

Erika's Diary: A Personal History of Flight and Safety

by Dr. Patricia (Trish) Spindel

Introduction: (by Mervin Weiss)

Erika Arlt was born in 1927 in the western border region of Czechoslovakia known then as Sudetenland. Czechoslovakia was a “new” country created after World War I when the former Austria-Hungarian Empire disintegrated. The Allied powers decided that the former Duchy of Bohemia, populated mainly by ethnic Germans, should be incorporated into the Czechoslovak Republic, forming its western border with Germany (Treaty of Versailles). The term “Sudetenland” then came into usage to refer to those border regions of Czechoslovakia containing mainly native German speakers, (about 3.1 million). The term derives from the Sudeten Mountains running along the northern Czech border.

When Adolf Hitler's territorial ambitions became obvious after 1936, many Sudeten Germans supported the German Chancellor and wanted him to take control of the Sudetenland. However, many Sudeten Germans also opposed what was by 1938 very obvious, (Anschluss of Austria in March 1938), especially members of the former Social Democratic Party, (effectively banned by Hitler in 1933.) The Czech authorities were also understandably opposed to Germany annexing Sudetenland. But neither were they sympathetic to the socialist Sudeten Germans. Violent demonstrations began, and not just in Sudetenland.

Erika's father, Joseph Arlt, was a known and vocal Social Democrat. He began writing to Britain's Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain about his fears that Germany would invade the Sudetenland territory. Nevertheless, Europe's leading nations met in September 1938 and agreed that Germany could occupy the Sudetenland territory. The pact became known as the Munich Agreement, with Neville Chamberlain proclaiming “Peace in our Time”. Sudetenland Germans opposed to Nazi rule had no choice but to flee. Extensive international cooperation saved them from the Nazi concentration camps. These German tradesmen, teachers, journalists and intellectuals abandoned their urban existence and began their lives anew as settler-farmers in the northwestern Saskatchewan communities around St. Walburg, Loon Lake and Goodsoil. About 300 Sudeten refugee families were resettled in Saskatchewan and British Columbia. Surnames included Kaschte, Sedlacek, Schmoker, Wagner, Wolnick, Arlt, Leiter, Kotnick, Schoen and Lerch. The story of the Sudetenland Germans is much broader of course, and more can be learned from Rita Schilling's book, *Sudetens in Saskatchewan*, as well as in Andrew Amstatter's book, *Tomslake: History of the Sudeten Germans in Canada*.

Erika's diary gives the reader an inside look at the turmoils which lead to her family's flight from Europe and at the challenges of an unfamiliar agricultural way of life in Saskatchewan. Rather than publish the diary verbatim, Erika's daughter, Dr. Patricia Spindel, has chosen here to summarize the contents as a third person narrative.

End of Introduction

Erika's Diary:

Recently I found my mother Erika's diary. It was written in 1945 when she was 18 years old, but it describes her life in 1939 at age 11 which is when, as she put it, her childhood ended. She was born Austrian in Bodenbach, a town in what became known later as the Sudetenland, part of Czechoslovakia. It was annexed by Germany in 1939. Her father, a Bürgermeister (senior official) on the railroad, was a Social Democrat, which made him a target, especially in light of his support of the resistance against Nazi Germany.

She describes trouble starting in her town and her being forced to grow up in a hurry. She says "so did a lot of other children thanks to Hitler and his followers [who] taught me the meaning of war." She describes street fights and people getting killed and her parents believing it better for her and her mother to move to a safer section of the country, especially since the invasion of the Sudetenland by Nazi Germany had begun. She describes a hurried exit from her beloved town and a "quick but hard goodbye with my father. It was the first time in my life that I had to leave a member of our family and home. That made things worse. Of course I was old enough to understand that my father was staying behind to fight and defend our home. I also realized that I might never see him again." It was something she dared not think about - that and never seeing her much loved grandmother again. She wrote of their leaving, "there are always hopes and I think that's what kept us going."

Three hours later they arrived in Prague which was overcrowded with refugees, so they went on to Kralovice which was a very poor town. Three weeks later her father had been transferred to Prague so they went back, but he was transferred again to Kralupy, which was dirty, overcrowded and where it was hard to find accommodation. They found a dirty room on the third floor of a building with a leaky roof and lived on bread and black coffee. She describes the Czechs as not believing the Germans would invade, and because they regarded all Germans as the same, they suggested that she and her parents go back to the Sudetenland, not realizing it would mean their imprisonment or death.

After a hard discussion it was decided that she and her mother would go back but her father would stay. They believed that Hitler would not hurt the women, but the Gestapo soon found out they were back and interrogated her and her mother separately, looking for information about the whereabouts of her father. They were going to hold them hostage until he was forced to come home so my mother lied and told them she would write to him and he would come home into their hands.

That bought enough time for them to escape back to Kralovice again with the help of her uncle who had been forced into the German army, but was later shot by the Gestapo for having helped them to escape. She described not being able to trust even old friends and neighbors

because Hitler's dictatorship had scared them so much they were afraid to talk to their own relatives and close friends.

They decided to go on to Svetla to reunite with her sister and her fiancé. There they were cooped up in a refugee camp with a couple of hundred others waiting more than three months to leave. She describes living in a castle with big rooms but 20-30 people living in each room seeing things a 12 year old should not see. She also describes being isolated and stared at in the school she attended because she could not speak Czech. And she was targeted by what she described as "young wolves" who seemed intent on sexually assaulting her, but she fought them off.

One day after coming home from school she found her parents with their bags packed. They were heading back to Prague which was now rife with street fights and the Nazi spies were stabbing police officers. She said the English would not help, being unprepared for war, whereas Germany had been preparing for four years. The Russians did not want to take on the Germans at that point either so they had to flee.

Her description of leaving Prague for the last time was poignant:

"we made it and the train pulled out at 11:10 PM. I'll never forget that last look at the station and clock. I wanted to remember the exact date, March 15, 1939 and time when leaving my fatherland. I realized then that I would probably never see it again."

This was the exact date that the first German panzer divisions crossed into Czechoslovakia.

She describes the train as being overcrowded and them having to stand up. As it pulled into Moravia-Ostrawa, they found it had already been invaded by the Germans. An Englishman saved them all when he said the train was full of Jews, because he knew the Germans wanted to be rid of them. The Germans did not search it and the train went on to Poland and then the Baltic Sea where the family boarded what she described as a boat that looked too small for an ocean passage. It was a rough seven day passage and she was sure the boat would capsize during a storm. All aboard were afraid.

The boat arrived in London and then the refugees went on to Scotland to a Holiday Camp just outside of Queensferry, where she described being treated very well. She said that country and its people were simply wonderful. She couldn't praise them enough for making her and her family feel so welcome and well taken care of.

When it was time to leave, no one really wanted them to go – neither the Scottish people nor their guests. She describes almost the whole village escorting them to the boat – the Andania II.

She very much enjoyed the sea voyage and being a young girl became friends with some of the young sailors. After an uneventful trans-Atlantic crossing that only featured a storm right in the middle of the Atlantic for a day and a half, the weary travellers arrived in Montreal where they did not stay long before getting on a train.

After travelling for a long time and seeing nothing but wheat fields my mother began to get a bit worried, and missed the mountains of her homeland. At Saskatoon they got a royal welcome but she was too weary to enjoy it although she described the Mayor's speech as being very nice. He reassured them that it would be peaceful in their new homes and that they would not have to worry about the Gestapo getting them out of bed in the middle of the night anymore. She said that appealed to her very much because she was so sick of it all, and that all she could dream of was peace.

The rest of the trip from Saskatoon was more interesting – more trees and hills and she describes arriving in St. Walburg – a town without electricity or trains. She says they all lived in granaries for a while before getting their farms. That meant seven families having to live and work together. Because they had all been city dwellers they had no idea about farming, but settled on the Tomlinson Ranch. They had a house with only 2 rooms for 2 families with skunks and rats in the basement. They never went down there.

She describes the area as very quiet with little entertainment except what they created themselves and a lot of hard work. She kept to herself, enjoying her dog and cats and says there were lots of disagreements in the early days. She generally avoided these but got into a couple of tussles herself on behalf of animals she felt were being mistreated, and prided herself on her ability to milk cows.

The family finally built a new home in an even quieter location than the Tomlinson Ranch where she could enjoy the horses and cows. She had to go to a new school that was in an ordinary house and had grades from one to twelve in one room. Because her English was not good she describes the other kids staring at her. Until she got better acquainted with their neighbors she felt lonely and cried every day. Having new friends meant she started going to parties and square dances and learned how to ride horses and round up cattle. It also helped her to learn English and she became special friends with a young man who was a trapper and taught her a lot about nature.

Leaving Saskatchewan was one of the hardest things she ever did, but her parents decided to move to Vancouver. She had to say goodbye to her beloved animals and she recalls crying and crying about that. The saddest thing was her horse neighing a good-bye as he was being led away.

As a grown woman my mother often recounted very fond memories of Saskatchewan and living on the farm with her animals. She had a fondness for nature and gardening all her life and that was a special gift that Saskatchewan bestowed on her.

Life was not easy for the Sudeten Germans who arrived at St. Walburg, but all worked hard and became prosperous. They were thankful that they had not perished in Europe and were able to build their new lives in Canada.

There had been two groups of Sudeten Germans sent to Canada – one to St. Walburg and the other to Tupper Creek, British Columbia. Approximately 300 Sudeten families settled in these two areas as a result of international agreements to save them from Nazi concentration camps. They had been a minority in Czechoslovakia – a result of treaty agreements after World War 1. Those who fled were members of the German Social Democratic Party, so found themselves in opposition to both the Nazis and the Czechs. After the Sudetenland was ceded to Hitler in 1938 life became very dangerous for the Social Democratic Sudeten Germans.

My mother's account tells the personal story of what life was like for an eleven year old girl having to flee for her life with only a suitcase, leaving behind all that she had known. Throughout her entire life she felt grateful to Canada for granting her and her family asylum. She went on to contribute to Canada by becoming a hospital board member, working all her life and raising a family, belonging to various peace groups, and even running for public office.

My own deep love for Canada is a direct result of the struggles I know my forbearers had. Especially during a pandemic, my thoughts return to what they had to endure and I feel grateful to live in Canada. My mother's diary, on which this is based, is both a cautionary tale about how quickly someone's life can change, and a testament to the human spirit, which, it seems, is capable of rising irrespective of circumstances.

Especially during trying times like this, it is sometimes helpful to recognize the struggles of our ancestors to maintain our perspective.

____by Dr. Patricia (Trish) Spindel_____

(map and photos next page)



Map showing former Sudetenland



Group photo on the ship Andania, including Erika and her parents



Erika and parents, St. Walburg



Author with mother and grandmother. Toronto