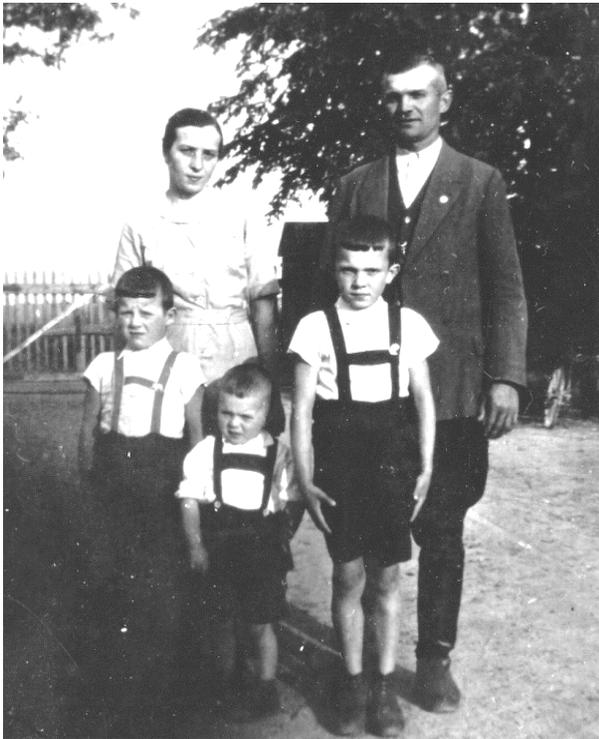


HELMUT AND IDA TISCHLER'S JOURNEY TO CANADA

Written by Kurt Tischler, April 4, 2022

The ancestors of Helmut Tischler moved from Rhineland-Pfalz, a Province in Southwest Germany, to the Province of Posen (Poznan) Poland around 1770. They were mostly farmers in areas where many other Germans had settled. The farm that Helmut and his wife Ida inherited in 1932 was in Tonndorf located near the town of Janowitz. It was not a very large farm, but the land was fertile and by adopting current farming techniques Helmut ran a very prosperous farm.



Helmut and Ida had 3 children, all boys, born in 1934, 1936 and I, Kurt, in 1939. When the war started in 1939 Helmut was not conscripted into the Polish army because he had a heart condition. However, in September 1944 he was required to join the German army under Austrian command. As the Russian army advanced relentlessly the commander of Helmut's unit gave up his command and told the men that they were on their own. Helmut and about 20 other soldiers travelled westward at night to escape being captured by the Russians. They did not want to end up in a Russian prisoner of war camp. After two weeks they were eventually taken prisoners by the American army and interred for several months. Conditions in the prison camp were very harsh but Helmut survived. Once he was

released Helmut worked for a distant relative in Alhorn, a village close to Oldenburg, West Germany. He had no information about his family – whether they were alive and where they might be located.

After Helmut was drafted into the army Ida kept the operation of the farm going with the help of two hired men. It was not easy for her. In December 1944, there were a lot of rumors circulating that the Russian army was advancing westward rapidly. One of Ida's uncles advised her to prepare for a possible trek westward ahead of the Russian army. With the help of the hired men two wagons were fitted with covers and loaded with supplies. And it did not take long when the call was made that a trek of wagons would leave Hernkirch (Zazim) on January 20, 1945. The trek travelled northwest crossing the Oder River not far from Szczecin before the bridge was blown up to slow the Russian advance. At Neubrandenburg Ida decided to follow the advice of an uncle and left the main trek to travel to Eixen. The uncle had a brother there who was a farmer. We arrived in Eixen on February 8, 1945. We were all in good

health and Ida still had food left on the wagons – bread, sausages, apples, and pears. A relative of Ida's uncle agreed to board us on his farm.

Unfortunately, our lives were upended once the Russian troops entered German territory in May 1945. Before most of the troops arrived in Eixen a Russian officer stopped his car in the town square and told all those gathered that we had nothing to fear and that the soldiers were coming to liberate us. His words were well intended but he must not have told the soldiers. The Russian troops moved very rapidly across the land and seemed to have to fend for themselves. They pillaged homes for food and valuables. Women of all ages were abused repeatedly and suffered greatly. The demand for watches was constant. From May 1945 to that fall, we had enough food to eat since many farmers had hidden some of their grain and vegetables but during the winter the sources of food began to dry up. By February 1946 the food crisis was severe. Ida had little food to give us so we boys started to get food anyway we could – steal and beg - even for bread from the Russian troops. Somehow, we survived but the time of starvation affected our health and our determination never to waste food.

By April 1946 the food crisis lessened as some goods were brought into the affected areas and a semblance of order was established. Small parcels of land were assigned to refugees who had a farming background – Ida qualified for one of these small pieces of land. It did not take long and many of the refugees were able to provide food for themselves. We also received two rooms and a bathroom for our accommodation in buildings of an abandoned estate. The bathroom was not functional, but it provided a place to sleep for the three boys. The land and the housing became available because the owner, a very wealthy man, had left Germany.

The Family Reunited

On July 8, 1946, Helmut arrived unannounced in Kaveltsdorf. Through the Red Cross he had found out where we were. He had aged and was so gaunt that Ida did not recognize him. What a relief for Ida and a bit of a shock for his three sons. Helmut's plans were to return to his farm in Tonndorf as soon as possible. Unfortunately, this door was closed to his great disappointment.

Helmut turned his attention to farming the small piece of land allocated to Ida. The whole family worked very hard to grow as much food as possible. Somehow Helmut managed to acquire an old horse and with some of the money Ida had hidden away, he bought a milk cow. These two animals were hitched together to plow the land and within a short period of time we grew wheat, oats, rye, turnips, and sugar beets. Ida also had a vegetable garden. By 1948 the Tischler's were producing enough food to be able to sell some. So, things were looking up. Schools were started, church services were held, and some medical facilities were opened in nearby towns.

Helmut and Ida began to notice that the East German government began the process of amalgamating farmland into state run collectives. Quotas were established and if farmers could

not meet those quotas, then their land would be taken over by the government. Secondly, Helmut noticed that his boys were being indoctrinated to believe the communist ideology that there was no God and that churches were of no use and would be closed eventually. This happened gradually as youth groups were established and the school curriculum began to reflect communist ideology. Helmut and Ida, strong Evangelical Lutherans, feared for their sons' future. It became clear to Helmut that if they were going to do anything to protect their sons, they would have to act before their oldest son was pulled into the East German army for training.

And so it was that Helmut and Ida started to think about undertaking another move. They did a lot of research and planning and eventually made contact with an uncle in Canada who agreed to sponsor the Tischler family. In February 1951 Helmut began the emigration process. This involved several family trips to West Berlin to meet with Canadian immigration officials and for medical checkups. The planning had to be done in secrecy since the East German Government tried to stem the flow of people leaving the country. Finally on January 7, 1952, we boarded the train and left Kavelndorf to West Berlin where we stayed several days before flying to Bremen, West Germany in an old American bomber. We were housed in a refugee camp till January 26, 1952, and then boarded the "Beaverbrae", a converted freighter, and sailed for 12 days to Saint John, New Brunswick. There again we were housed in a refugee holding center for almost a week before travelling by train for four days to arrive in Luseland, Saskatchewan on February 11, 1952. We were met at the train station by my uncle and taken to their farm 6 miles away by horse drawn sleigh. The temperature was -20 degrees celcius.

That spring and winter Helmut and my two older brothers found jobs – Helmut wanted to pay off our debt to my uncle as soon as possible. The people in the German speaking church we attended were very generous and one of the members offered to rent a half section of land to us. In the spring of 1953 Helmut started farming. The shift of farming from using horses to mainly machines was very difficult for him. But Helmut persisted and in 1961 he purchased a farm in Minburn, Alberta. He farmed successfully until his health forced him to sell the farm and retire to Manville, Alberta. Helmut died in December, 1983 and Ida in 1991. They were both laid to rest in Manville.

Conclusion:

The journey from Kavelndorf to Luseland was not an easy one for Helmut and Ida. They were not that young anymore and the thought of starting all over again in a strange land with a new language caused some fear and apprehension in their hearts. As we travelled west for four days through the frozen Canadian Shield and the snow-covered Canadian prairies, Helmut confided in Ida wondering if they had made the right decision to move to Canada. These thoughts were made worse by a German saying that he remembered about life in Canada. "*Kanada ist so wie Siberia wo man mit der Kaffeetasse melken geht*". Little did he know that his children and grandchildren would thank him from the bottom of their hearts that he and his wife had the courage to follow their convictions at great sacrifice for the sake of their children.