Flucht aus Russland

(Escape from Russia)

Daniel L Boxberger

All four of my grandparents were Germans from Russia. My father, Ruben Boxberger, was born in Fort Collins, Colorado, in 1918. My mother, Helen (neé Schneider) Boxberger, was born in Melbeta, Nebraska in 1923. My parents moved to Vancouver, Washington in 1948, where I was born in 1950. I never knew my paternal grandparents, they both died over a decade before I was born. However I do know a good deal about them from stories I heard growing up. My father and all of his siblings were great storytellers.

Summer vacations in the 1950s and 1960s were spent traveling to Colorado and Nebraska to visit relatives. Invariably every visit involved talking about the "old days" of farming and celebrating our heritage; we ate German Russian food like blina and kraut birock. We went to Dutch hops and we had family reunion picnics where there would always be fresh garden produce, watermelon pickles, homemade Wurst, and Schwarzenbeere Kuchen. Since all of my parents' siblings married Germans from Russia we heard stories of where our families emigrated from. Throughout these stories it was drilled into our heads that even though our grandparents emigrated from Russia, we were Germans – **NOT RUSSIANS!** This was during the Cold War and the height of Russian xenophobia. Later in life I learned that much of that distaste of anything Russian had deeper roots then the *Red Scare* of the 1950s.

My paternal grandparents were both born in Ährenfeld, southeast of Saratov, just three months apart. Johannes Boxberger was born on July 7, 1882, and Eva Katharina Bender was born on October 7, 1882. They were baptized in the village of Friedenfeld eight *versts* away (5.3 miles), Dad had copies of their Taufscheins (baptismal certificates).

Johannes and Eva were married in 1902 and Dad's oldest brother Uncle John was born in 1903. Grandfather John was a farmer and Grandmother Eva was the daughter of a miller.

Dad always said that Grandmother Eva was not happy in America. She was from a well-to-do family in Ährenfeld and she missed her relatives in the old country. She refused to speak English, but you couldn't assume that she didn't understand it. Dad said you didn't dare say anything in English if you didn't want her to know what you were saying. I always wondered if her fondness of Russia continued after the atrocities committed after the First Russian Revolution of 1905-1907.

We have copies of some of the letters my grandparents received from Ährenfeld between 1913 and 1927. These letters tell of the misery our relatives suffered during the Bolshevik Revolutions. The letters talk about how the soldiers would come and take their food and their money. It was common in Communist Revolutions to target wealthy members of a community because they were capitalists and had to be punished. Uncle Sam told me that the Bolsheviks arrested Great-Grandfather Georg Bender because he owned a flour mill. He was locked in a silo in the middle of winter and froze to death. Dad remembered that whenever his mother received a letter from Ährenfeld she would stay up all night crying. There was also a story, that I did not hear until later in life, that my grandmother was assaulted by Russian soldiers.

When Tsarina Catherina extended the invitation to Germans to immigrate to Russia in 1763 they were promised free land, the right to their own language, religion and culture, and exemption from the military. The military exemption was revoked by her great-grandson Tsar Nicholas II in 1874. Grandfather Johannes was part of that first generation who was conscripted. Every five years all Russian villages were required to furnish a quota of

recruits for a term of service of five to seven years. Grandfather was conscripted into the Russian cavalry in 1905. In the Russian military abusive treatment of recruits was commonplace, especially of Russian minorities. Because he was fluent in German and Russian he was sent to the Russian-occupied Poland, less than four miles from the border with the Kingdom of Prussia. The Kingdom of Poland was revolting against Russian domination and Prussia was constantly pushing at the boundaries with Poland. Poland was torn between two competing world powers for control of their territory.

Every cavalryman was assigned their personal horse and issued a sabre and sidearm. I have a wonderful photograph of Grandfather Johannes in uniform posing with his sabre, the principle weapon of a cavalryman. Every cavalry soldier was responsible for the care and feeding of their horse, cavalrymen were fond of their steed because their lives depended upon their horse being well trained and responsive in the heat of hand-to-hand combat.

Day to day life was mostly routine, in the morning tending to the horses, then muster for inspection and assignments. Most days assignments involved patrols along the Prussian border. Some days soldiers would patrol through the local villages to maintain peace and look for signs of insurgent activity. It was relatively peaceful in this part of Poland, most of the armed resistance was further east.

Johannes resented the fact that the promise of Catherine the Great had been rescinded and he was forced to serve in the military. He resented the treatment he received as a cavalryman who was not of Russian descent. So he plotted his escape. He knew the penalty for desertion was death but he could no longer bear being away from his wife and child back in Ährenfeld. He and Grandma Eva hatched a plan to meet in America where they both had kin. In the summer of 1907 this is what happened.

The cavalry command post near the border with Prussia had nearly 200 soldiers and even more horses. One night in June 1907 during a new moon Grandfather was on guard duty. He snuck his saddle and sabre out of the barracks and when the other guards on patrol were as far away as possible he found his horse, saddled up and quietly led it out of the *zagon* (corral). He knew that it would only be a few minutes before it was noticed that he was gone, so he wasted no time leading his horse far enough away to where they would no longer be heard, then he mounted and began to gallop as fast as they could to the border. Having done dozens of patrols in the local countryside he knew the route he must take, even in the dark of night his horse knew the route well and soon they were galloping full speed away from the garrison. It was not long before it was discovered that he was missing and *borzoi* (Russian wolfhounds) were released in pursuit. Borzoi were bred for speed, the ability to follow a trail, and to be deadly to their prey. The hounds soon caught up to him and were nipping at his heals and his horse's flanks. He drew his sabre and began slashing right then left, right then left, eventually slaying them. Sometimes the story would include the added telling of Johannes looking back and seeing a borzoi lying on the ground with just stubs for legs. Knowing that the soldiers in pursuit would not be far behind and would soon discover the bodies of the borzoi he chose an alternate route that would take him to a stream where he could proceed the rest of the distance to the border. This area of the border was well guarded but he knew where the patrols would be at this time of night. He did not know how far the soldiers would dare to pursue him into Prussian territory, so he continued to flee at full speed until the break of daylight. A Russian soldier would not be well received in Prussia and so he avoided Prussian patrols until he found a remote farm where he bargained with the farmer for clothes. He shed his uniform and soon he was on his way to the nearest railroad station another few miles away. Here he was able to sell his horse and purchase a train ticket to Bremen. At Bremen he sent a cable to his brother in Oklahoma. His brother wired money for his ticket and soon he was on his way. Johannes boarded the S.S. Hanover on July 11, 1907 and he arrived in Galveston TX on August 6. His brother Jakob was settled in Mountain Park, OK and was his sponsor, so that was where he went to wait for Eva and John.

Grandmother Eva and Uncle John left Ährenfeld three months later. Eva's "escape" from Russia was not nearly as dramatic. She secured a passport and left Russia on October 1, 1907 arriving in Baltimore on November 2. In Baltimore she boarded a train for Hoisington, KS where she had relatives. Soon Johannes would join them and they would be reunited.

My grandparents lived with the Bender families in Hoisington for the next few years. Grandfather John worked as a laborer on the railroad. My Uncle Henry was born in Hoisington in 1911. The next year my grandparents learned of an opportunity to work their own farm in Fort Collins, CO and so they moved in 1912 and began farming near Waverly, CO; Uncle Sam was born there in 1913, Uncle Vic in 1916, my father in 1918, and Aunt Frieda in 1919. A few years later they moved to the Buckeye ranch eighteen miles north of Fort Collins. My father and his siblings described life on the Buckeye as idyllic. Each of the kids had their own horse and they would spend many days riding through the countryside. Grandfather's skills as a cavalryman came into play when my father's horse broke a leg. Rather than euthanizing it Grandfather rigged a sling in the barn, set the bone and put it in a cast. My Dad always said that when his horse Peanut recovered he was good as new.

They farmed with horses the first few years but in 1922 they started to get mechanized. Grandfather John decided to buy a new car and so he and his friend Jacob Schneider went into town to pick it up. While in town they had a little too much to drink and Grandfather drove off the road and rolled the car over. They were both thrown on the ground and the first thing Jacob said was "Wo ist meine Pfeife?" (where's my pipe?). He was more worried about his pipe then whether they were hurt or not. They walked the rest of the way home and got Uncle John to go back with a team of horses and pull the car back on its wheels. After that Grandfather never drove again. Although they had tractors he continued farming with horses until the day he died.

Grandfather John died of a stroke in November 1938, he was just 56 years old. In August 1940 Grandmother Eva was in a car accident and suffered a broken neck, she died a few days later, at just 58 years old. Thus ended the first generation of our line, the Colorado Boxberger's. I always think about the hardship and suffering they endured in their escape from Russia and the building of a new life in America. My cousins and I have them to thank for the lives we have, free from oppression and rife with opportunity. I wish I knew more about the rich culture they and other Volga Germans brought to America, but I am thankful for what we do have and that I am able to continue to celebrate that heritage with my children and grandchildren.

1948 words

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