

Johanna (Alksne) Tataryn

.....a rough start to a full and busy lives

World War II displaced 45 million Europeans, meaning that people who found themselves at war's end (1945) living somewhere other than where they were living in 1939, when the war began. Many families were forced to re-locate more than once. Such was the case of the Alksne family from Riga, Latvia. Nearly 53,000 Germans were evacuated from Latvia in late 1939 by the German Wehrmacht and resettled in German-occupied Poland.¹ This was just one consequence of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact signed between Germany and Russia in August 1939.



Photo: Edward and Elsa (Bajohr) Alksne

The majority of Latvian Germans were urban and middle-class professionals. Edward Alksne (1877-1959) was an engineer, serving as a ship Captain on the Baltic Sea. He had married Elsa Bajohr (1885-1944) in 1907 and they had six children, including Roman Alksne, also educated as an engineer, as were his two brothers. The family had no choice but to leave everything behind in Riga and submit to the evacuation order to German-occupied Poland. Their new "home" would be Stettin, Poland (today Szczecin).



Photo: Roman and Olga Alksne married 05 July 1941.

From Stettin, Roman Alksne was conscripted into the German Wehrmacht, as was his older brother Werner. The family knows very little about Roman's military service.² However, he did manage to meet Olga Greiss, a kindergarten aide in Warsaw. Olga had been born in Samara, Russia and grew up in Poland. They met in Stettin and were married there in 1941. Johanna was born in Posen, German-occupied Poland (today Poznan) in December 1943. Her sister Veronika was born near Berlin in 1945 during the Alksne family's long flight from Poland. Roman's mother and two sisters had been killed on the same day in a bombing raid over Stettin in August 1944. They were buried in the same grave. Johanna never got to know her Grandmother, or the two aunts.

¹ Germans had been living in the Baltic Sea countries for over six hundred years, initially moving to the area as traders and Christian missionaries.

² Roman, not surprisingly, never talked about his service in the German Wehrmacht, and this is common among many war veterans.

As the Soviet Red Army pushed west towards Berlin, tens of thousands of refugees began to flee Poland, heading westward to Germany. Johanna remembers a story her mother told about their trek out of Poland into Germany. The people traveled in small groups, sticking to forested areas for protection, looking for places to spend the night. At one point their group was apprehended by Russian soldiers. They were lined up against a wall, and an execution squad was set up. In desperation, Johanna's mother (speaking in Polish) intervened with a personal plea to the Officer in charge. Astounded by the audacity of this woman, he ordered his men to stand down, and they moved on.

In 1945, all ethnic Germans were expelled from the Polish territories as part of the Allies' wider plan of European resettlement agreed upon at the Potsdam Conference (July 1945). This too involved the Edward Alksne family, now minus his wife and two daughters, and now homeless and with uncertain citizenship. The Alksne family next found itself in Neumünster, in Schleswig-Holstien. Roman joined the family there and he worked at odd jobs until they were re-located to the Buchholz camp for displaced persons near Hannover. Here they waited out the immigration process before they could depart for Canada.³

Seeing no future in Germany, Edward reached out to his brother-in-law Gerhard Neufeldt who was living in Rosenort, Manitoba, a German Mennonite community south of Winnipeg. Gerhard was married to the sister of Edward's wife, and he owned a sugar beet farm. Gerhard was also a Mennonite pastor, preacher, and teacher/principal. He agreed to sponsor the Alksne family to come to Canada. The extended group of 11 people arrived on board the ship General MB Steward in Halifax on 22 August 1947. The ship, having departed from Bremerhaven, was only the second one to arrive in Canada with post-war European immigrants.

The Winnipeg Free Press reported: "Bound for the sugar beet farm of G.P. Neufelt of Rosenort, Man., a Latvian family of 11 persons from a Canadian Pacific train at Winnipeg Monday evening. They were members of a party of more than 70 persons who recently arrived in Canada from displaced persons camps in Germany." The party of 11 was made up of Edward Alksne, his son Roman with his family, Edwards' son Joseph and his family and his daughter Irma. (The photo clip incorrectly identified Irma as Monica, Joseph's daughter.)

³ Nearly a quarter of a million post-war refugees came to Canada sponsored by relatives, and often church groups, and others under labor contracts to prospective employers. 1946-1962.



Bound for the sugar beet farm of G. P. Neufelt of Rosenort, Man., a Latvian family of 11 persons from a Canadian Pacific train at Winnipeg Monday evening. They were members of a party of more than 70 persons who recently arrived in Canada from displaced persons camps in Germany. From left to right they are: Edward Alksnis, his son, Joseph, carrying his young son, Wolfram, Elvira and Ewald Alksnis, Mrs. Joseph Alksnis, Monica Alksnis, a sister; Roman Alksnis, holding his daughter, Veronica Mrs. Roman Alksnis, and Johanna.

At first, Edward Alksne felt remorse, or perhaps guilt, at abandoning the family's history and heritage in Latvia. But after settling down in Manitoba, he felt safe and comfortable, and he realized coming to Canada was a good decision. Johanna remembers her grandfather well. Although educated as an engineer, Edward had also been an organist and choir director in Riga. "He was extremely musical," says Johanna, "and he composed many cantatas for church choirs." Johanna's sister Veronika has all of his musical compositions. Johanna remembers Edward as a serene and very private gentleman, always dressed well with hat, topcoat and cane, who often admonished his grandchildren to be quiet. He had many Lutheran Church contacts across Canada, and he often hitch-hiked to various cities to meet with them. Edward never re-married, and he died in Winnipeg in 1959. Johanna does not remember her father Roman ever expressing regret for leaving Europe.

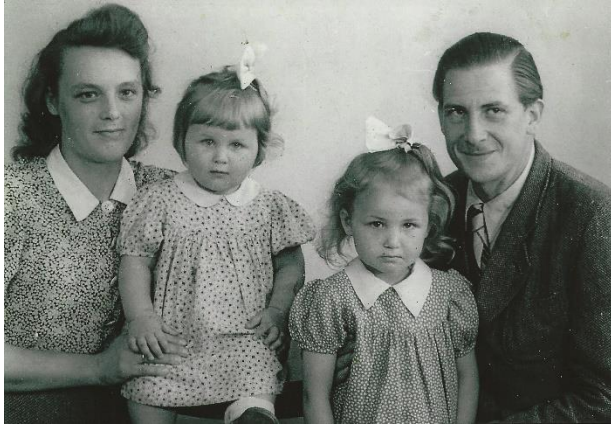


Photo: Roman and Olga with Johanna and Veronika, 1947.

Roman and Olga settled down in Rosenort with their two young daughters. Three sons and one more daughter were born in Manitoba – Arnold Roman, Evelyn Klara, Walter John, and Reginald Wilfred. Roman soon started an electrical business which was quickly busy helping farmers with Manitoba's rural electrification program. The family next

moved north to Fischer Branch, where Roman continued the same work. The family later moved to Winnipeg where Roman worked for the Canada Cement Company and for CNR railways. By this time, Johanna had completed her public education, and would have preferred to pursue medical studies. However, the family was very poor, and needed the income Johanna could earn by joining the workforce. Her first job was with the Royal Bank in Fort Gary (Winnipeg).

Johanna remembers a very strict upbringing in her home. They were not allowed to go to movies, or dances or parties of any kind. Her Dad was very strict, as was her mother, and Johanna says she never once even thought about challenging their authority in the home. But Roman was also very musical, playing the organ and piano, as well as trombone, trumpet and mandolin. From this background, Johanna learned to play the organ and piano as well, and the three sisters loved to sing together. Their mother often joined them. Johanna was only 5 years old and Veronika was 3 when they gave their first performance at the Christmas Service in Morris, Manitoba. They sang "Ihr Kinderlein Kommet". Their lives from then on would be filled with music.

The next move for the Roman and Olga Alksne family was to Saskatoon. For years Roman had felt the call to serve his Lord through the Lutheran Church. In 1963 Roman entered the Lutheran Theological Seminary in Saskatoon. Johanna was able to arrange a transfer to Saskatoon with the Royal Bank, and for two years, the sisters Johanna and Veronika contributed their earnings to the Alksne household, so that their father could become a Lutheran Pastor. Johanna remembers traveling later with her Dad when he preached in small towns. She would play the piano and lead the singing. Sometimes all the siblings would accompany their Dad where they would add a four-part harmony to the songs.



Photo: Johanna and Elmer Tataryn.

On a train trip back to Winnipeg to visit friends, Johanna was attracted to a fellow passenger, Elmer Tataryn, the son of a Ukrainian family from Bukovina. Elmer was born in Gimli, Manitoba but grew up in nearby Arborg. They were married by her father in 1966 in Radisson, Saskatchewan, Roman's first parish. In fact, Roman married each of his children, and baptized all his grandchildren. Johanna's brother Arnold also became a Lutheran pastor, as did sister Veronika's husband, William

Kiesman. Roman was eventually called to Alberta, where he served the church for many years before his passing in 1994. Olga died in 2009.

Of course, Johanna herself remembers very little from her early years in Europe. She was not yet four years old when she arrived in Canada, but she has one vivid memory of seeing wild and colorful tulips in northern Germany.⁴ Starting a new life in Canada was challenging for everyone in the family. The family naturally continued to speak German in the home and Johanna remembers being bullied at school in the early years because of her poor English skills and other kids would make fun of her accent. Johanna now speaks a flawless, accent-free English, but she is still fluent in her native German as well. Johanna has lived a very full life in Saskatoon as a homemaker and mother, but also as an entrepreneur and as an engaged community supporter, contributing to the economic and cultural life of our city and province.

Johanna was a member of the Home-and-School Associations where her children attended school. As a young mother, she continued to work part-time at the bank, but she eventually opened up her own flower shop, a business which grew to include 3 locations in Saskatoon.⁵ She created many floral arrangements after-hours in her own home. Queen Elizabeth II visited Saskatoon in 1987, and Johanna's business provided the floral arrangements for the service at St. John's Cathedral, and for the Queen's hotel suite in the Bessborough Hotel, as well as the personal bouquet carried by the Queen.

⁴ Johanna's eye for beauty would shine in later life through her flower business, her sewing, and her egg-decorating.

⁵ Johanna got the idea from her mother, who had opened up a flower shop in Edmonton.



Photo: Johanna, Veronika and Evelyn.

In 1961, teenagers Johanna and Veronika auditioned at CBC Winnipeg Studios for a local variety program. In 1986, younger sister Evelyn joined them and they formed "Edelweiss Harpstrings Musik". It was the beginning of an amazing musical journey – from Morris, Manitoba to Munich, Germany; from Biggar and Cabri to Camrose and Calgary where they performed at the prestigious Spruce Meadows Equestrian Show for 10 consecutive years. From Edmonton and Stony Plain, Alberta to Salmon Arm, BC, Kelowna to Kimberley, Lanigan to Leavensworth, Washington; from Rosenort and Rose Valley to Regina where they performed at the Mosaic Cultural Festival; Rosetown, North Battleford, Leduc, Banff, Lake Louise and Golden, BC and from Vernon to Vancouver. They recorded six CDs. They sang at Saskatoon's Festival of Trees, and of course many times at Saskatoon's FolkFest German Pavillion. In 2019 they performed at Folk Fest's Grand Finale. Thirty-three years of singing and sharing their passion for song, in German and in English. With Zither Harp, keyboard and accordion, their goal was to present their Folk and Gospel music in a unique blend of harmony, humor, warmth and sincerity.

Johanna has long been involved in the German community in Saskatoon, serving as a Board member for the Saskatoon German Club Concordia (past and present) and for the Saskatchewan German Council, serving as President 2004 to 2006. She sang with the Volksliederchor Concordia choral group for 30 years. She sewed costumes for the choir members, as well as for her family's appearances at Folk Fest. She was active in the Ladies group at the "old" Concordia Club. She managed the German Pavilion at Folk Fest for several years. Johanna looks fondly through her collection of Folk Fest photos. "It was always a lot of fun," she says, "and the whole family was involved. One year 17 Alksne family members were Folk Fest volunteers, doing everything from cooking, cleaning up, and of course, singing." For the Alksnes, Folk Fest became a family affair. Johanna is proud to say her grandson is now a dancer with the Concordia Alpenrose Schuhplattler Verein.

Johanna's busy life did not preclude motherhood. She and Elmer raised four wonderful children: Kristine who runs a Mission Thrift store in another city, son Anthony who is an assistant fire chief, son Mark who is an RCMP officer and son Justin who is a building contractor. Johanna is very proud to say that each one is a hard-working and productive Christian person contributing to the communities in which they live. Together the four children have given Johanna the joy of 11 grandchildren.⁶

⁶ Elmer Tataryn died in 2008.

Needless to say, Johanna was devastated by the loss of the “old” Concordia Club, which burned to the ground in September 2009. But looking through her old Folk Fest pictures, a smile quickly reappears along with all the good memories.

The Soviet Union officially dissolved in 1991. Freed from communist rule, about 4 million ethnic Germans began moving to Germany, where many made the decision to move to Canada. Working with Manitoba-based Star 7 International, Johanna began to help new German immigrants who arrived in Saskatoon, many of whom had come from Kazakhstan, often housing them in her own home, some for months. Her many efforts to help these new German immigrants alerted Saskatchewan German Council to the need for a German Immigration Settlement Advisor program, which was formally established in 2010 with government funding. Through these years, Johanna was also a Funeral Director with Acadia Funeral Chapel.

Johanna is a talented seamstress. Her sewing centre is now set up right in her dining/kitchen area. She designed and sewed dozens of fabric carry-bags during the Covid years. Her creativity shines through in the newly-designed and crafted fabric “saddle” bags for people who use walkers and wheelchairs. Even the choice of fabric illustrates her creativity and eye for beauty.

A more recent venture involves Johanna’s egg-decorating, long a German (as well as Ukrainian) tradition. However, she now uses plastic egg shells of various sizes and creates beautiful designs on each unique egg. No two are alike. They are for sale at various shops and venues around the city. Johanna’s eggs are often used as fund raisers for various causes. Recently her eggs were sold at her Church to raise funds for Ukrainian humanitarian aid.

Johanna still finds time to volunteer two days per week at Mission Thrift, a store which re-sells donated clothing, furniture and household items, for the benefit of Bible League Canada. Johanna’s time at Mission Thrift is a testament to her lifelong devotion to her Church, continuing the family legacies of her father and grandfather. Johanna’s legacy will be one of a loving wife, mother and grandmother who served, and still serves, her community in multiple ways. Her commitment to her German heritage and culture will be remembered in Saskatoon’s German community for many years.

Johanna speaks with pride about each of her six siblings. It is obvious they are, and have been, a very close family, celebrating together their love of music, their devotion to their Church, and their German identity. Through Veronika, the family has preserved an impressive collection of old family photographs. The Alksnes are a very accomplished German family, and another example of the positive contributions made to our country through immigration, and to our German identity in Canada.

Yes, hers was a rough start to an amazing life, but Johanna would not look on her life that way. Looking back on her life, Johanna says only that she has learned just how little one can

have and still survive. After all that she has accomplished, this is what stands out for her. Thank you Johanna, for sharing your story.



How good it is to give thanks to You, O Lord
To sing in your honor,
With the music of stringed instruments
And with melody on the harp. Psalm 9:1, 3