schreiber (Margarete) and I did most of the work in the garden. We raised carrots, parsnips, red beets, rutabagas, and a small amount of turnips, white cabbage, turkish beans, sugar beets, onions, and potatoes. We also raised a few sugar beets in the garden spot. The beets, when mature, were scrubbed, peeled, and boiled to make a sweet syrup. This syrup was used in cooking to sweeten some foods. My folks raised winter and spring wheat, barley, oats, white peas, flax, and hemp, but mostly potatoes. Some of the colonists, situated on hillsides that had sandy places called *Bakisi**, planted watermelon, muskmelon, pumpkins, cucumbers, and turkish beans. I really came to enjoy the gardening. It was such a joy to put seeds in the ground and watch them grow into something wonderful to eat. We had good, fertile soil, so gardening was rewarding. As I grew up and had my own family, I always thanked God that I knew how to grow a garden .

Because of the long skirts we had to wear, work in the garden was more difficult. Every time I bent over to do something, like planting or hoeing, I would step on my skirt. I said to Mrs. Schreiber one hot day, "Can't we pin our skirts up so we won't step on them?" She answered "No! We must not show our legs; it is not ladylike to show our legs."

Mr. Schreiber always milked the cow. He tried to show me how when I was about ten, but I just didn't have enough strength in my

*This is possibly a Russian word.