My Volga German Quilt

by Julie Holovach

I, as an American-born citizen, have fibers of immigrants running through my veins, red with stripes of white and tiny stars appliquéd on a blue background. The patchwork quilt of my family has threads that trace to the early settlers in Plymouth Colony and to those fleeing tyranny along the Volga at the turn of the 20th century. My predecessors lived, worked, and some died for this country. Both families struggled, dreamed, prayed, and ultimately brought me to a point in my life where I understand the importance of their unique patterns. My experiences in these two worlds prompted me to piece together my own sampler, with blocks and stitches tracing my grandmother's Volga German quilt. Each block represents something, perhaps profound or an insignificant act of kindness.

I began my coverlet while I listened to my grandmother describe her life in Russia, the Old Country, and watched my mother meticulously scribble down her words. My quilt feels random but is really intricately designed. My grandmother contributed various patchwork patterns, simple and humble, yet powerfully created.

Grandma, Katie Ringler Roh, and her ancestors lived in the Russian villages of Kutter or Straub, moved to Nue Straub, and finally to Katharinental. Marie Cathrine Ringler (Katie) was born in 1898 to parents Sophie Heinz Ringler and Heinrich Ringler, the oldest of five children.

Great-Grandma Sophie was reported as sweet and kind, if perhaps a bit gullible. She had married Henry even though her family was socially and financially superior. A person could question her decision, but she must have seen some charm in him at the

beginning, as he certainly was not the most eligible bachelor in the village. One could wonder if he was handsome in his younger days. She admitted there were few men around to choose from. He could be described as a flaw in the design, but God had a plan, and he was somehow included in that plan.

Henry Ringler was the product of an alcoholic family. He was proven to be made of harsh and scratchy material, perhaps burlap, only to be used as batting, with nothing touching the skin. An important design material, but not one to be presented to all admirers. He and my grandmother had a complicated relationship. I don't know the circumstances surrounding his use of her nickname, the Red-Headed Devil, but my imagination has all kinds of theories. What he gave her was determination and the independence to see possibilities and not succumb to negativity. It steered her life in an innovative direction.

Great-Grandpa Ringler's drinking had become a problem, causing embarrassment with his slovenly behavior. Grandma earned the title her father gave her. The Red-Headed Devil had a mind of her own and could verbalize her thoughts. She wore her heart on her shirtsleeve, sending a very ominous stare when she was upset, usually focused on her father. Grandma knew right from wrong, and he was often on the wrong side of things. His block is the Drunkard's Path, made from shades of red and black spiraling together. He was German, I am sure of that, but he did not behave like the rest of the community. Germans were noted as being hard workers. Not Henry. He did just enough to keep a roof over the family's heads, food on the table, and drink for his cup.

Katharinental was located in southern Russia on the east side of the Volga River, the meadow side, flat with few trees. Homes were constructed of bricks made from processed sod, mud, and straw. Bricks were two feet by ten inches, making effective insulation for the savage winters and scalding summer heat. Lumber was sent down the Volga for use only in their most precious projects, churches and schools, keeping their German roots intact through architecture and design.

The Ringler home had one room with a straw roof. A long, narrow brick stove with a steel door ruled one end of the home, with a kettle that reigned atop it like a massive, steaming crown. A fire built in the front of the stove was used to heat the bricks.

Heating for the winter was a never-ending battle. These industrious people found a way to use everything, including manure! The animals were put in a corral by the house. Manure was piled up until spring and early summer, when it was spread across the ground about a foot thick. Water was added, and the animals tramped it down until it was packed hard. It dried during the hot summer days. In the fall, it was cut into bricks and stored near the house. Those bricks were burned for heat and, unfortunately, to bake the bread and cook. She described her mother using a shovel-like paddle to scrape, clean, and bake the bread right on the hot bricks at the front of the stove. Ten rye loaves a day was the average. Once in a while, they had white bread, usually on holidays like Christmas and Easter, and she admitted that the thing she missed most about the Old Country was a steaming loaf of her grandmother’s rye bread.

My grandmother, not one of the long-forgotten grandmothers, used cow pies as fuel. I guess I'm showing my Americanized sensibilities, for it's better to be warm and have hot food to eat than worry about the source of heat.

In the late spring, families moved out to the fields and lived in tents or dugouts, working the crops and tending the animals. I imagine the vast grass rippling like waves and wonder if they enjoyed living next to nature. The background fabric on each block contained meaning: some of amber, like the ripe wheat; dark, like the night sky with stars glimmering like ripples on the water at dawn; or hues of brilliant green, like the vegetable garden.

Great-Grandpa Ringler had two horses and one steel plow he used as soon as the ground was thawed. They planted the seeds, weeded, and harvested manually. During the harvest, they used a scythe, cutting the stalks of rye or wheat, tying them into bundles, and stacking them until they could be threshed, winnowed, and processed at the mill into flour for bread.

Each home had a garden with cabbage, onions, cucumbers, carrots, beets, beans, peas, sugar beets, tomatoes, pumpkins, and watermelon. There were orchards where they could pick apples, pears, and cherries. In the meadows and fields, they could find wild strawberries. Meat was butchered in November and smoked to preserve it. German sausage was a staple in the diet, which was and is a favorite of mine. My Christmas block includes a scarlet flame like Grandpa's recipe; a person could breathe fire after only one bite.

They had chickens for eggs and meat, eaten with noodles. Soups, stews, belina (a type of crepe), bierock (a bread stuffed with cabbage, onions, and ground meat), and bread were typically eaten. Dishes were modified from the German menu to include items introduced by the early Russians and the demands the new environment placed on their growing conditions.

Children had one pair of shoes a year. They would get them in the fall for the walk to and from school and church. When they wore out or were too small, they had to go barefoot. Many days, their feet were bloody until they got calloused.

Grandma's family practiced the Lutheran faith. She went to a German school under the direction of the church. Classes ran from the end of the harvest until they went back to the fields in the spring for ages nine to sixteen. Boys and girls went to school together and studied German reading, writing, math, and religion. They sang old hymns and memorized Bible verses. Grandma, like most of the children, never learned any Russian.

Life was not always unadorned. Christmas was exciting. One Christmas tree stood in the village square. Each family could not have a tree of their own; trees were valuable and not wasted on frivolous matters. It was embellished and bedecked with bits and pieces from each member of the village, perhaps a scrap of ribbon, a pretty feather, or something more elaborate they had created.

A program in the schoolhouse brought the entire village together for a celebration on Christmas Eve. The schoolteacher performed the duties of a part-time pastor and was responsible for the event. He taught the children carols and portions of the

Christmas story, including memorizing the Bible verses. They proudly stood in the front of the schoolroom and gave their best performances. Parents listened with pride and smiled as the schoolchildren sang the beloved hymns, proclaiming the wondrous news of our Savior's birth. Cookies in the shapes of animals and stars were provided as a reward for all their hard work. Villagers returned to the schoolhouse for a special church service on Christmas morning, with the pastor coming from a neighboring village to preach and present Holy Communion. Grandma said that on this magical day, even her father couldn't dampen her enthusiasm.

The community had special visitors, much like Santa, on Christmas Eve. Christkind was represented by a small woman from the village. She would dress in a white gown and veil and bring each well-behaved child, usually the girls, a cookie, putting it in a shoe with perhaps a star or other homemade treat. They were excited to see her come, but first, there was a visit from Belznickel to endure. He came to individual houses to pass judgment on the behavior of each child. He was loud and rough-looking, rapping at the windows and doors and announcing his arrival. He spanked the bad boys with a switch and warned them to be good in the New Year. One of the grouchy men from the village usually took this job. He would dress in a pelt or fur coat to scare the children into obedience. Grandma expressed concern about whether there were a few times when the actor seemed to enjoy his part, but I wonder if Grandma's mother saw that she had a treat or if her father saw to a spanking.

The Germans maintained their German culture and had set to work establishing villages, planting crops, building churches, and establishing schools. The stalwart colonists found the Russians unproductive; you could tell the difference between

villages. The Germans were neat and tidy; the Russians were haphazard and slovenly. Marxism and socialism, and eventually communism, took hold in Russian hearts. The Russians were jealous of Germans who were not fond of the Russians. The Emperor was under pressure from a rebel group that wanted to follow Marxist ideas. His desire to continue with a social system leaning toward feudalism and imperial control impacted the relationships between the two groups.

The German colonists heard tales of a new country, America, that offered an interesting new kind of life. It was said that the streets were paved in gold. It must have sounded too good to be true, but I can hear the whisper: “Let’s give it a go!!!”

Grandma’s quilt took on an unexpected transformation. It changed from all German to shades of red, white, and blue. The final creation became an heirloom, a patchwork design pieced together by hand until she earned enough money doing laundry or cleaning for the upper crust to purchase a treadle sewing machine of her own. I remember watching her sit at the quilting frame, using the tiniest stitches to connect the backing, the batting, and the artful top. I can grab a quilt from the linen closet and tell you if it was one of her creations. The workmanship is outstanding; I see her pride and attention to detail in each stitch. Scrap cloth pieced together made the loveliest finished piece, even if the batting was once rough, scratchy, and difficult to put a needle through. No creative project is perfect, but there is value and loveliness in the complexities of its final outcome.