

Memories of My Adopted GR Family

It was 1960 and Ken and I had not dated long before I asked the question, “Where did your folks come from in Germany?” His answer was surprising – “They came from Russia,” followed by “Catherine the Great took some Germans with her when she went to Russia, and then they came to America”. He added, “The folks don’t talk much about it.” Well, that made no sense to me! My background was German and I had never heard such a story!

Time went on and it was time to meet his family. I’ll always remember that day, since I was a bit nervous. We drove to Brush, Colorado for dinner at one of his sisters’ homes, and yes, all the family would be there except for one brother. We drove up to a small farm house outside town with lots of children playing outside. Being the youngest of seven, with a 19-year difference between he and his oldest sister, Ken had numerous nieces and nephews! Mama was short and stocky, with her hair drawn straight back into a bun on the back of her head. Later I would learn, she never cut her hair! She had a sparkle in her eye, and greeted me with a smile. Papa was a little taller and stocky, soft-spoken, and quietly watched the activity from his chair. One by one I met Ken’s siblings - four sisters and one brother, plus their families. How would I ever remember who went with who! But all were friendly and quickly engaged conversation with me.

The day proceeded with all the women bustling around in the kitchen cooking platters of food, with the men laughing and talking amongst themselves – sometimes in German and sometimes in English. Throughout the day, there was a great deal of eating, laughing, and telling stories. It was clear, this family enjoyed being together. Having come from a conservative, small, and quiet family, it was a very different environment for me.

We continued to make many trips to see the family, both before and after our marriage, and always it was the same - eating, laughing, stories, and genuine fun. I found myself eating kraut barouk, schnitz and rivol soups, kafilta, butter balls and homemade noodles, homemade rye bread, grebble, and a host of other foods unknown to me. In addition, I heard many stories of farm life – thinning sugar beets, butchering beef and pork, homemade laundry soap, metal hobble for milking cows, John Deere Tractors, the grain and bean harvest, crocks of

watermelons, jars of pickles, sauerkraut, beans, and jams, plus a hand pump for water at the kitchen sink!

It was clear these family members were hard-working, tenacious, fun-loving, God-fearing, and determined people - much like my folks who had a farming background but had since moved to the city. Yes, there was bickering and differences expressed, often spoken in German. Yet, everyone continued to show up at the next family event. Mama and Papa demonstrated “unconditional love” for their family, and that was evident when family differences were expressed.

As for Mama and Papa, I soon learned Mama was the spoke person for the couple as Papa rarely said a word to me, and usually spoke in German with Mama. During visits, Papa loved holding the babies and thoroughly enjoyed watching the toddlers play. It was amazing to watch Mama cook, always wearing her apron. She never used a measuring spoon or cup or written recipe card, and everything turned out to be delicious, especially her pies! The house was filled with her handwork – quilts and crocheted doilies, plus, the house was clean and neat with a well-tended flower garden. It seemed clear – Mama ruled the home and garden, but Papa had ruled the farm!

If our visit was on Sunday, Ken and I attended church with Mama, she in a dark blue dress and hat, with a circle pin on her shoulder, and Papa in suit, hat, and tie - both carrying their German Bible. Seating at church was different – men sat on the right side of the church and women on the left side. Deeply religious, they sang the hymns (both had good singing voices), and also attended the Wednesday *Brotherhood* meetings at church. Every meal started with bowed heads and speaking the prayer beginning “*Segne Vater, diese Speise*”. They never drank liquor, smoked, danced or played cards. Although their children enjoyed beer, dancing, and playing cards, it was a well-known fact – no one smoked in sight of “the folks”.

One day, I asked Mama a few questions about their story – names of their parents, when did they arrive in America, their marriage? Mama (from Kraft) answered for both she and Papa (from Beideck). I learned more that day than any other family member had known, since no one had ever asked the questions. The surprising facts were 1) they had buried three children, one being their first-born daughter who died shortly after birth, and 2) their marriage had been arranged! They were

introduced, spent that Sunday afternoon together, he left that evening on the train back to Lincoln for the week, he returned, and they were married the following Sunday in church! How I wish I would have asked more questions!

When Mama and Papa came to Denver to visit us, they would stay for a week. Early on, I wondered what they and I would do while Ken was at work. I soon learned Papa was content to sit in the rocking chair, hold the babies, watch them play, and read the newspaper. As for Mama, I made a pile of mending to be done and purchased pounds of flour and sugar. By the end of the week, all mending was done and there were loaves of bread and pies in the freezer! Plus, we had enjoyed German dishes all week!

Soon, we were attending weddings, and I was introduced to the Dutch-hop! It seemed no GR wedding could occur without a reception for guests, complete with platters of German Sausage, rivot kuga, rye bread, and grebble on the tables. Following food, the band played and all danced – some slow songs, some fast. But when the Dutch-Hop music started, everyone was on the floor – laughing and dancing till they dropped into their chairs! Now that was an experience to watch!

After Mama and Papa's passings, our trips to Brush continued until the last of the siblings passed away. The family traditions of good German food continued as all the sisters were wonderful cooks, as well as the one brother. The visits were the same – food, laughs, stories, and sharing memories.

We joined AHSGR some years ago, and through research have learned so much more about the GR history, and now have both the Pleve made Koehler and Weimer family charts. In addition, the many meetings and conventions we attended were filled with the similar laughs and festive feelings, plus, they were instrumental in understanding more of the GR travels and history.

I have so many fond memories of experiencing first-hand the unique foods, stories, and traditions of this family. Plus, our memorabilia wall contains the many cherished possessions reminiscent of this special life – Papa's Bible and songbook, Mama's circle pin and crocheted doilies, the sausage stuffer, Ken's miniature John Deere tractor collection, and a beet knife with a hook plus a short beet hoe.

I always knew when I married a man, I not only married the man, but I married his family, too! I was just fortunate to find myself married into the John J. and Marie (Weimer) Koehler family and their children, Lydia, Esther, Elsie, Jo, Harold, Ben, and Ken. Ken and I were married nearly 64 years before he died last year, and we enjoyed all the GR foods and traditions throughout that time.

Today, many grandchildren, nieces and nephews continue cooking some of the traditional foods, such as rival kuga, German sausage, butter balls, rye bread, and making noodles. Ken enjoyed cooking kafilta, rival kuga, kraut barouk, and grebble, and now, son Dan, has passed down those cooking skills to his family. With a grebble or kraut barouk in my hand, I can't help but remember all those fond memories and happy days with my adopted GR family members.

