



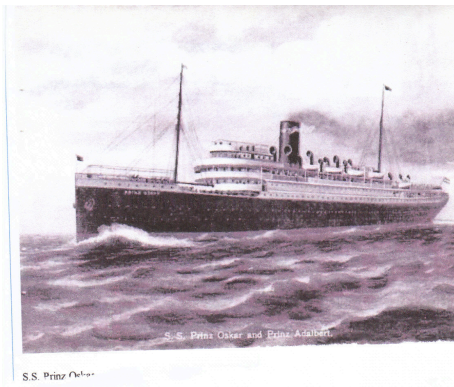
Amelia

My grandmother was born in Russia. I learned this in fourth grade when we studied family history. We were each tasked with asking our grandparents where they came from and then we wrote a short essay and presented it to the class. My father's family was proud of their Scottish/Welsh heritage and according to Grandma B. we had been here, (in the United States), since before the Revolutionary war. I would later learn more about this heritage but was more interested in when Grandma P. told me she was born in Russia. We are Russians! I declared to my classmates.

As a child, I didn't fully understand grandma's German ancestry and why she was born in Russia and not Germany. Those were not questions I thought to ask. Spending time with grandma was more of an experience in walking through her daily routine alongside her. The homemade rye bread we devoured like candy still warm from the oven, the frozen girl scout cookies available long past cookie season. The garden with rusted coffee cans protecting the delicate plants, the house plants on her window seal, watching her make her coffee with steamed milk, cappuccino. I think of her whenever I order one, savoring her memory as I slowly sip its deliciousness.

Amelia was born in Hussenbach, Russia. A village in the Volga River valley, which was occupied by people of German heritage, the Volga Deutsch. I didn't know this history until I was 50. Attending a family celebration of the 100-year anniversary of the family immigrating to the United States. They didn't teach this in school, and I don't recall any movies immortalizing the story of the Germans from Russia. The book recommended by my mother's cousin was out of print and cost me a premium to order through Amazon. I have loaned this book out, but sparingly and only to those I trust will return it to me. It's a sad story and I won't go into it here as there are other sources that provide a much better account of the plight of the Germans from Russia.

In 1912, grandma's family ended up in McCook, Nebraska. In the early 1900's, the political climate in Europe was volatile. Amelia's family was blessed with three daughters. Three beautiful and delightful daughters, Lizzie, Millie, and Katie. Her mother had given birth to two additional children, two boys of whom both died in infancy. This is important as in the agreement with Catherine the Great to the German settlers, land would be given to all male children so that families could pass down land to their sons in perpetuity. Having only daughters, regardless of how delightful they were, my great-grandfather, Henry, had no guarantee of keeping his land. Additionally, with the volatile situation, the German men were now required to serve in the Russian Army – a direct violation of Catherine's covenant.



Ameila's mother Katherine had a sister who had immigrated to the United States and found work and a home in McCook; following several former towns people from Russia to this place where jobs were plentiful. Writing about the employment opportunity, Henry and Katherine made the long journey from the Volga River valley. They first traveled by horse drawn cart to the train. Then from train to Hamburg, Germany where they booked passage and boarded a ship, the S.S. Prinz Oskar, to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Then another long train ride across the continental United States to McCook, Nebraska.

The very same day that Amelia and her family boarded the S.S. Prinz Oskar in Hamburg less than 100 miles away in Bremen, there were two young German boys saying goodbye to their parents and boarding the S.S. George Washington destined to Ellis Island, New York. These boys were travelling with friends and former neighbors, and the care of these two young men were greatly entrusted to this couple. Those boys were Gerhard and Johann. These were the two oldest children of Fred and Anna, and they were being sent to the United States to stay with Fred's brother John in Hallam, Nebraska. You see, Anna was fearful that her two boys would be conscripted into the German Army as they were then 14 and 12 respectively. The sooner they left the country, the better as far as Anna was concerned. The rest of the family would come later and join them in Hallam, but that could wait. There was an immediate need to protect her boys from a predestined fate by staying in Germany any longer. Not to spoil this story, but this family would eventually end up in McCook, and Johann would become Amelia's husband. My grandpa John.

The ship's journey lasted three weeks. Amelia's family was in the lower portion of the ship – steerage which according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary is, "... a section of inferior accommodation...". Amelia recalled that one night the steerage passengers held a dance in their quarters. Many had musical instruments and there was much merriment. The next day there was a terrible storm, and the ship was tossed about on the rough waves. The passengers lamented their partying believing they were being punished for their behavior. They vowed to be more prayerful for the remainder of the journey.

When they arrived in Philadelphia, there were several horse-drawn carts at the port waiting to take them to their next destination, or so they thought. The family climbed aboard one of these carts and gave the driver money. They were then taken on a tour of the fine city of Philadelphia. Ameila remembers seeing a large bell with a crack in it, (the Liberty Bell), as well as several buildings that she had no idea what they were or the significance of them as she didn't speak the language in which they were speaking. After the tour, they were deposited back at the shipyard. Frustrated and mad for being taken advantage of, Henry, along with likely the other dupped passengers, finally found a legitimate taxi that would take them to the train station. There they boarded a train for Chicago and transferred to a line that would take them to McCook. This wasn't the last time that Amelia would travel by train to Chicago, but that part of the story comes later, another chapter of Amelia's life...

Katherine's sister and brother-in-law met them at the station in McCook and took them the short distance to their home. "Russia Town" according to the 1890 census of Red Willow County as there were several of their countrymen, mostly friends and neighbors from Russia who had immigrated and settled in this area. Most had taken up jobs with the railroad, the CB&Q. The work was hard, but jobs were available.

McCook had become a haven for the German immigrants because of the vast opportunities. You see, up until 1882, this area was still considered a savage wilderness and only the brave dared to venture into the hunting grounds of the natives. That changed with the completion of the transcontinental railroad 80 miles north through North Platte and the desire to build rail lines for commerce in the southern part of the state. A more direct connection between Chicago and Denver and the site that would become McCook chosen for its central location between Denver and Omaha. Timing of this coincided with the unrest in Europe and the migration of the German people from both Germany as well as Russia. Traveling together, families and neighbors settled in this land of opportunity.



Soon after their arrival, Henry found work for the family in the sugar beet fields on a farm just east of McCook. He and Anna took on heavier labor, while the three girls pulled weeds with their small but nimble hands. They were given a place to stay, a sod house with a kitchen, living space, and at least one bedroom. At the end of the first season, Henry and Anna were not paid the money for their labor as they thought they should have been. Henry threatened to go back to Russia, however that would not happen as the family did not have the money. In hindsight, their housing was likely rented to them at a premium out of their hard-earned wages, another misunderstanding in this country.

That winter, Henry found work at the railyard to help get them by, but he did not care for the job or the work so the next summer, they worked for a different farmer outside of Haigler. They had become smarter and opted for a boxcar instead of a house. There were less conveniences, but at least they were out of the elements and protected at night. Anna had given birth over the winter and Katie, the youngest of the girls, stayed behind and cared for baby Johnny while the rest of the family worked in the fields. That summer, at just 10 years old, Amelia suffered heat stroke that had lingering effects throughout her life.

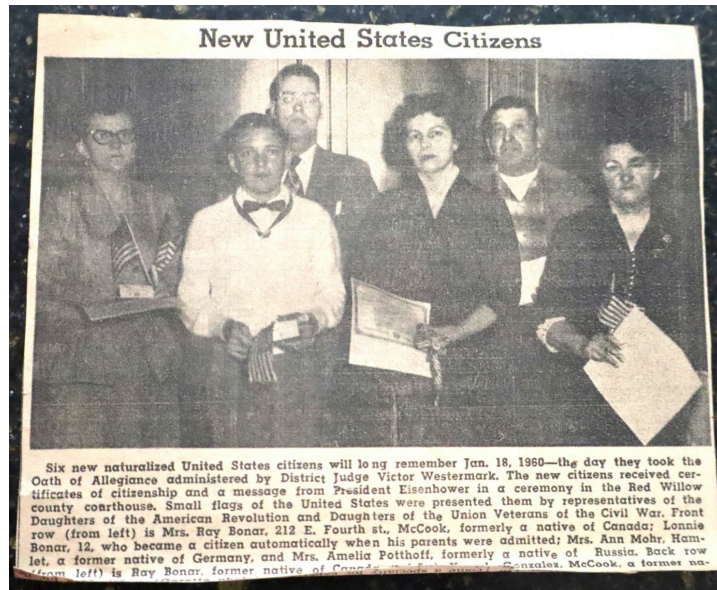


Front row, left to right: Kaufman, Freida Amen, Katie Bauer, Lottie Lebsack, Anna Lebsack, Pauline Geist, Pauline Bernhart.
 Second row, left to right: Robert Bernhart, Carl Lebsack, Elizabeth Schlager, Katherine Schlect, Lydia Geist, Fred Lebsack, Hattie Heck, Katherine Heck, Dorothy Geist, John Walter, George Walter, George Rommel, Dave Schneider, Connie Hamburg, Phillip Schneider, Henry Schlager, Gottlieb Hein, Reinold Beard, John Washenfelder, Chris Schlect.
 Third row, left to right: Millie Herman, May Schlect, Marie hein, Marie Kaufman, Katie Fries, Amelia Fries, Elizabeth Herman, Mollie Propp, Pauline Felker, Elizabeth Propp Katie Lebsack Katie Schilreff, Millie Wickman, Mollie Kaufman.
 Fourth row, left to right: Elizabeth Hamburg, Marie Lebsack, Katherine Bauer, Katie Geist, Pauline Kaufman, Pauline Saurbrie, Elizabeth Fries, Teacher, Dave Washenfelder, Emanuel Felker, Jake Bauer, George Geist, Mollie Rummel.
 Fifth row, left to right: Arthur Felker, John Herman, Henry Propp.

In the fall and winter months, the girls all attended the Evangelical Lutheran Missionary School associated with the church of the same name. It provided both religious and school lessons in the German language. This church is now known as Peace Lutheran. With World War I, the German language was banned from being used in school instruction. Many of those children didn't teach their native language to their children and so the generation that followed had lost a connection to their history. As adults, some of the older of these students created a weekend celebration, "German Heritage Days", honoring their heritage so that younger generations might not forget.



As soon as she was able, Amelia took jobs as a “hired girl”. Many of the German immigrants did as they were valued for their ability to keep a house, look after children, and prepare a hearty meal. This was the only career path available to her at the time and the local elite employed one if not more in their households. Amelia worked for the Kelley family for many years. I still have the cut glass service ware that Mrs. Kelley gave her when she left for Chicago to get married. My sister and I now live in homes where grandma would have been employed. She likely spent time in both of our homes either helping the on-staff girl or in my case, visiting the German speaking female doctor who tended to the medical needs of the hired girls. As I write this, I’m sitting in my kitchen where Amelia surely had been. I hold her memory with me as I wear her wedding band; it never leaves my ring finger. Her artwork from Chicago is on the wall and the glass doored cabinets show off her delicate tatted lace shelf scarves.



Amelia became a citizen of the United States on January 18, 1960. My father was the one who took her to the ceremony as he had helped both her and my grandfather complete the paperwork to become citizens. She received her citizenship along with others at a hearing in the courthouse in McCook. Their picture was printed in the newspaper, and each person was given a small flag and booklet with facts about the flag by the local chapter of Daughters of the American Revolution. She was always proud of that day, becoming a U.S. citizen, and the flag and booklet were on display on the buffet in her dining room.

Things were never easy for Amelia; life had dealt her a challenging hand. She raised her family and her children and grandchildren and now the great, great-great, and great-great-great grandchildren enjoy an easier life than I'm sure she could have even imagined. Not such a terrible legacy for a girl born in the small village of Hussenbach, Russia.

