

My Father's Immigration Story

by Arlene Fedorchuk

My father, Karl Friedrich Seemann, was born on August 12, 1930, in Großsoltholz, Germany to Carl and Helene (nee Jordt) Seemann. Schleswig-Holstein is a quaint, pastoral area in northern Germany that has coastlines on both the Baltic and North Seas. Most of the land is used for agricultural purposes and it's one of the regions where Holstein cattle originated. Karl's father, Carl, was born December 11, 1904, in Obdrup, Germany. His mother, Helene, was born on November 11, 1911, in Großsoltholz. My grandparents eventually settled in the village of Sörup where they worked diligently to provide for their family. Carl was a *Müllermeister* (master miller), and Helene worked in Bakery Lensch in Sörup until she was well into her 70s. Carl and Helene had six children, with my father, Karl, being the eldest followed by Hans, Helma, Peter, Marga and Traute. I never met my *Opa* because he died before I was born. I met my *Oma* for the first time when I was 18 years old and living in Germany for a year with relatives whom I had never met before.

My father would have been nine years old at the outset of WWII. When I was growing up, my father seldom talked about his life in Germany during the war. It was unusual for him share



My grandparents Helene and Carl Seemann on their wedding day in 1930.

stories, so when he did, they stayed with me. Once my father told me about Nazi soldiers coming into classrooms at his elementary school to offer innocent children a shiny *Pfennig* in exchange for information about their parents' loyalty to Hitler. If a child candidly revealed that their father didn't support Hitler, that father would suddenly disappear never to be seen again. Food and clothing rations for German citizens were minimal, and they certainly didn't allow for luxuries like chocolate, coffee, whipped cream, or leather goods. One of my aunts shared about the time *Oma* had a pig's head, which young Karl acquired through the black market, cooking in a soup pot. When a Nazi soldier entered their house, *Oma* stood nervously by the stove keeping the pig's head submerged with a wooden spoon. If the soldier had seen it, they would have all been punished.



Five of Carl and Helene's children. From left to right: Helma, Peter, Hans, Marga and Karl, affectionately called None.

When my dad was 12 or 13 years old, he was sent to the *Kinderlandverschickung* in Melk, Austria on the Danube River for six weeks, which today is part of a UNESCO World Heritage site. *Kinderlandverschickung* is a German term for a Nazi state program that evacuated German children to the countryside to provide them with safety and better nutrition during the war. It was also an extension of the Hitler Youth and was an opportunity to indoctrinate the children into the ideology of the

Reich. The Nazis had expected a quick victory to the war and initially children were not expected to be away for more than a few weeks, but apparently some children were away for several months and longer. Children lived with families unknown to them or in camps. I recall my father talking about the abundance and variety of good food and that they spent a lot of time outdoors playing sports. My *Tante* Helma, recently shared that she remembered Karl coming home with several plastic pins shaped as wine bottles and grapes that you would pin onto a jacket or hat. At 88 years old, she still has a very clear memory of this because she had never seen anything like them. It would have been around this time, 1941 - 42, that *Opa* Carl was drafted to Neustrelitz. Sending a child away to *Kinderverschickung* was ultimately the parents'/guardians' decision, yet there would have been pressure from the Nazi state to do so. *Oma* would have been raising their five oldest children alone in these war times and having to make the decision alone to send her young son away. Although my father never talked in detail about his experience, I can only imagine how he and the other children felt being separated from their families and sent away to a foreign country to live with strangers during the chaos of war times.

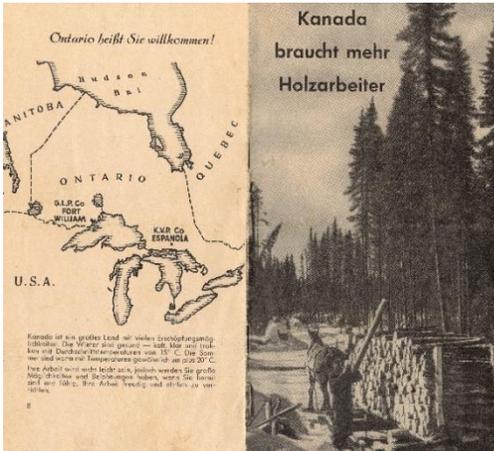
As a soldier, *Opa* spent time as a prisoner of war in Crimea, where he secretly hand carved a complete set of chess pieces out of bullets. From there, *Opa* walked to Austria then eventually served in the German Navy on the Danube before returning to Sörup. *Tante* Helma shared that one day Helene saw a man in a jeep through her window and commented that he looked like her husband. Within a short time later, her husband did return home. Unfortunately, he was forever changed after his experiences in the war, and he was diagnosed with heart disease. He eventually suffered a pulmonary embolism and was taken by ambulance from Sörup to Flensburg, the nearest city with a hospital. In his frail condition, he could not withstand any movement, so the ambulance drove at a walking pace to Flensburg, a 20-minute drive that would have taken at least 4 hours at that pace.

As with all male youth in WWII, dad and his younger brother Hans, were recruited into the Hitler Youth. Strong-willed Karl didn't like the constraints of the Hitler Youth and would often run back home. The group leader in Sörup told his mother that if Karl didn't willingly participate, he couldn't do anything to help him, implying there would be consequences. What a dilemma *Oma* faced! The story goes that Karl and Hans organized a lot of trading on the black market, such as the pig's head mentioned earlier. My father was bold and brazen, the type of man who was mechanically inclined and could improvise anything. He obviously had these skills as a teenager, too, because he covertly tapped into the Nazi telephone lines and strung wires throughout their village so he and Hans could speak with their friends. When the British Army came to occupy Schleswig-Holstein near the end of the war, Helene quickly tore down all phone lines and destroyed their pictures of Hitler. *Tante* Helma said that the British soldiers gave the children chocolate, but her mother forbade them to eat it because it was surely poisonous! The children ate it any way and, of course, they survived. In fact, *Tante* Helma recalled that the chocolate was especially delicious!

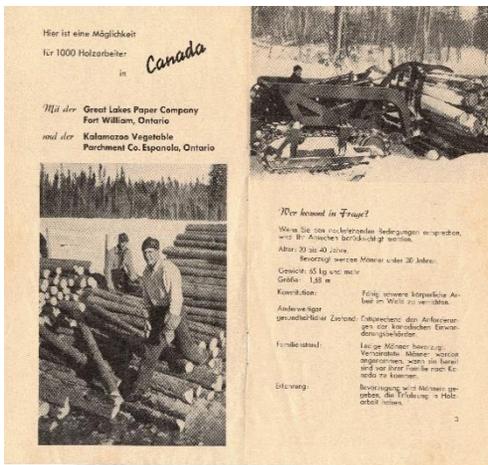
After WWII, as with most of Germany, Schleswig-Holstein endured social, economic and unemployment issues. However, Karl got an apprenticeship in the office of the Deutsche Bahn (German Railway), which was at that time as good as winning the *Lotto*! Later my hands-on father trained as a *Schmied* (blacksmith) where a piece of hot metal flew into his eye. He spent weeks in a hospital in Kiel recuperating from eye surgery. He also worked as a *Torfarbeiter* (peat worker) and for a business delivering goods. After the war, it was nearly impossible to find permanent work in Germany. Dad hoped he could find work in South Africa, but that country was not accepting German workers at that time. During the war, an older friend from his village, Sigi, had been recruited by the Nazis. Sigi was captured and spent time in a POW camp in Taber, AB. Apparently, the camp in Taber even allowed the prisoners to have a cake to celebrate Hitler's birthday in the POW camp. When the war was over, these soldiers were released and left to find their own way. Sigi opted to stay in Canada and wrote letters to encourage my father and other young men from their village to come to the land of opportunity. My *Oma* had saved a recruitment pamphlet from the Great Lakes Paper Company in Fort William, Ontario and the Kalamazoo Vegetable Parchment Co in Espanola, Ontario. This pamphlet was entitled *Kanada braucht mehr Holzarbeiter* (Canada needs more lumberjacks). The requirements listed in the pamphlet wouldn't be allowed by today's politically correct standards. The company was specifically recruiting single 20- to 40-year-old men, with preference given to those under 30 years of age. The men must weigh a minimum of 65 kilograms (143 pounds), be at least 1.68 meters tall (5 feet 5 inches) and

be capable of doing heavy, physical work in the forest. Hard work was one thing my father never shied away from, and so, my determined, intrepid father accepted the challenge.

In February 1952, with passport and immigration documents in hand, Karl boarded the M.S. Columbia in Bremerhaven headed to Halifax, NS, being one of the 693 passengers on board.



He reached Canada on March 8, 1952. My father was proud to be one of the few on board that wasn't seasick who enjoyed extra portions at mealtimes. When he landed in Halifax, he took a train to Montreal before heading to Fort William, Ontario, a city on the Kaministiquia River on Lake Superior. His work as a lumberjack would be on St. Ignace Island in northern Ontario, the 11th largest lake island in the world. As a condition of employment with the Great Lakes Paper Company, he had to sign an 18-month contract and pay back his employer for his crossing expenses through deductions from his wages. I recall my father saying that they lived in tents, even during the harsh Canadian winter. Workers had to pay for this lodging, as well for meals. On payday, he had very little to show for his labour since most of it went to the employer. Yet, he did his best to send money and coffee home to his family and even to some of the other families in Sörup



Pages from the pamphlet from Great Lakes Paper Company in Fort William, Ontario and the Kalamazoo Vegetable Parchment Co in Espanola, Ontario.

As my father was just getting settled in this foreign land, back home in Germany his terminally ill father lay in hospital dreaming of his son's transatlantic journey. At the same time, coincidentally, Karl had a dream that his father had died. Karl didn't learn of his father's death until three

weeks after his passing because he was working in a remote location in the bush where mail wasn't delivered. This letter containing such sad news was the first one Helene had written to her son since he left home just two months earlier. Carl left behind his wife and six children ranging in age from 6 years to 22 years of age. I believe at this point my father would have returned to Germany if he could have afforded the passage. He was quickly realizing the Canadian dream wasn't all that he anticipated, and as the eldest son of the family, it was his duty to take care of



Karl's passport photo 1952. His name at birth was actually Carl. At some point, he changed it to Karl, perhaps to avoid being mistaken for his father, Carl. However, his father at birth was name Karl, too, but changed his name to Carl at some point.

his family. I sensed this dishonour weighed on my father for the rest of his life, although he never said as much in words.

Eventually, Karl made his way to Saskatoon, SK where he found employment as a brakeman with the CNR earning \$3,700 per year. He had a friend, Ozzie, with whom he shared a one-bedroom studio apartment. Ozzie worked in the day time and dad worked nights, so sharing one bed worked out fine. At some point, Dad was injured on the job and ended up in hospital. He didn't speak much English, but a friend knew that my mother spoke some German, so she arranged for mom to visit this handsome, homesick German in the hospital. Karl was very glad to be able to speak to someone in his mother tongue. Their first date was on Valentine's at the Club 400. Within seven months, they married and in due course had six children.

In the beginning, Karl regularly wrote letters home to his family and friends. In one of his earlier letters to his mother in Sörup, my father wrote that the

canned kale she had sent at Christmas had exploded all over the customs office's white walls. The officers thought it was a bomb! Dad insisted that his mother not send him any more gifts because, after all, he was now living in Canada and wanted to buy Canadian goods. After their marriage, and as their family grew, dad's letters home became few and far between. In his last letters, he often wrote how difficult it was to make a life in Canada. In fact, it was almost more difficult in Canada than in Germany and it was better if his brother Peter and friends from their area didn't follow in his footsteps, especially if they couldn't speak English and had no training.

My father neither spoke German at home nor referred to his family when I was a child. I remember being surprised to learn that he was born in Germany and that he had family there.

I had also been sheltered from the stigma of the assumed association with Hitler and Nazis that German immigrants were subjected to. I didn't understand until I was older why my father worked extra hard to be accepted, why he was overly generous, why he got his Canadian Citizenship as



My parents Karl and Sarah Seemann, on their wedding day Sept. 26, 1954.

soon as he could, and why he suppressed his German-ness. In my Master's Thesis, a narrative inquiry into refugee students' experiences, I wrote: My father had stepped into the anti-Nazi tensions in Canada following World War II, with an undeniably *deutscher Akzent* that betrayed his roots, at a time when the government had implemented a set of initiatives designed to develop a sense of Canadianism among members of the so-called foreign-born population. The underlying hostilities against the foreign-born population were accentuated by the corresponding set of initiatives meant to educate 'old stock' Canadians about the threat that prejudicial attitudes posed to national unity. My father often talked about this dissonance and the affect it had on his position on the landscape of his new country. He told me how shortly after his arrival he felt as if he were the only person in the entire city that was charged to walk on the city sidewalks. He had interpreted the poll tax charged to all citizens as being charged solely to him because he was a foreigner, creating conflicting emotions for him simultaneously being singled out and unaccepted. His misinterpretation was not far-fetched considering that my mother's father, who had emigrated from Prussia in the late 1920s to begin farming here, had his rifle impounded during WWII because he was seen as a potential threat, for after all he was foreign looking and foreign-born.

My father was a man of morals, ethics, and values. When he asked for my mother's hand in marriage, her father had agreed, but only if they stayed in Canada. Karl was true to his word. He took pride in working hard to support his family, despite the cloud of racism that hovered around him. I remember him often saying, "If there's a will, there's a way", words he lived by. He was eventually hired by the Anatomy Department at the University of Saskatchewan where he worked until his retirement. During his first-year probationary period, he continued to work nights for the CNR and days for the university. After his retirement when dad became legally blind from macular degeneration, he taught himself how to turn wood and created beautiful pieces by feel. Craving freedom and independence he also took up cycling – as a blind person – and amassed nine bicycles, some manual and some electric.

My father had left Germany at 22 years of age for an unknown land, a long journey from which he would not return to his homeland until 27 years later. When I was 18 years old, Karl's brother, Hans, reunited with my father in Saskatoon. I jumped at *Onkel* Hans' invitation to live in Germany with his family for a year and to get to know my relatives there. I didn't understand a word of German when I arrived, so I interpreted my father's homeland through sights, sounds, smells, and tastes. Living in Germany and getting to know my newly found relatives over the years has given me an understanding of the milieu that had shaped my father. I have come to realize the courage it took my grandparents, my father and his siblings to survive in a country at war. I can finally appreciate what it meant for dad to leave his family and his country to start over in a

foreign land that wasn't welcoming. I recognize the tension he felt throughout his life to maintain one foot planted in Germany and the other foot planted in Canada. When my father passed away in 2014, part of his ashes were buried alongside his mother in the cemetery in Sörup; part of them were scattered at the Gardiner Dam in Saskatchewan, and the remainder rest beside my mother here in Canada.