

# Grandma and Grandpa

## “Not Russian”

by Sharon Mohr

“Well, if we are Montanans and Americans because we were born here, why aren’t you a Russian?” This conversation took place at Grandma’s and Grandpa’s kitchen table—the 1950’s white Formica topped oval with chrome legs-- as we enjoyed the always present cookies and milk.

I was eleven years old and first becoming interested in “How did I get here? What group of peoples did my family identify with? Why were my grandparents born in another country?” The news in the 1970’s made me believe that if we Americans were in a ‘cold war’ with the United Soviet Socialist Republic, or Soviet Union, then all Russians were the enemy. I was just understanding the concept of the Volga Germans and my heritage tied to the fact my German ancestors lived for generations in Russia.

I remember not being happy about being a Russian grandchild, even though my grandparents insisted they were German, not Russian. “But you were born in Russia, so we must be Russian, was my argument. And no one is happy with Russia right now.”

Only five years earlier, I was shocked to learn that Grandpa had even been a baby, like my new baby brother! Grandpas and grandmas had always been old. Moms and dads had always been moms and dads. Just my brothers, my friends and I were young! That is what I thought as a five-year-old who had never seen photos of my grandparents as babies. As it turned out, I would never see photos of my grandparents as babies. They did not exist.

As I aged along in school, we were learning about different parts of the world, different races, different cultures—that people moved to avoid war, famine, environmental catastrophes or other concerns. I began to ask my grandparents about their parents and grandparents. This was my first foray into genealogy.

Grandma was able to tell me her parents’ names. She knew the name of her grandmother, but gave an incorrect name of her grandfather—which threw me off my ancestor search for decades. She couldn’t remember any names of great-grandparents, although she knew she was born in Walter, Russia, November 10, 1901, and came with her parents to the United States on a ship across the Atlantic Ocean in 1903.

The access to *Ancestry* gave me invaluable information. Grandma’s family passed the customs inspection and health screening at Ellis Island, New York before settling in Lincoln, Nebraska, where an uncle was already living. Her parents came with \$119-- the equivalent of \$4,300 in today’s money.

My grandfather only knew his parents’ names—although the surname of his mother had been reconstructed a few times. I would discover her true identity decades later. His mother was born in Kolb, Russia; his father in nearby Beideck, Russia. Each arrived in the United States alone, young and with little. Grandpa’s father arrived in New York May 12, 1902. Ship records state he boarded in Antwerp, Belgium on the SS *Vaderland*. After landing, he was placed in the ‘Record of Aliens Held for Special Inquiry’ and was held at Ellis Island under the category of “likely public charge.” I assumed this transpired because he had very little money, if any, and no relatives to meet with. He was fed three meals by the ship authorities and released the next day to continue his journey to Lincoln, Nebraska. Who helped my great grandfather travel to Lincoln is a mystery that may never be solved.

I learned two of my great grandfather’s brothers had sailed to Argentina. Another who stayed in Russia, was shot dead in a field in Beideck, after refusing to leave at the request of the Russian army several years later. The fifth brother and a sister are still waiting to be found with records hiding somewhere. This family did not stay in touch unfortunately.

Grandpa’s mother made the trek to the United States at the age of 22 in 1902. She had boarded the SS *Statendam* on May 8, in Rotterdam, Holland, spending 10 days on the ship. She carried \$2 with her—equivalent to about \$70 today. She had a sister already living in Lincoln. Somehow, she met with Grandpa’s father and they were married in Lincoln, Nebraska, April 26, 1903, and Grandpa was born the following year.

Like most Upper Volga Germans, my grandmother’s and grandfather’s families lived for some time in Lincoln, following the roads and rails to Colorado back and forth for work in the farming industry. Both families ended up

moving to Montana when the sugar beet industry took root in Billings. A beet processing factory was constructed there in 1908. My grandmother's family was able to eventually purchase their own 160 acres of irrigated land. My grandfather's family had a much harder life.

Grandpa's mother died at 35 years of age from tuberculosis, leaving his father with five young children. Grandpa did not remember—or wouldn't divulge much about his mother as he was nine when she died. His father would remarry soon after his wife's death as most did then, but Grandpa did not get along with her. Grief and depression were hidden issues at that time. I am sure Grandpa was grieving for his mother.

Grandpa left home after he finished the eighth grade of school. He lived and worked with other farm families around Billings before meeting and marrying my grandmother. His father lost his second wife and died penniless in the arms of Grandpa at his end.

Grandma's family also had many setbacks but were financially stable. Her parents were able to raise five children and help them acquire their own land or higher education. Grandma and her sisters attended school but very sporadically. Church attendance and farm work were priorities. Her older brother had no schooling outside the home. The youngest brother did attend school, as education became more accessible, attaining a civil engineering degree after high school—in Lincoln, Nebraska!

When just a young girl, Grandma was teased for being a German-Russian by other children in the community. Learning English and the American culture was difficult. The other nationalities living here—English, Irish, Italian—ostracized the Volga German immigrants. And of course, information spread about World War I involving Germany and Russia from 1914 to 1918, did not help the perception of the new immigrants.

My grandparent's spoke both English and Volga German—especially when they were arguing or not wanting us to know the topic-- but would not teach it to their children, nor to us grandchildren. The years of World War I and World War II with German Nazi hatred and distrust of German immigrants or German speakers, silenced the passing of the language on. But their faith kept the family moving forward.

I always felt so fortunate to see Grandpa and Grandma every day. We moved to the family farm when they decided to slow down and relocate into town with my father and mother taking over the farm. Grandpa still came to the farm every day to help where he could and to milk his Guernsey cows. On Sundays, Grandpa arrived early so he wouldn't miss church. He faithfully listened to the Sunday Lutheran Hour on the barn radio, pausing to pray "The Lord's Prayer" with the radio congregation. When we kids helped milk on Sundays, we knew the expectations—stand up, bow your heads and fold your hands that were covered in milk to recite the sacred prayer.

Grandpa sold cream, milk and eggs to the townspeople. When animals were harvested, he made use of almost every part of the animal as he had learned from his Volga German parents. My brothers and I never did develop the taste for headcheese, nor kidney pie, nor pickled pig's or chicken's feet, nor liver, nor heart, nor brains, nor "sweetbreads" ... I cringed at curdling milk setting outside the milkhouse on a bench in the sun for days waiting to be made into cottage cheese. But we loved Grandpa's German sausages. Grandpa had cut a significant piece of a finger off using a meat saw making those sausages one year. He placed the finger section in a small jar then buried it under a black walnut tree in the orchard. He told us grandkids, "I want ALL of my body parts buried!" Of course, we watched the ceremony with wide-eyed interest.

Grandma would help raise and butcher 100 plus chickens every spring with my city- born mother. Grandma also raised a large garden every summer and canned thousands of jars of vegetables and fruits over the years. Her raspberry garden was the source of berries for my favorite "kuchen". She taught me how to make maul Dascha, rivvel kuchen, kartoffel und glace, grebble, and kraut burgers. Grandma never used a recipe nor a mixer. She had everything memorized, as her mother did, and mixed all ingredients by hand. When Grandma's arthritis progressed, her daughter bought her a hand-held mixer—which was never used. Grandma shunned microwaves also! Both grandparents were frugal and resourceful, but steadfast in their ways and stubborn toward some technologies.

My quest to know myself and my origins lead me to visit the "Motherland" – Russia-- in June 2019. I was guided to Beideck—my grandfather's homeland, from Saratov, seeking the graves of my family, only to be shocked by the reality the Russian army and Bolsheviks had destroyed nearly everything, including grave markers, linking Volga Germans to this land. The cemetery had a crude fence made of metal tractor wheels around it with a few Russian

Orthodox graves being the only ones marked. A small number of homes still exist, most painted white with the windows trimmed in blue. The church is in disrepair but is used as a small library and museum.

My heart was overflowing with the feeling of “being home” in Walter, my grandmother’s birthplace. The sun was bright. The wind was gentle on the expanse of the treeless land. Outlines of house foundations are still visible. I could imagine the bustle the townspeople experienced at its’ peak. The church my grandmother was baptized in is damaged and unused, but still stands. Two large wooden doors remained locked but bore a crack allowing me to look into the narthex; the alter was devoid of any Christian décor. The church interior was smaller than I expected given several thousand people lived in Walter at one point. I brought a piece of the church’s crumbling red brick home with me as a souvenir.

Behind the church and up a short, dirt road was the cemetery. Mounds covered with grass delineate where the unmarked graves of my ancestors lay. I sat beside the Medveditsa River at the town’s edge, imagining the people that had come here before to gather water or to swim, or to bathe, or to do laundry. A mill had existed along the river once. Today, hundreds of wasps drink from the muddy banks of the quiet river and dozens of frogs live in peace. It was a beautiful experience. I hated to leave Walter, knowing I would never visit again and that our ancestors cannot be located.

Most importantly during this journey, I learned the Russian people are kind, friendly, tolerant, helpful and living the best life they can just as we attempt now in the United States. They are not to be thought of as an enemy at this time in history. I no longer decry the fact that I am a grandchild of Russia, even if I honor the beliefs of my grandparents that we are “not Russian.” I am now proud to call myself a Volga German descendant from Russia.