

Immigration Story: Andrew and Ida Grzesina

Andy Grzesina and Ida Lipp met in Regina. Each saw a future in the other, and they married in Regina in August 1965. Their paths may have crossed in Regina, but their paths from Europe to Saskatchewan were parallel. Both families had endured and survived the displacements caused by the turmoil of World War II. Both families ultimately left Germany for Saskatchewan.

Andy was born in 1937 in Czernowitz, Romania, the youngest of four children. (Today Chernivtsi is in Ukraine.) His father, Franz Grzesina, was born in 1902 in Bielits (now in Poland). Andy's mother, Theresa nee Jungfer, was born in Romania. Both parents grew up speaking German, although Franz was fluent in several languages. In Czernowitz they manufactured a variety of brushes which they sold through a small storefront. Franz also traveled the countryside selling their brushes. He was most proud of his shaving brushes which were made from selected hairs of a horse's tail. They lived a comfortable life until the terms of the now-infamous 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact between Germany and Russia forced them to leave. One of the terms of this treaty allowed Russia to annex parts of Romania (Bessarabia and northern Bukovina). Rather than become Russian citizens, the Grzesinas agreed, along with many of the other Germans in the area, to be re-located to Poland, initially to a refugee camp at Bad Reinerz (Lower Silesia).

Andy started school in Teschen (Cieszyn), Poland right on the border with Czechia (Czechoslovakia at the time). This area was known as Upper Silesia. Always entrepreneurs, his parents next managed a fine china and crystal shop.

In 1943, Andy's father was recruited into the Germany army. Captured by the American Army, Franz Grzesina was handed over to the Russians, as per terms of the Yalta Agreement. Initially sent to a Russian labour camp, he was later released to Romania. Franz had no idea where his family was. In 1952, with the help of the German Red Cross, he found his wife and children alive and well, living in Waldsassen, Germany, a small town on the Czech border. They had been separated for almost ten years.

In 1945, German Wehrmacht recruiters took Andy's older brother, age 17, right out of his high school classroom. He was subsequently captured by British forces and later worked as a translator in British POW camps because he had learned English in school.

As the Russian army pressed from the east in early 1945, Mrs. Grzesina was not able to flee with the rest of the refugees. After bringing the three younger children to Waldsassen, she had to return to Teschen by military order and so she left the children with an acquaintance in Waldsassen, which thankfully was located in the American Zone of Occupation. After escaping Russian confinement, she was able to join her children several months later.

In 1952, Andy was able to start an apprenticeship in business management and accounting with Glassfabrik Lamberts. The firm manufactured stained-glass for windows, in high demand after the war because of all the bombing damage. Andy completed this apprenticeship three years later, shortly before emigrating from Germany with his mother and two siblings.

After re-connecting with his family in 1952, Franz Grzesina also re-connected with a boyhood friend from Romania, who had immigrated to Canada after the war. Now living in Regina, this friend recommended that Franz do the same, and in 1954, he found a sponsorship for Franz to come to Saskatchewan. The next year, Franz arranged for his wife and the three younger children to join him in Regina. (The eldest son had already married and remained in Germany.) As with all immigrants, the early years were difficult, but there were always jobs. Franz worked for Imperial Oil, cleaning out oil tanks, then at a now-defunct auto-assembly plant in Regina, and later as a janitor in schools and churches. The lack of good jobs in Germany was a prime motivator for many Germans to move to Canada after the war. Andy remembers well the steamship journey from Bremerhaven to Halifax as an enjoyable experience. Andy recalls that he missed the many friends he had made in Germany, especially several whom he met through the Boy Scouts program.

Besides the challenges of learning a new language, the Grzesinas in Saskatchewan missed their family and relatives living in Germany and they complained only about the climate. But Andy says his father never once talked about missing “home”. He was content to live in a country which valued peace. Franz and Theresa did manage to return twice to Germany, this time by air, to visit relatives, before he died in 1981. His older brother who had remained in Germany died there in 2020.

Andrew Grzesina arrived in Regina in 1955 ready to start a new life. With only a limited knowledge of English, he was lucky enough to start work within a day as a bus-boy and waiter in the Hotel Saskatchewan. Between lunch and dinner shifts, he often went to the old Roxy Theatre where he watched the same movies over and over as a way to improve his English. He broadened his “Canadian experience” by working in a lumber camp on Vancouver Island before getting a job on a freighter hauling goods from Vancouver to many ports up the western coast. Returning to Regina, his accounting training in Germany led to jobs with Silverwood Dairies and Sears. He began taking night classes in order to gain entrance to the University in Regina, eventually earning Bachelor of Arts and Education degrees. Andy taught for 30 years, seventeen of which he served as a Principal, in several Regina Catholic Schools.



left to right: Therese Grzesina (nee: Jungfer), Franz Grzesina, Maria Grzesina, Helene Grzesina, Franz Grzesina, Andreas Grzesina

Although Andy had no way of knowing, his future wife was already living in Regina when he arrived in 1955. Ida Lipp was born in the small German Catholic village of Alexanderdorf, called Alexandrowka by the Russians, very close (about 30 km) to the city of Kherson, Ukraine. It was 1941, a full twenty years after the Bolshevik Revolution had confiscated all private property and forced people to work for the State. Before 1917, the Lipps and Thaubergers had been successful farmers. Ida's parents never forgot the hunger years of 1932-1933, narrowly avoiding starvation. Betrayed by an informant in 1934, Ida's father was sentenced to a Gulag or slave-labor logging camp on the Kamchatka Peninsula in the far, far East of Russia, approx. 10,000 kilometres from Kherson. His crime was that he belonged to the former land-owning class of farmers opposed to collectivization. Both of Ida's Grandfathers were sentenced to the Gulag later in 1937 during the so-called Great Purge, and both died somewhere in Siberia. By 1941, Ida's parents were working on the local collective, her mother milking cows and working in the fields and gardens. Ida's father, a handyman all his life, repaired and maintained the collective's machinery. For a while he also worked as a translator at the Post Office in Kherson. While Russian was the official language outside of the home, the Lipps always spoke German at home.

Johann Lipp and Agnes Thauburger had married in a civil service in Klosterdorf in 1937. Ida was born just a few months after the German army invaded Russia, and occupied the region of Ukraine where Ida's family lived. German occupation in 1941 removed many of the restrictions of the Soviet regime, allowing a return to a more normal life. Once again, they could speak

German in public; the schools could teach in the German language again. The people could re-open and attend their churches again. Hundreds of marriages and baptisms were formally consecrated. They could sell their own farm and garden produce again. But the revived freedoms were short-lived. By the fall of 1943, Russia's Red Army was re-taking territory occupied by the Wehrmacht. The German Army began to retreat, ordering all ethnic Germans to evacuate. Long caravans of horses, wagons, and people on foot made their way over several months to German-held territory in Poland, Austria and Czechoslovakia. The Lipp family was directed to a refugee camp in Ausspitz, Czechoslovakia near the Austrian border. Ida's younger sister was born here in December 1944, in the middle of an air-raid! Ida's father Johann worked for farmers in the area, but by January of 1945, with the Red Army pressing from the east, millions of refugees began to flee towards the west. The Lipp family lived on the run, continually moving to avoid the Russian military police who sought out former citizens of the Soviet Union. When asked, the parents insisted they were Czech citizens. Eventually they arrived in the British Zone of Allied-occupied Germany and lived in a series of small towns near Hannover (Bennigsen, Lüdersen, Hüpede). Not everyone was so fortunate. Ida's Aunt Maria, her mother's sister, was caught in the Russian Zone and shipped east into Siberian Russia. Ida's parents worked for farmers, trading their labors for food and shelter. Johann's mechanical skills were a major asset, but many farmers did not want to accommodate a family of six which included very small children.

Slowly the realization set in for Johann and Agnes Lipp that they were never going to get ahead in post-war Germany. Jobs, at least good jobs with a future, were very scarce. They were barely surviving, and they could only see a life of poverty ahead. What kind of future would their children have? Agnes' Uncle Gustav Thauberger had immigrated as a young single man to Saskatchewan in 1911. By 1948, he was established enough to sponsor two Thauberger brothers to emigrate from post-war Germany to Saskatchewan. Favorable reports convinced the Lipp family to make the same move in 1952, again sponsored by family members in Regina who had preceded them. The Lipp family left the port of Bremerhaven and arrived in Quebec City in May. By 1956, all but one of Agnes' eight siblings, as well as her mother, had immigrated to Regina, Saskatchewan, an amazing story in its own right. (Agnes' sister Maria eventually was allowed to immigrate to Canada in the late 1970s.) Everyone worked hard, and they helped each other. Gradually, each family had its own home. Starting over again was not something new for these displaced Germans from Russia. An important priority for the Lipp parents was a good education for their children, something that would have been impossible in Germany at the time. John Lipp worked at various jobs around Regina. The unhealthy fumes while cleaning out oil tanks for Imperial Oil convinced him to look for another job. This eventually led to work as a steel erector for a firm which built steel-frame buildings and steel communication towers. He was a hard worker, but he was away from home a lot.

John and Agnes missed the fields of fruits and vegetables of their homeland, especially the fields of watermelons. John told his children about fishing in the Dnjepr (Dnieper) River. He wished he could have been a farmer in Saskatchewan, but the cost of starting a farm in the 1950s was already too much for him.

Ida says she quickly learned the English language by playing with her cousins, and she had no problems in school. She went on to become a nurse and a 40-year long career followed, including time in Public Health.

Andy Grzesina and Ida Lipp met at a Catholic Youth Group. Andy was already friends with one of Ida's cousins. They married in Regina in 1965. Three children followed. Both Andy and Ida have been active members of the German Club in Regina (German-Canadian Society Harmonie) for many years, and remain so today. They still sing in the Volksliederchor Harmonie in Regina. Andy also served as President of the Board of Directors for Saskatchewan German Council in the years 2004-2008.

Submitted by Mervin Weiss. Approved by Andy and Ida Grzesina. January 2022



1950. left to right:
John Lipp, Ida Lipp, Agnes Lipp (nee: Thauberger), John Lipp, Hilde Lipp, Rudy Lipp



Ida's maternal grandparents: Johannes Thauberger married Maria Behr in 1910. Johannes was "verschleppt" in 1937, meaning he was arrested for (fictitious) counter-revolutionary activity and exiled to the Gulag system of labor camps in Siberia. He never returned. Maria emigrated to Saskatchewan in 1950.