

## Grandmother, Maria Katherine Haberman Zieg

Mary Katherine Zieg was my husband's paternal grandmother. I can remember meeting her on a few occasions toward the end of her life.

In looking back through time, I wish I could have conversed with her, and learned her life story. As it was, I only knew a few words in German, and she only knew a few words in English. In other words, what I am writing now is probably more fiction than fact. I may have dates and places correctly identified, but I can only guess as a parent and grandparent what her thoughts may have been throughout her adult life. For ease of reading, I have "Americanized" names in this story.

Mary was born in 1879 in Balzer, Russia to George and Anna Haberman. Balzer was the name of the first German mayor of this Volga German community. Mary was the fourth child of thirteen.



Mary is on far right with her parents and siblings

In later days over half of Mary's siblings would immigrate to Sutton, Nebraska, which was a thriving town filled with many German speaking immigrants. Mary married Henry Zieg when she was about nineteen years old. They were living in Balzer, Russia. They had their first child, Henry, about a year later. A second son, Alexander, was born two years later, and their third son, John, two years after that. A daughter, Maria, was born in 1906.

We don't know what Henry's occupation was when they lived in Russia. The family story is that they were bricklayers. It is safe to assume, without any more information, that they were busy parents with a large family.

The Germans who moved to Russia were finding a changed world about this time. Catherine the Great had promised German immigrants that they would not be conscripted into the Russian army, have no taxation, and they could maintain their own language and customs, but those promises were not being kept. As a result of this and many other broken agreements, the Germans in Volga Russia were immigrating to the United States in large numbers.

Travel was not easy in those days. There were no airplanes, and most travel was by train, boats, or horse drawn carts. Imagine traveling for a very long distance, over 2,000 miles, with four children under six years of age. To complicate things, Mary became pregnant with their fifth child. Leaving the home of their birth was not easy. The immigrants knew they would not see their friends and family again. Many immigrants couldn't ever share stories of their home in Russia or of the emigration to America because it was a very traumatic experience.

Our Zieg family sailed on the S. S. Campania, leaving Liverpool, England on 29 June 1907. We do not know how long they waited in Liverpool for their sailing date, but we have heard it was a time-consuming experience. Mary's younger brother, Alexander Haberman, traveled with our Zieg family. They traveled in steerage class, which meant cramped, overcrowded quarters in the bowels of the ship, typically damp, with vermin possibly there. The passengers ate unappetizing food. Illnesses occurred. The good news was that our family had a fairly quick passage, for they arrived in New York on 6 July 1907.

Ships docked in New York City. First and second class passengers completed the necessary immigration requirements while on the ship and didn't go to Ellis Island. Steerage class passengers, sometimes in great numbers, were ferried to Ellis Island. It must have been confusing. If you have ever traveled through an international airport when it is overly crowded, you may have a small idea about how the Zieg family felt. They had four small children, and often small children are not observant in following directions, and if the language wasn't German, the parents also had difficulty following directions.

Within the Ellis Island hall, the immigrants saw a huge staircase, appropriately called the Grand Staircase. As over 1000 people went very slowly up this staircase, there were doctors, located at the top, doing visual examinations of the people. The examination was known as "the sixty second physical". The doctors were looking for illnesses such as trachoma, among other diseases and illnesses. The immigrant who was identified as ill had a large X written on their clothing. The families who had such a person were grouped separately. Other immigrants were seated in the Great Hall to await a personal interview with a customs official. The immigrants needed to have some money, a sponsor, and a destination. Those who qualified went downstairs to make arrangements to go to their destination. Those who did not meet the requirements went through a different exit downstairs, called "the staircase of tears". Fortunately, less than two per cent had to do this. Steamship companies had to pay for the passenger to return to their original port. The steamship companies tried to make sure the passenger met the requirements before they left Europe.

Our family, we believe, were identified as medical risks as they climbed the staircase. The thought had to be devastating for the family. Ellis Island had a hospital, but it was very overcrowded, as were the facilities for the family members who were not hospitalized. Mary, young Henry, Alexander, and baby Maria were hospitalized. Father Henry and John were not. We don't know the diagnosis for the hospitalization, but we can imagine it was overwhelming. Sadly, little Maria died in the hospital on July 25, 1907 and young Henry died on July 30, 1907, around 3 weeks after they arrived in this country. We believe they were buried at Evergreen Cemetery in New York. Mother Mary and Alexander survived and at some unknown date were discharged from the hospital.

In less than six months, Mary left her family and all that she knew to travel on a long, long trip with her husband, four very young children, while she was pregnant. The family then, after an unknown wait at Liverpool, traveled in steerage to this country. I have wondered how many of the fellow passengers spoke German. It would have been nice if that happened. Then, after arriving in America, Mary and three children were hospitalized, separated from her husband, and the family then lost two children to death. We don't know if the family could bury their children with religious services, or even if they attended the burial. It took great strength for Mary and Henry to persevere.

Finally, our family was able to make arrangements to travel to Nebraska. They had \$25.00, and Mary's brother, Jacob Haberman, would be their sponsor in Sutton, Nebraska.



Left to right: Alex, Henry (white dress!) and John in Sutton

Railroad companies were encouraging new immigrants to settle in the Midwest. Germans from Russia wanted to be near family, if possible, and they wanted to be in a community where they could speak German, attend a church of their heritage, and have customs that they knew. So, our family left the sadness of Ellis Island and boarded the coal driven train that would take them, after many stops, over 1,500 miles to Sutton, Nebraska.

Henry worked on his brother-in-law's farm in Sutton. Their child, a son, who had travelled in utero across Europe, the Atlantic Ocean and half of the United States, was born in January 1908 in Sutton and he died one day later. Within approximately a year after leaving Russia, Henry and Mary lost three children. Joy came to the family when my husband's father, Henry, Jr., was born in Sutton on February 3, 1909. A daughter, Catherine was born in Sutton on August 20, 1911. Tragedy once again struck Mary and the family. When Catherine was almost two years old, she ate some matches. The matches had poisonous chemicals, and Catherine died June 29, 1913. A daughter, Elsie, was also born in Sutton on October 9, 1914. The family moved to Lincoln, Nebraska in 1916. They would live there for the rest of their lives.

Although Mary probably found comfort in her new home, it was not an easy life for her. She faced new challenges in culture and lifestyle. Within their home the Zieg family spoke German. When the children began attending school, they learned the English language. They attended a German Reformed church. There were family members as well as friends who lived in Lincoln but there were people who had never experienced German or Russian traditions or languages. We do not know how far Mary was from German Russian neighbors. We do not believe Mary learned much English, but Henry, seeking citizenship, did.

The United States entered the war against Germany in 1917. Although I don't know if our family was affected by the anti-German sentiment that occurred, I think that there could be uncomfortable moments for a German speaking person when interacting with people who only spoke English. Also, the Germans from Russia often dressed differently from their neighbors. They often wore long coats like one saw in Russia that were distinctive in style. The residents of Lincoln weren't always sure if these newcomers were Germans or Russians. The immigrants' native language was German, but they immigrated from Russia. As a result our families primarily lived in areas of Lincoln that are still identified by some as the Rooshin Bottoms.

In 1918, our country passed a law that all male residents of a certain age would need to register for a draft, with the possibility that military service against Germany could occur. Being a person of German heritage was isolating. Remember, one of the reasons the Germans from Russia immigrated, was that they feared conscription into the Russian army. Henry, at 39 years old, registered for the draft, even though the thought of going to war was terrifying.

When Mary and Henry first arrived in Sutton, Henry worked as a farm laborer to support his family. Many, if not most, of new immigrants also worked as laborers. Agricultural workers were needed. One of the crops raised throughout the middle west was sugar beets. Harvesting sugar beets required hand labor. The railroads ran "sugar beet specials ". Whole families would take trains to farms in Oklahoma, Colorado, Iowa and other states to harvest the beets. The task which involved the whole family has been called "stoop labor " because it required literally working close to the ground. The Zieg family went to Kanawha, Iowa to be beet workers. In September, 1918, Henry registered as required for the draft while the family lived and worked in Kanawha. After the harvest, the family returned to Lincoln.

During this time, I believe, being a mother was more difficult for. Mary. She probably had fewer family members who spoke her language and understood her history. To make matters more difficult, Mary was once again pregnant.

Henry and Mary's daughter, Elnora Frieda Zieg was born on January 20, 1919 in Lincoln, Nebraska. As stated earlier, the family lived in Lincoln for the rest of their lives. Their home was at 737 B Street in Lincoln. Mary, by this time, had fewer friends who shared her cultural background. Fortunately, their family church was less than a block away from their home. Most of the people in that church were Germans from Russia. Mary, hopefully, found common bonds and comfort there.

Henry continued working as a laborer, carpenter, and machine operator, much of his employment was with the Burlington Railroad. Henry began the educational process to become a citizen in 1919 and obtained citizenship in May, 1924. Henry died on December 30, 1952 of diabetes and heart disease.

Mary continued living in the family home for the rest of her life. Her brother Alexander lived near her. She died on November 29, 1952 of ovarian cancer.

I mentioned when I began this story that I only met Duane's grandmother a few times. My memory is that she was very quiet. Duane's parents understood and spoke German, but I don't remember hearing any conversations in German. Memories fade with time, however. In looking at the life journey that Duane's grandmother traveled, however. I feel a kinship with her.

When I was a young wife and mother, Duane, as a young Air Force officer, learned that we would be going to live for over three years in Okinawa, Japan. The thought of leaving my country and family was difficult. Mary left her home forever, but I recognized the feelings she had. Mary had a much larger family, and a much more difficult journey, but I recognized a similarity. We were blessed in Okinawa to have military families in our lives so we shared language and had common bonds with them. I had a very difficult time trying to understand Japanese. I understand Mary's reliance on speaking her native language of German. It is my thought that Mary lived in a more difficult world, but I am pretty sure that both of us had our share of loneliness. I wish I could have communicated more with Duane's grandmother Mary then, but I am pleased to share her story now.