

Julia Richter, geborene Lohrey

--a young person's perspective of immigration to Canada from Germany

Historical Background: In 1763, after the end of the Seven Years War in central Europe, the famous Russian Czarina, Catharine the Great, invited foreigners to settle in Russia. Russian agents traveled throughout war-torn western Europe, spreading the word. Thousands of discontented people, mainly Germans, responded to generous incentives to immigrate, giving Russia a substantial German population, which for two centuries would play an important role in developing the agricultural potential of the Russian economy.

The first mass movement of Germans to Russia occurred in the years 1764 to 1767. More than seven thousand families (about 25,000 individuals), mainly from Hesse, but also from other parts of south-western Germany made the arduous journey by sea, by river and by land. A settlement area around Saratov, on both sides of the Volga River, had been set aside for the arriving German settlers. By 1767, one hundred and three German villages had been founded in the lower Volga Region. These Germans became known as the Volga Germans. Conditions for the first generation were very turbulent and impoverishing, but perseverance and hard work eventually established a successful German agricultural society on the Volga River. Those who had not voluntarily left on their own before the Russian Revolutions of 1917, learned to survive and to live under communist rule until August, 1941. As a result of Germany's invasion of Russia in June, 1941, Stalin ordered the deportation of the "enemy aliens", ie. the ethnic Germans in Russia. Four hundred thousand Volga Germans would be rounded up and crudely transported to Siberia and other areas of Asiatic Russia.

The early German families which settled along the Volga River included the ancestors of **Julia Richter**, whose immigration story follows.

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There is a Facebook Group page called "Germans in Saskatchewan". A year ago, I posted a reference about Germans who once lived in the former Russian Empire and later in the Soviet Union, and now live in Saskatchewan. I received an excited response from **Julia Richter**, "Yes, that is exactly my family's story!" It took some time to arrange a meeting because Julia had recently given birth to a second son, but in May 2024, I finally sat down with Julia to hear her story. I quickly realized that Julia belongs to a large family here in Canada, and in order to tell her story, I would have to tell the family's story as well. Julia has four siblings, all here in Saskatchewan. As well, Julia has fifteen aunts and uncles, and dozens of cousins, although those from her Dad's side live in Germany. It is also quickly obvious, from the way Julia speaks about her family, that there is a special closeness which connects them all.

Julia Lohrey was born in 1992 in the town of Sögel (or Soegel), Lower Saxony. She grew up in another town not far away – Lorup. The location is north of Münster and west of Bremen, and not far from the North Sea.

Julia immigrated to Canada in 2007 with her parents and 3 siblings. A younger sister was born here in Saskatchewan. Julia's Aunt (her mother's sister) and her family immigrated at the same time, and since then another sister of her mother's has also come to Canada. The aunts live in the Hanley area. All three sisters now work at the same business in Saskatoon. Julia also worked at this business before she became a stay-at-home mom. Julia and her family, along with her widowed mom live on an acreage in the Dundurn area. Tragically, Julia's father, Alexander Lohrey, died in an outdoor recreational accident in June of 2023.



Photo: David Lohrey and Frida nee Lautenschläger.

Julia's dad, Alexander (also known as Sasha) Lohrey was born in 1968 in Omsk, Russia. Omsk is a large city (over one million population) in southwestern Siberia, close to northern Kazakhstan. Alexander's family had voluntarily left the southern Volga River region some decades earlier, likely in response to a government program which was encouraging development in the Omsk

area. Alexander was the son of David Lohrey and Frida Lautenschläger. Having previously moved to Omsk prior to the start of World War II, the Lohrey and Lautenschläger families missed the brutal deportation of the 400,000 Volga Germans in August of 1941. Nevertheless, after World War II they were Germans living under Soviet rule behind the Iron Curtain.

Alexander left school as a teenager and began working on the collective farm as a field laborer, as did all the men in the village. It meant extra income for the large Lohrey family which included eight siblings. Alexander's mother Frida worked on the collective farm as well, milking cows, which was normally "women's work". In his free time, Alexander loved working on old motorcycles, and he became an expert motorcycle mechanic. When he turned 18 years of age, he served the mandatory two years in the Russian military. He learned to drive large transport trucks, and later instructed others so they could obtain the necessary license. During those two years he was not allowed leave to visit his home.



Alexander Lohrey, third from the left, on the day he left for military service in Russia. Joined by his brother David (left), a friend, and his sister Katharina.

Meanwhile, Julia's Mom, Lidia Walter, was born in 1973 in Kazakhstan. She was the daughter of David Walter and Matilda Stang. They too were Volga Germans, and their families were deported by the Soviet government from their home region in 1941 to Kazakhstan. Because they were Germans, they were deemed disloyal to Moscow, despite the fact that Germans had been living in the area for nearly two hundred years. Lidia went to school in Kazakhstan and learned to milk the cows on the collective farm where her parents worked.

The Soviet Union officially dissolved in December 1991, but in the years prior (especially after the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989), it became possible for Germans to apply to immigrate to Germany, which accepted these ethnic German people as German citizens. This was a special provision of the post-war German constitution. Germans who had been stripped of their citizenship because of World War II on political, racial or religious grounds, as well as their descendants could now return to Germany and live as German citizens. This provision is still in effect.

Julia's Grandmother Matilda reminisces that life for her mother (Emma Stang) in Kazakhstan was hard, especially in the first years after the forced re-location of the Germans from the Volga River region around the city of Saratov. Struggling to raise a family, Emma and her children were often hungry, living mostly on potatoes and flour-based dishes. Living conditions slowly improved, but work on the collective farms did not pay well, and there were few opportunities available outside of the collectives. When the Soviet Union fell in 1989, Julia's grandparents jumped at the chance to immigrate to Germany, as did Matilda's mother and siblings. Thousands of German families left hundreds of Kazakhstan's towns and cities nearly deserted in the early 1990s.¹ Life in Germany was easier in many ways – more jobs, more income, more food, more consumer goods and better weather. They did not miss the large snowfalls which they had experienced in Kazakhstan.

Matilda observes that the countryside here in Saskatchewan is very similar to Kazakhstan. The weather is also similar, at least regarding the seasonal temperatures. However there is less snow here than in Kazakhstan. But life here is better in every way, she says! The young people have so many opportunities which they never would have had in Kazakhstan.

¹ Personal note: This is also the story of many of my relatives living in Germany today. MW



Photo: Alexander building their family home in Lorup, Germany where they lived from 1998-2005.

Alexander Lohrey, along with his parents and 7 siblings, immigrated to Germany in 1990. In 1991 the Walter family successfully applied to immigrate to Germany. Lidia along with her parents and eight siblings made a new home in Germany. Lidia continued her education and through mutual friends, she met Alexander Lohrey. They married in 1991. Julia was born in Germany, the first of their five children. In Germany, Alexander trained and qualified as an industrial welder. It is a trade much in demand around the world. Alexander's wife Lidia had relatives (aunts, uncles, cousins) living in the Steinbach, Manitoba area. Alexander had cousins living in British Columbia. With Alexander's trade skills, and with family already in Canada, immigration should have been easy.

Alexander did not like living in Germany. For him, the country was too busy and too crowded. Beginning in 2005, Alexander traveled twice to Canada to "see for himself" what the country had to offer. He decided to immigrate to Winnipeg. He sold their home in Germany in 2005 and moved the family in with his parents in Markhausen while they waited for the necessary documents to immigrate to Canada. When the process with the Manitoba Employment regulations bogged down, Alexander's immigration agent looked to Alberta where a potential job was identified. Here again, the provincial process of approval came to a standstill. The immigration agent advised Alexander to consider Saskatchewan because the government had a fast-track system for selected trades, welding being one of them. Overall, Alexander found the Canadian immigration process to be quite frustrating.



Their immigration adventure began with relatives driving them to Amsterdam. They next flew to London, and from there to Toronto and Winnipeg, where Alexander purchased a car, and the family drove to Dundurn, Saskatchewan. The Lohrey family arrived in Saskatchewan in July, 2007. Alexander soon began working for CNH Industrial (New Holland Agriculture) in Saskatoon.

Lidia's sister Olga along with her family came at the same time as the Lohreys, and settled in Hanley. Lidia's brother, wife and family have since immigrated to Steinbach, and four other Walter siblings have also come to live in Canada. Lidia, Olga, and another sister, Helen, all work at the same business in Saskatoon. In total, six of Lidia's siblings now live in Canada. Two have remained in Germany. Their parents, David and Matilda Walter immigrated in 2009 and joined Olga and her family in Hanley. David Walter died in Hanley in 2012. Matilda still lives in Hanley. Her siblings are now split between Canada (near Winnipeg) and Germany. Her mother Emma died in Germany.

Alexander's parents and all eight of his siblings have remained in Germany. Similarly, Sergej Richter, Julia's husband, has no family members living in Canada. They have all remained in Germany as well.

Julia began her education in Germany, attending to the end of Grade Nine before immigrating to Saskatchewan. She completed Grades 10, 11 and 12 in Hanley, SK. When asked to compare the education systems of Germany and Saskatchewan, she observed that the classroom setting was more formal in Germany. Students never joked with the teacher. The students stood up when the teacher entered the room. Julia liked the more relaxed atmosphere of her Saskatchewan school and she really liked the fact that the national anthem was sung every morning. In terms of academics, Julia feels the academic standards are more advanced in Germany. She said that the mathematics and sciences which she studied in Grade 10 in Hanley had already been covered in her Grade Nine year in Germany. When I commented on her perfect and un-accented English, she said she had the highest score in English Grammar in her Grade 10 class at Hanley High School!

After graduating, she worked in Saskatoon. In 2013, an acquaintance in Germany contacted Julia through Facebook, inquiring about life in Canada, because he was thinking about leaving Germany as well. The next year, Julia traveled to Germany to visit family, and also to meet Sergej Richter. They started dating, and in 2015, Sergej came to Saskatchewan for a visit. He decided that he would like to stay. Julia went back to Germany with Sergej to help with the immigration process. As a German citizen, Julia had no trouble finding a job in the interim. In 2017, with Sergej's working visa in hand, they returned to Canada and were married. They lived in Saskatoon until 2019 when they moved to Hanley, in order to be closer to Julia's aunts and cousins. Julia and Sergej moved to her mother's acreage near Dundurn after the untimely death of her father in 2023. Their two sons were born in 2019 and 2022.

Random thoughts comparing Germany and Canada/Saskatchewan:

Julia's Dad, Alexander never really felt at home in Germany. While living in Russia, he felt like an outsider because he was German. Living in Germany he was made to feel like an outsider also, because he was "Russian". On the other hand, he never felt any similar discrimination in Saskatchewan. Alexander never missed Germany at all, despite his parents and siblings who still live there. Julia also feels that racism or discrimination is not so blatant here as it is in Germany.

On a more positive note, Julia feels that family life is much closer in Germany. Life revolves around the family more so than around a social circle of friends. Cousins tend to associate more with each other than with friends. (This would apply especially to larger families like the Lohrey and Walter families. – MW) In Canada, the social circle seems to be more important than family, according to Julia.

When asked to compare living in Germany versus living in Saskatchewan, Julia said that the relationship with a boss or supervisor is always formal. A strict social distance between managers and employees is normally observed. The adjustments to Canada and Saskatchewan of course required a working ability in English. This was not a problem for Julia, but it was for her parents and aunts. Sergej had studied English in the German education system as well, but was not as fluent as Julia when they immigrated. Equally important as the language, Julia feels, is understanding how the workplace functions – what is acceptable, and what isn't.

When asked about the benefits of life in Saskatchewan, Julia's first response was, "Freedom!" By way of explanation, she says that so much of life is more regulated and therefore more costly in Germany. Her husband Sergej says that here he can go to the gas station, purchase a fishing license, and head to the lake. Not so in Germany where you first have to attend a special course, and write an exam. Hunting is even more regulated. In Germany one can hunt only as a member of an organized hunting party, where "pushers" are used to flush the game out of hiding towards the hunters. And it is very expensive to hunt. Sergej loves to hunt and fish here in Saskatchewan, and the family buys very little meat at the grocery store. Julia and Sergej appreciate the slower pace of life in Saskatchewan. They enjoy the feeling of being more connected to nature than is possible in Germany. There are far fewer people, and hence far fewer crowded spaces. They like the wide open spaces of our province, and their acreage has a special appeal. A drawback however is the dust and the often rutted grid roads.

Julia admits that she does miss the food in Germany, especially the breads and buns, AND the chocolate, she quickly adds.

Julia's husband, Sergej Richter is the son of Waldemar Richter and Tatjana Baumtrock. He was born in Kazakhstan in 1993 and immigrated as a baby in 1995 to Germany with his parents and a brother. One more brother was born in Germany. Sergej has established himself as a builder of decks and fences, working not only in the local area, but has also taken on jobs farther afield like Candle Lake, several hours north. During the off-season when he is not building decks and fences, Sergej works with a friend framing houses. Sergej qualified as a journeyman carpenter in Germany where he had worked as a framer, but also as a cabinet maker, trade skills much in demand in Saskatchewan.

Both Alexander's and Lidia's families preserved their German language while living in the Soviet Union. They were educated in the Russian language, of course, and the language on the street was Russian. Nevertheless the Lohrey and Walter families maintained their connection to

Germany via the German language. German remains the language spoken within the Lohrey family here in Saskatchewan. Julia and Sergej speak German to their two little boys.

Julia's family continues Canada's long-standing tradition of German immigrants bringing their skills and education to Canada, along with the German work ethic. They have become productive Canadian citizens who appreciate what Canada and Saskatchewan have to offer them. They enjoy the freedom to preserve their German culture and language in the quiet privacy of their homes. Theirs have been lives in transition, from Russia to Germany to Saskatchewan. It has been a long journey. While recent re-locations were voluntary, previous ones were not. In Saskatchewan, Julia and family feel they have found a home where they can thrive while enjoying the quiet and un-crowded countryside.



Julia Richter, nee Lohrey with husband Sergej and sons.

Photo Gallery below:

A nice collection of old family photos from Russia.



Left Photo: Julia's Great-Great-Grandfather Theodor Lohrey in the Russian army, standing on the left. He was born in 1880 in the German Volga Colonies, near Saratov.

Right Photo: Great-Grandfather Theodor Lohrey and his wife Anna-Lisa NN.



Julia's Great Grandparents, on her father's side. Johannes Lautenschläger and his wife Emilia NN.



Julia's Great Grandparents, on her mother's side. Johannes Walter and Paulina nee Lautenschläger.



Julia's Great Grandmother Paulina Walter and her mother Lisakaterina Lautenschläger (Julia's Great-Great Grandmother)