We Found a Home in Canada

by Mervin Weiss and Adele Wagner

Foreword:

While I have written these words, this is Adele's story, written from her perspective. It is an incredible story of family love, hope, perseverance, and persistence. My input has been to position her memories and oral stories into an historical context and timeline with the geographical background of the turbulent times into which she was born.

– Mervin Weiss, August 2020.

It was the map. Yes, it was the map that my brother Paul had drawn from memory of our village in Ukraine where we once lived. It was September of 2017 and I was returning from a trip to Ukraine, the country of my birth. It was not an easy journey, the express purpose of which was to visit the village where I was born. But it was an amazing experience, and not until the long flight home, did I have time to reflect on what the trip meant to me. Paul's map lay open on my seat-tray. I could see where the community well was, the school, the store, our home, Grandpa Brühler's place, the cemetery, and more. I really have no personal memories of our village. I was not yet eight years old when we were forced to leave our village, to leave our home, to leave almost everything behind. But after studying Paul's map and after visiting our village, I was overwhelmed by a flood of memories from the years which followed. Perhaps for the first time, I was able to reflect on my life with a clearer focus on its beginnings.

Brühler Family, Neukron, about 1920.

I was born in a village called Neukron by the Germans who settled there about 1883. They were a mixture of Evangelical Lutherans and Mennonites who had re-located from the so-called Chortitza and Prischib colonies, as the German farmers expanded their network of farming colonies to support their ever-growing families. The ancestors of these German Lutherans had migrated mainly from the Germanic state of Baden-Württemberg and from West Prussia in the early 1800's at the invitation of the Russian Czar (Tsar). They had been enticed by promises of free land, tax exemptions and interest-free loans, exemption from military service, and the right to maintain their language, religion and culture.

Today Neukron has been re-named as Novosolone, and it is located about fifty kilometers east of the Ukrainian city of Zaporizhia. I was born there in December of 1935, in the immediate aftermath of the Holodomor, the man-made famine which starved millions to death in Ukraine. The Holodomor is widely recognized as genocide, a weapon used by the dictator Josef Stalin to break the resistance of the German and Ukrainian peasants who opposed the collectivization of their lands and other assets. Those were extremely difficult years for my parents and grandparents, but as a child, I knew nothing different.

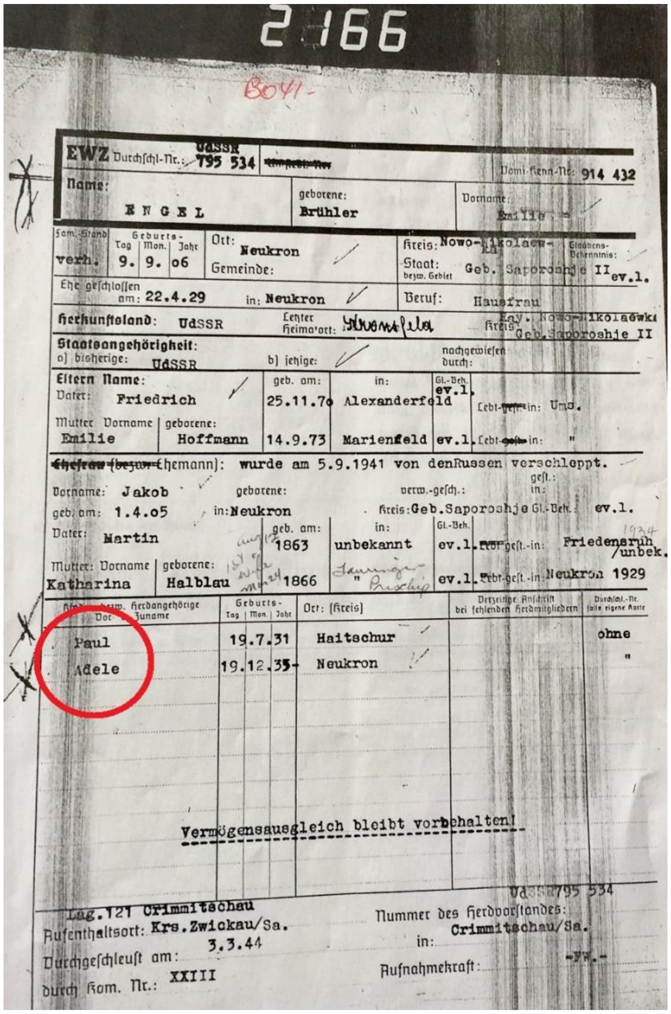
The German farmers had prospered in the days of the Tsars' Russian Empire. Those days were long gone by the time I was born. Neukron was now a village in Ukraine, one of the communist Soviet Socialist Republics, and part of the USSR. The Russian Revolution of 1917, and Stalin's Five-Year Plan of Collectivization beginning in 1928 had converted the entrepreneurial German farmers and tradesmen into hungry and despondent collective workers toiling for the state. My Dad was one of them. He was often gone for days and weeks at a time because some of the collective's land was too distant for day trips. It was during this time that we, that is, my mother, Paul and I, moved into her parent's home, Grandpa and Grandma Brühler, with whom I became very close. My mother later told me that Grandpa Brühler had been severely beaten, and left for dead, in his workshop because he refused to join the collective.

The increasingly paranoid Stalin ordered the arrest, banishment and execution of tens of thousands of Russian citizens during the Terror Years of 1937-1939. He trusted no one. My father's older brother, hence my uncle, Peter Engel was arrested for counter-revolutionary activity (ie. a typical bogus charge for not supporting the Soviet regime) and was executed by a firing squad on November 27, 1938. Still my father managed to avoid the attention of the local NKVD State Police and he continued to work as a blacksmith on the collective farm, even though he had trained as a printer.

In June, 1941 Germany invaded Russia without a declaration of war. Russia was caught off-guard. One of the first reactions of the Russian state was to evacuate all its German citizens behind the Ural Mountains, far from the war's front lines, because all non-Russians, and particularly Germans, were suspected of being spies for foreign states. Fearing that Russia's German citizens might be supportive of the invading Wehrmacht, Stalin began to deport Germans first from Crimea, and then from the German colonies along the Volga River. They were shipped in cattle cars to the labor camps in the Urals where the ones who survived the journey provided free slave labor for various industries vital to the war effort. In our area, it was decreed that all males between the ages of sixteen and sixty would leave first. My father, along with all the other men in Neukron, was ordered to appear at the train station on 05 September. Their most likely fate was exile to a Gulag slave-labor camp where they were starved and worked to death, and buried in mass graves. I do not remember my Dad, although my mother told me that I was the "apple of his eye". On the day he left, he was allowed to take along a sack which Mother had packed with clothing and food. She told me that I kept going into the bedroom where we kept a box of apples, to get more apples for Dad's sack. We never saw him again, and to this day, I do not know what really happened to my father.

Later that Fall it was our turn. The decree to re-locate German women, children and the elderly came on 28 September, but it was November before we were picked up and taken to the Novo-Nikolaevka train station. I have one faint memory of this time. I am sitting on a suitcase on the floor of a large building and there are many people around. My brother has told me that we were at the train station waiting to be loaded onto one of the box cars, when an advance unit of the invading German army arrived, having met with little resistance in our area. Uncertain of what would happen next, people fled in all directions. I have been told that a Ukrainian family hid us in their root cellar. But we soon learned that the Russian forces had scattered and the German Army was going to remain as an occupation force, and would assume governmental administration. The German people were relieved; they felt they had been liberated from the yoke of communism.

By the time we were able to return to Neukron, Grandfather's house had been looted by local non-Germans who had taken advantage of our short exile. Of course, they had not expected us to return. If the German army had arrived an hour later, we would have been shipped east along with the Crimean and Volga Germans. We would have never seen Neukron again. For two short years under Nazi occupation, life for the Germans farmers regained a sense of pre-Revolutionary normalcy. The Wehrmacht authorities allowed a return to an entrepreneurial economy where one was able to keep the products of his or her labor. The churches were allowed to open. The German language was again acceptable on the streets and in the schools. Still we were without our father, as mother tried in vain to learn what had happened to her husband.



2166

B041-

EWZ Durchſchl-Nr.: UdSSR 795 534

Domi-Kenn-Nr.: 914 432

Name: ENGEL
geborene: Brühler
Vorname: Emilie

Fam.-Stand: verh.
Geburts- Tag: 9. Mon.: 9. Jahr: 06
Ort: Neukron
Gemeinde:
Kreis: Nowo-Nikolaew-ka
Staat: bezw. Gebiet: Geb. Saporoshje II
Glaubens-Bekenntnis: ev.l.

Ehe geſchloſſen am: 22.4.29 in: Neukron
Beruf: Hausfrau

Herkunftsland: UdSSR
Letzter Heimatort: Kronsfeld
Kreis: Ray. Nowo-Nikolaewka Geb. Saporoshje II

Staatsangehörigkeit:
a) bisherige: UdSSR
b) jetzige:
nachgewieſen durch:

Eltern Name:	geb. am:	in:	Gl.-Bek.	
Vater: Friedrich	25.11.70	Alexanderfeld	ev.l.	Lebt-~~geſt.~~-in: Uns.
Mutter Vorname: Emilie, geborene: Hoffmann	14.9.73	Marienfeld	ev.l.	Lebt-~~geſt.~~-in: "

~~Ehefrau (bezw.~~ Ehemann): wurde am 5.9.1941 von denRussen verschleppt.

Vorname: Jakob
geborene:
verw.-geſch.:
geſt.: in:
geb. am: 1.4.05 in: Neukron
Kreis: Geb.Saporoshje
Gl.-Bek.: ev.l.

	geb. am:	in:	Gl.-Bek.	
Vater: Martin	1863	unbekannt	ev.l.	~~Lebt~~-geſt.-in: Friedensruh /unbek. 1934
Mutter: Vorname: Katharina, geborene: Halblau	1866	" [illegible]	ev.l.	~~Lebt~~-geſt.-in: Neukron 1929

Kinder bzw. Herdangehörige Vor- Zuname	Geburts- Tag	Mon.	Jahr	Ort: (Kreis)	Derzeitige Anſchrift bei fehlenden Herdmitgliedern	Durchſchl.-Nr. falls eigene Karte
Paul	19.	7.	31	Haitschur		ohne
Adele	19.	12.	35	Neukron		"

Vermögensausgleich bleibt vorbehalten!

UdSSR 795 534

Lag. 121 Crimmitschau

Aufenthaltsort: Krs.Zwickau/Sa.

Durchgeſchleuſt am: 3.3.44

durch Kom. Nr.: XXIII

Nummer des Herdvorſtandes:

in: Crimmitschau/Sa.

Aufnahmekraft: -FW.-

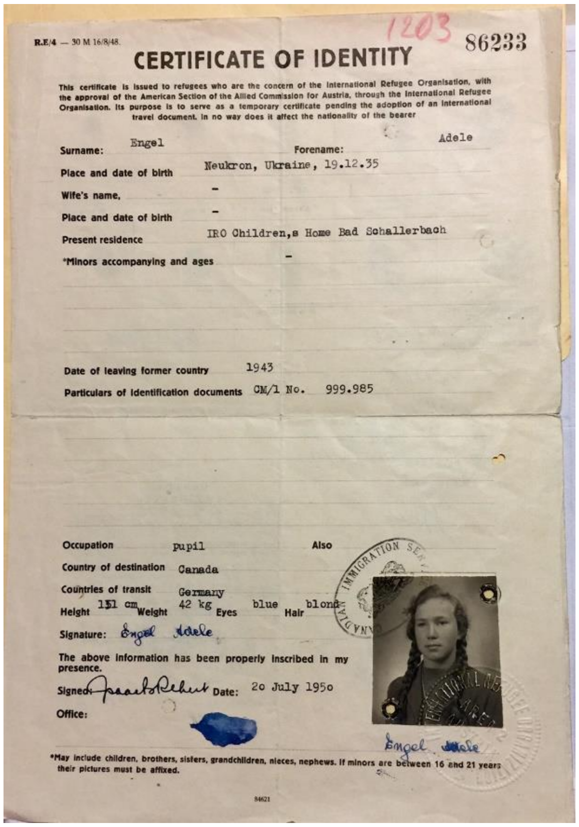
Refugee registration of Emilie, Paul, and Adele Engel.

Hitler's dream of "Lebensruam" in Eastern Europe would soon end. After the disastrous defeat of the German Army at Stalingrad in February 1943, Russia's victorious Red Army began to drive back the German invaders and to re-claim the territory it had been forced to cede to the Wehrmacht in 1941. The residents of Neukron were ordered by the Nazi authorities to re-locate to the village of Kronsfeld. We packed whatever belongings we could fit into a wagon and left Neukron 18 February 1943. Our family unit consisted of Grandpa and Grandma Brühler, my mother Emilie Engel, nee

Brühler, my brother Paul and myself. Our stay in Kronsfeld lasted only 9 months, and our only knowledge of the fact that we were there at all comes from statements provided by my mother on the refugee registration forms required at the time, copies of which I have.

Again we Germans who had been living in Russia (really Ukraine) were subject to the whims of political powers beyond our control. As Russia's army continued its advance westwards, Hitler ordered that all remaining ethnic German people in Ukraine be evacuated to the Reich (Germany and its occupied territories). We left Kronsfeld 19 October 1943. I have another vague memory of crossing the frozen Dnieper River, fearful of not making it to the other shore. Apparently some wagons and families were lost when they fell through, according to later recollections by my mother. The Germans were forced to abandon nearly 150 years of their history in South Russia, and depart for Germany. Like Stalin, Hitler too needed free German laborers for German wartime industries and in particular, he needed farmers who could provide food for the German army. So again we joined a wagon trek, much longer this time, of German families forced to leave everything familiar behind, and with no idea about what lay ahead. It would be 74 years until I could again walk the streets of the village where I was born.

Fast fünf Monate waren wir unterwegs. We were on the road for almost five months, camping alongside the trail at a different spot each evening. Occasionally we were offered shelter from the winter weather in barns and other outbuildings along the way. The retreating German Wehrmacht was supposed to be responsible for feeding us, after our own provisions had run out. But we often had to beg for food from farmers along the way. At some point we were loaded onto a train and we eventually arrived at a refugee camp in eastern Germany. Our refugee registration forms were processed 03 March 1944 in Crimmitschau, Kreis Zwickau, Sachsen (Saxony), about 70 kilometers south of Leipzig. These forms now declared that we were German citizens. We were no longer Russians or Ukrainians. I remember thinking that this was rather odd, because I had thought we were Germans all along!



R.E/4 — 30 M 16/8/48.

1203

86233

CERTIFICATE OF IDENTITY

This certificate is issued to refugees who are the concern of the International Refugee Organisation, with the approval of the American Section of the Allied Commission for Austria, through the International Refugee Organisation. Its purpose is to serve as a temporary certificate pending the adoption of an international travel document. In no way does it affect the nationality of the bearer

Surname: Engel Forename: Adele

Place and date of birth Neukron, Ukraine, 19.12.35

Wife's name, -

Place and date of birth -

Present residence IRO Children,s Home Bad Schallerbach

*Minors accompanying and ages -

Date of leaving former country 1943

Particulars of identification documents CM/1 No. 999.985

Occupation pupil Also

Country of destination Canada

Countries of transit Germany

Height 151 cm Weight 42 kg Eyes blue Hair blond

Signature: Engel Adele

The above information has been properly inscribed in my presence.

Signed: Date: 20 July 1950

Office:

Engel Adele

*May include children, brothers, sisters, grandchildren, nieces, nephews. If minors are between 16 and 21 years their pictures must be affixed.

84621

Adele's Certificate of Identity.

I do not know how long we remained at Crimmitschau, but I do know that we were next relocated to German-occupied territory in Yugoslavia – all of us, Grandfather, Grandmother, Mother, Paul and I. My mother and grandparents worked on a farm near the rural community of Haselbach, about 50 kilometers northwest of Zagreb, Croatia, in what is today the Balkan country of Slovenia. The only compensation was room and board for all of us. The time in Yugoslavia was chaotic. The constant and persistent partisan resistance against the

German occupiers resulted in frequent and unpredictable attacks on Nazi troops. Supporting air power from the Western Allies lead to air-raid sirens and time spent in tightly-packed underground air-raid shelters. I remember well the claustrophobic fear of being trapped underground. By January of 1945, the Wehrmacht forces had crumbled and the Soviet Red Army began to steam-roller through Eastern Europe. By February, refugees were fleeing Poland by the tens of thousands ahead of the advancing Russian troops. The goal was simply to head west, away from the Russians, and towards the areas already held by the Allied powers.

The situation in Yugoslavia was slightly different because the German army was able to hold out longer against the anti-German partisans. Marshal Josip Tito had gathered a large force of partisans which gradually gained military control of most of Yugoslavia ahead of the Russian army. Just as the battles in our area began to intensify, Grandfather had a gall bladder attack and was rushed to a hospital for an emergency surgery. He died 18 February 1945 in Rau, Yugoslavia, where he was also buried. In March, the German authorities re-located us to Bruck an der Mur, a scenic town on the edge of the Alps in southeastern Austria. We were among the last of the Germans to be moved out of Yugoslavia. In Bruck we were given a small bungalow in which to live, and Mother worked on a nearby farm.

Germany finally surrendered to the Allies on May 8, 1945. But allied forces had not yet arrived in southern Austria to take control. The Russian forces were pressing from the east. The last of the Wehrmacht Army units from Yugoslavia, along with Croat partisans who had fought alongside them, began streaming through Bruck, heading towards Germany. Fearing reprisals, the Croats desperately wanted to surrender to British forces in Austria rather than being captured by Tito’s men. The German soldiers were equally anxious to surrender to British or American forces, rather than being taken prisoners by the Russian Army.

On the morning of May 9, our family group, now reduced to Grandmother, Mother, Paul and I, along with several hundred other civilians, clambered aboard a kilometer- long convoy of Wehrmacht army vehicles which was retreating to Germany. Mother was placed in a separate vehicle while Grandmother, Paul and I traveled in a different one. During the night of May 12, the vehicle carrying mother broke down, and the rest of the convoy rolled on without stopping. We did not find out until morning, when we became frantic. Paul wanted to run back, but was stopped by the soldiers. We pleaded with officials to send someone back for our mother. But it would be sixteen years before we would see her again. We would later learn that Russian-backed partisans quickly surrounded the abandoned truck, arrested the Nazi soldiers as prisoners of war, and took the civilians, our desperate mother among them, to a concentration camp held by the Russians.

Within a day or two Grandmother, Paul and I arrived without our mother in the Austrian State of Kärnten or Carinthia. One night we slept in Army trucks which had been abandoned on the side of the road. We were directed to a refugee camp for displaced persons at Sankt Veit an der Glan. We had no luggage because it had been in the same vehicle as mother. We arrived literally with only the clothes on our backs. But here we found ourselves in the protection of the British

Occupation Zone of Austria.[1] Paul and Grandmother immediately made inquiries with authorities about finding our missing mother. Our poor Grandmother, 71 years old, was given work cleaning houses. One day, after cleaning in the rectory, she suffered a heart attack and died right in front of me. I remember crying over her body, vaguely aware of another woman behind me shrieking at the sight. It was 26 June 1945, and now we were just two – Paul and I. We were devastated, two orphans in a strange land. Unknown to us, our Uncle Alexander Engel, Father's brother, was also in Austria, also separated from his family, except for his adult son. He read Grandmother's obituary notice in the newspaper. He contacted us, and Paul and I then joined them in a Displaced Persons camp in Klagenfurt, Austria, which was only about 15 kilometers from where we were. We lived in a large barracks structure with long rows of bunk beds which served as a Displaced Persons camp. I was nine years old going on ten. Paul was nearly fourteen. The only food offered was a thin soup, twice a day, and occasionally a bit of bread. So Uncle sent Paul and me out into the village begging for food door to door. He felt that younger children would generate more sympathy and would be offered more food, which we dutifully took back to him for the four of us to eat. I remember foraging in the fields for frozen potatoes and turnips which had been missed by the farm workers. We looked for discarded apple cores, even food tins which we could lick out. We were always hungry.

Paul and Adele in Salzburg.

Because so many able-bodied men had been lost in the war, farmers were always looking for help. One day a man observed Paul begging door-to-door and told him that he was certainly capable of working for food. There was no need for begging because there was lots of work available, and that is how we came to live with Franz and Maria Talk at Picheldorf. They had no children, and so Paul worked on the farm to provide both of us with shelter and food. The Talks were good to us. I started going to school, my first school!! This was probably in 1946. It was still a time of strict rationing after the war. Yet Maria, the mother, scrounged enough ingredients to make a birthday cake for me, my very first birthday cake! She pulled all the blinds so that the neighbors could not see that she was baking a cake. I remember swimming with some girlfriends from school in a nearby pond. I enjoyed the farm chores like picking apples and watching the cows in the pasture because there were no fences. Of course, I was barefoot all the time! I have good memories of living with the Talks. We spent the better part of a year with them.

---

[1] It is incredibly lucky that the Engels found refuge in the American zone of Austria. Had they been captured by Russian forces, they would most likely have met the same fate as their mother. Chances are that they may have been re-united with their mother, and that they would never have had the opportunity to leave the Soviet Union.

The Talks wanted to adopt us, but Paul refused to admit that we were orphans. Until proven otherwise, he believed our parents were still alive, and that we would be re-united with them. We now fell under the authority of the IRO – International Refugee Organization founded by the new United Nations General Assembly. I was next placed in a Children's Home in Leoben, Austria. This was likely 1947 or 1948. Paul was too old already to live in the Children's Home, and so he worked as an apprentice, first in a bakery, and then in a blacksmith shop. Paul lived in another town, and I was able to take a train to visit him. Life was good. I had a clean bed to sleep in, plenty of food to eat, and lots of clothes to choose from as care packages arrived from overseas. This Home was actually a convent managed by nuns, and financed by Americans. I continued to attend school right across the street in Leoben, making some life-long friends there. I was growing up.

As the authorities found homes for the orphans, they began to consolidate the Displaced Persons camps. The last camp I lived in was the IRO Childrens' Home in Bad Schallerbach, Austria, northeast of Salzburg, close to the German border, in the American Occupation Zone. Lists of children needing homes were circulated. About this time, a couple from Australia offered to adopt us, but Paul refused, reasoning that we would never find our mother, or our father, if we moved to Australia. We still had no idea where our parents were. While we were still in Klagenfurt, Paul had met a neighbor from Neukron who told him that we had relatives in Canada. This turned out to be Fred and Frieda Krutsch in Davin, Saskatchewan. Frieda was a first cousin to my mother Emilie. Paul arranged to send a letter through the Red Cross. Fred and Frieda immediately sent a care package of food and clothing. The Krutsch family agreed to sponsor our emigration. An English Major with the IRO took us to Salzburg for our passports and emigration transit visas. They are dated 20 July 1950. We had lived in Austria for more than five years.

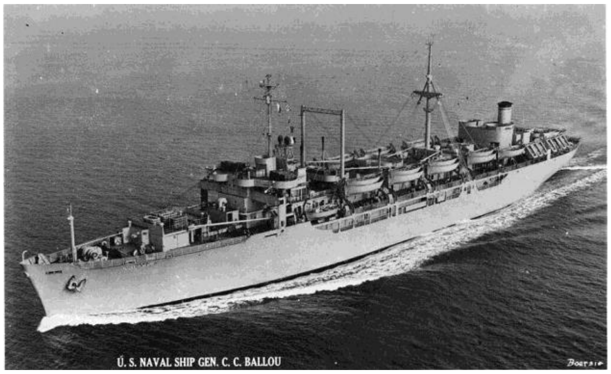


Photo of USS General C.C. Ballou.

Paul and I and our small suitcases traveled by train to Bremen. Because neither of us spoke a word of English, tags were attached to our coats which stated our names and final destination. The American Authorities had arranged for our passage to Halifax aboard the USS General C.C. Ballou, a U.S. Navy transport ship. We arrived at Pier 21 on 19 October 1950. I was seasick for most of the voyage. Our Canadian sponsors paid the rail fare to Regina. We arrived in Regina, and then Davin, six days after leaving Halifax. Paul was 19, and I was almost 15. It would be another new beginning, but I was used to them by now!

The Krutsch family was good to us, and for the first time in a long time, we felt like we were part of a real family again. "Uncle" Fred became the Dad I never really had. I started school immediately and faced the challenges of learning a new language. There were so many other new things to learn as well, like using a horse and cart to travel to and from the country school. Paul and I were starting a new life but we have never regretted immigrating to Canada.

After I turned sixteen, and was reasonably proficient with the English language, I began to help neighboring families with household chores. Paul was already working as a farm laborer. He eventually moved to Regina where he soon found a job. Through our "cousins" in Davin, Paul had discovered a latent talent for music, and began playing saxophone and clarinet. Soon after moving to Regina, Paul was invited to a barn dance where he met Bill Wagner, leader of a popular dance band. Paul soon joined Bill's band, and I became the band "groupie"! I loved to dance! And that is how I met my husband – the band leader! We were married in October 1953 in Regina, and a year later, Paul married Bill's sister. So we were brother and sister married to brother and sister. We were united as a foursome, and we became a team, determined to learn the fates of our parents, Jakob and Emilie Engel from Neukron, Ukraine. Meanwhile life in Canada moved on. Babies arrived.

By now, we had learned enough to conclude that our mother had mostly likely been re-patriated by the Russians and shipped east to the Soviet Gulags. And in fact, this is what did happen. (Mother worked in forestry camps for two years, under the crudest living conditions imaginable – inadequate nutrition, inadequate clothing, primitive tools, poorly-constructed barrack-style accommodations, etc.) The non-Soviet world at that time knew absolutely nothing about the men who had been "verschleppt" in 1941. So we concentrated on trying to learn if our mother was still alive, and where she might be living. Paul began to write letters – to the International Red Cross, to the Russian Embassy in Ottawa, to refugee organizations in Germany, to Canadian immigration officials in Ottawa, to any organization he thought might be able to help. He asked about other Engel and Brühler relatives as well. But it would be 1955 before we got a peak behind the Iron Curtain.

Nikita Khruschchev, First Secretary of the Soviet Union, addressing the United Nations in New York, 1960.

By invitation, Germany's Chancellor Konrad Adenauer visited the Soviet First Secretary Nikita Khrushchev in Moscow in September, 1955. As a result of this meeting, Russia agreed to release all German prisoners of war and interned civilians from the labor camps in which they had been living for ten years (since the end of the war). They were not allowed to return to Germany or to their former villages where they lived before the war broke out. But they could move, with permission, to other parts of the Soviet Union. Besieged by thousands of requests, Moscow had slowly begun to allow some families, particularly those without husbands or fathers, to join family members in East Germany (DDR), which always enjoyed a special status within the Soviet Union.

By chance, Emilie Engel learned of a woman who was being re-patriated to “the West”, and who was taking along a list of names of those left behind, which she planned to circulate as widely as possible. Emilie asked for her name to be added to the list. As it turned out, a friend of Emilie’s older sister Frieda eventually saw the list and recognized the name Emilie Engel. She quickly informed Frieda. It was the break we had been waiting for.

After five years living in Canada, we finally learned that our mother was still alive, and we knew where she was living. It was October 1955 before Mom received our first letter. The joy was great, but it would take more than five years before she could join us in Canada. The wheels of bureaucracy grind slowly, but nowhere slower than in the Soviet Union. Paul began a letter-writing campaign informing anyone he thought might be able help. The local media in Regina gradually picked up the story. Newspaper, radio and television coverage helped spread the story of a brother and sister team desperately trying to bring their ill and ailing mother to Canada. Moscow did not acknowledge any communications on the subject, and further complicating the matter, Canadian Immigration officials initially ruled that Emilie Engel was medically unfit to enter Canada.

Our persistence began to make headlines in September 1960. By this time we were desperate, because our mother, as a result of her failing health, had had to give up her job as a seamstress in a clothing factory in the city of Syktyvkar. We had already been sending whatever money we could spare, as well as care packages which became all the more important now. Regardless of the negative Canadian Immigration ruling, Paul determined that obtaining an exit visa from Moscow was still the biggest obstacle to being re-united with our mother.

Paul learned that Nikita Khrushchev, Premier of the Soviet Union, would be leading a Russian delegation to a United Nations session in New York City. Khrushchev was scheduled to address the United Nations on September 23, 1960. Paul decided to travel to New York and confront the First Secretary of the Soviet Union directly, and plead for our mother’s exit visa. We scraped enough money together and Paul left for Ottawa, where he hoped to lay the groundwork for a face-to-face meeting with Mr. Khrushchev. Prime Minister John Diefenbaker had already left for New York. Nevertheless Paul spent two days walking the halls of power in Ottawa, informing departments of his mother’s plight inside Russia, and of his plan to confront the Russian leader. Paul’s name and quest were already well known in Ottawa. A large file of correspondence was on file with External Affairs, as well as with the Russian Embassy in Ottawa. The Russian Ambassador’s office promised to send an inquiry to Moscow about the status of an exit permit application for our

Adele and Paul’s parents, Jakob and Emilie Engel.

mother. Paul was helped tremendously by Robert Moon, the political correspondent for the Regina Leader-Post who introduced Paul to various ministers and assistants, set up meetings, and coached Paul on proper etiquette and social guidelines. The advice to contact Mr. Moon had come from Paul's friend in Regina, Victor Richert of Richert Agencies, who made all of Paul's travel arrangements. Victor was also instrumental in arranging our mother's eventual trip from Moscow, Russia to Regina, Saskatchewan.

The Regina media closely followed the story of Paul's trip to Ottawa and New York. More newspapers began to pick up the story. I have a scrapbook full of newspaper clippings about Paul's trip, which really laid the groundwork for getting our mother to Canada. Correspondent Robert Moon accompanied Paul to New York. They met with members of the Russian delegation and with staff-members of the Russian Consulate at the United Nations. Paul was politely informed that a personal visit with First Secretary Khrushchev would not be possible. Nor would anyone even agree to hand-deliver a note from Paul to Mr. Khrushchev. The best he could do, he was told, was to write a personal letter of appeal and mail it, via the United Nations mail system, directly to the New York address where Khrushchev was staying during his visit. Paul was assured that Mr. Khrushchev's assistant would personally receive the letter. And so that is what happened. Copies of this letter were also filed with the Russian and Canadian Consular offices in New York. Paul returned to Ottawa, and re-visited several of the same offices he had visited a few days previously, reporting on the events in New York. Then he flew back to Regina. It had been a whirlwind eight days. I met him at the airport. We cried as we hugged each other, satisfied that we had done all that we could to bring our mother "home" to us.

As luck would have it, Canada's federal Minister of Immigration, Mrs. Ellen Fairclough, visited Regina in early October. She had not been in Ottawa when Paul was there. Paul arranged to meet her, and he was cordially received in the news room of The Leader-Post. She assured Paul that our mother would be given a "special" immigration permit directly from her department, "when" our mother was granted an exit visa. We were encouraged by the Minister's use of the word "when" rather than "if".

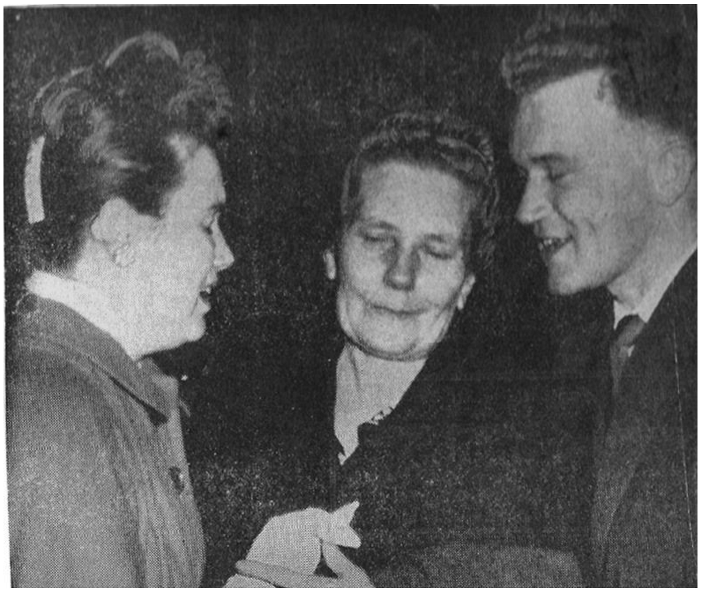
Later in October, we received a letter from the Russian Embassy in New York saying that Paul's letter had indeed been passed on to the "appropriate authorities" in Moscow "on the instructions of Mr. Khrushchev" and that Premier Khrushchev was aware of Emilie Engel's application to immigrate to Canada. We were sure that Paul's efforts in New York were bearing fruit, but we heard nothing further until the New Year. We were asked to submit personal affidavits and financial guarantees that we could support our mother in Canada. Paul's friend, Victor Richert was a huge help in preparing these documents, as he had been all along with his council and encouragement.

In January 1961 we were notified by Canadian Immigration in Ottawa that our mother had received some kind of permit from the Russia authorities. A letter from Mother shortly thereafter confirmed that she had received the necessary health permit, as well as an acknowledgement that permission from the Russian government to leave for Canada would follow. She was required to fill out more forms, and to submit a photograph of herself. "I hope to be with you by Easter," she wrote.

Sometime in March 1961, we received a letter from Minister Fairclough stating that our mother had been granted an exit permit from the Soviet Union. Her department sent a cable to Moscow authorizing an immigration visa for Canada. Emilie had already been notified by the Canadian embassy in Moscow that she had been granted the necessary permits and permissions from the Russian Government to immigrate to Canada. But she had yet to hear this directly from Moscow officialdom.

Suddenly a telegram cable from the Canadian Embassy in Moscow arrived in Regina. It read simply: "Mrs. Emilie Engel leaving Moscow….March 24, 1120 hours…..please check arrival in Regina and meet." After ten years in Canada, we could hardly believe this was real.[2]

Our mother landed in Regina late Saturday evening, March 25, 1961. Thanks to the media publicity, approximately three hundred people, including Regina Mayor Henry Baker, gathered at the airport to await the arrival of the plane. Many in the crowd carried flowers. Newspaper and television reporters jockeyed for spots to capture photographs. Paul and I met our Mom half-way down the ramp. None of us could speak; we could only cry and hug each other. The raw emotion brought tears to many in the crowd. A loud applause greeted us as we entered the Terminal building. Naturally, Mom was very tired, but also anxious and hesitant. She did not know what to think of the crowd and the reception. It had been 44 hours since she had left Moscow, flying KLM Royal Dutch Airlines via Brussels and Montreal. But before that, our mother had traveled two days by train from Syktyvkar to Moscow. It took a further ten days for all the bureaucratic arrangements to be finalized. All that was behind us now, and it was time to take her "home".



March 15, 1961. Adele and Paul meet their mother, after 16 years, at the Regina Airport.

I had not seen my mother in 16 years. I was only 9 and one-half years old when circumstances beyond our control separated me from my mother in Austria. Now here we were in Regina, sitting beside each other in the back seat of the car as we left the airport and drove to Paul's house. Hazy and distant childhood memories brought a confusing range of emotions and thoughts. Was this person really my mother? I remembered that I always had to look up to my mother, yet now I was the same size as she was, perhaps even a bit taller. The same kind of thoughts were troubling my mother as well. As we drove, she reached over and took my right hand, and felt for my ring finger. As a child, my hand had been crushed in a door frame, breaking my finger. When she felt my misshapen finger, she looked at me, and said, "“Ja, du bist bestimmt meine Tochter.” (Yes, you are definitely my daughter.) A mother’s love never forgets.

---

[2] Russia's "compassionate" decision to allow Emilie Engel to emigrate had a practical side. She would have been eligible for a Russian pension in 1961 at age 55. She had known health problems. She would soon be a cost to the "Soviet socialist paradise". It was a good time to grant permission to leave Russia.

Our Mom’s first night in Canada was her first night since May 1945 spent in a home shared with family members. Ten hours after arriving in Canada, that is, the very next morning, she attended Sunday service at Grace Lutheran Church, the first public religious worship she had attended since May 1945. One week later it was Easter Sunday, the first religious holiday celebrated since Christmas 1944. Since locating our mother in 1955, Paul and I had been writing weekly letters to her, and receiving many letters in reply. We gradually learned the story of our mother’s life after we became separated in Austria in May 1945. Still, it was painful to learn more about the ordeals she had to endure. That she survived at all is a testament to her strength of spirit and her determination to see her children again one day.

It was during the night of May 12, 1945 in the mountains not far from Bruck an der Mur, Austria when the truck carrying Emilie broke down. As the rest of the convoy streamed by, she shouted to no avail for someone to stop and pick her up. Within moments of the last vehicle fading into the darkness, anti-Nazi partisans surrounded the stalled truck. The German soldiers were seized as prisoners-of-war and marched away almost immediately. The civilian refugees were grouped under guard on the side of the road. There was still snow on the ground, forcing everyone to huddle for warmth. They were given no food, and in the morning, a small group of partisans marched them off towards the East. They were held at various small encampments along the way until they were turned over to a mixed band of Russian and Czech soldiers, which took them to Prague, Czechoslovakia (today Czech Republic). Emilie gradually lost track of the number of moves after that, taking her further and further to the East, and farther and farther away from her children. The refugees suffered the depravations of food, clothing and shelter. Many of the relocations were forced marches. Some were conducted with trucks and train boxcars.

Like hundreds of thousands of Germans and other non-Russian ethnic minorities, Emilie would spend the next ten years in the Soviet Gulag system of forced labor camps. She spent the first two winters in the western Ural Mountains in a lumber camp chopping, sawing and transporting logs to a river. Severe rheumatism forced her

Adele, translating for her mother. CKCK-TV interview, Regina.

removal from the lumber camp, which also deprived her of her meagre food rations. But given a work permit, she found housekeeping work for Russian government and military families in a nearby town. Somewhere in this time frame she learned through the "gulag grapevine" that her husband Jakob had died of malnutrition in a Russian hospital, confirming what she had long suspected. In 1950 she found a factory job where she learned to sew truck tarpaulins. She began to make inquiries about her children, and was informed that they were not living in the Soviet Union. 1n 1959 she obtained permission to move to Skytvkar[3] in the north Urals in order to work as a seamstress in a clothing factory there. In 1961 she received her exit permit to leave Russia.

Adele and Paul with their mother in Mayor Henry Baker's office, Regina.

The days and weeks after her arrival in Regina brought a flurry of interviews—follow-up stories by the Leader Post and by CKCK-Television (I have a digital copy of the interview). Mom was invited to the Mayor's office to sign the official guest register, and to receive a "key" to the city. In June 1962 Chatelaine magazine ran a feature article, written by Jerry Boultbee, about our story of bringing our mother to Canada. She was continually amazed at people's interest in her story.

Throughout her ordeals in Russia, my mother never blamed anyone for her mistreatment. It was the same for everyone, and she just accepted the situation as it was. Her strength and resilience

Emilia Engel (nee Brühler) reunited with her happy family, Regina.

---

[3] Syktvkar is located 1300 km northeast of Moscow, at 62 degrees north latitude.

came from her faith that her God was just and merciful. She had no control over the system, and so she just had to cope as best she could. I inherited many good qualities from my mother, but I am not sure I could have been that stoic through it all. Early on in life, I realized that I had to look out for myself. Maybe that is all that Mom was doing as well – just looking after herself, all the while holding out hope for the day when she would again be re-united with her children.

Adele Wagner (nee Engel) visiting her birth village, Neukron, Ukraine, 2017.

My mother died in Regina in 1996, just a few days shy of her ninetieth birthday. She had lived 35 years in Canada, surrounded by her family, discovering the joys of grandchildren and great-grandchildren. During those years, I became a Canadian citizen, and obtained my Grade 12 GED. Our family grew up, and now I too am a widow with grandchildren and great-grandchildren. But that is a story for another telling.

A natural consequence of aging, I think, is to reflect on the past. Many people begin to wonder if their lives have had any real meaning or purpose. I cannot explain why I felt the need to return to the village of Neukron where I was born. My trip to Ukraine in 2017 resulted in the need to write this story. The experience of visiting Neukron and the writing of this story have clarified for me many things about my life. They have made my life now seem “real” in ways that I cannot explain. It’s a peaceful and satisfying feeling and I am glad of it.