

JOSEPH WEISS, 1852 – 1921, my great grandfather.

Joseph was born in Selz 01 June, 1852. His father Karl Joseph was 38 years old. His mother was Elizabeth Degenstein, 33. Joseph would have been born just as the work and toil of two generations of Germans in South Russia was beginning to blossom. By 1859 the population of Selz had risen to 1,573 souls as the 104 founding families of 1808 had firmly taken root. Of these, 68 families had come from Alsace, and indeed the majority of all six villages in the Kutschurgan district were Alsatian Catholics. Selz was named after Seltz on the River Rhine, a small ancient town with over a thousand years of history, about 25 miles north of Strasbourg in present-day France. The village of Selz, Kherson province, Odessa district is located about 60 versts (60 km) northwest of Odessa. The first mayor of Selz was an Alsatian farmer from Neeweiler named Michael Fetsch. Today's Russian name for Selz is Limanskoye. Many immigrants to North America from this area simply listed "Odessa" as their previous residence.

Although living in Russia, Joseph would have grown up totally German. He would have spoken only German at home, in school, and listened to German sermons in church. He would have attended sumptuous three-day "hochzeits", and celebrated "Dreikönig", the Feast of Epiphany on January 6, or the twelfth night of the Christmas Season. He would have celebrated his "Namenstag" or "Names Day", Saint Joseph, the carpenter of Nazareth, on March 19. As a youngster he would learned to be apprehensive of the "Belzenickl" on Christmas Eve, who punished small boys and girls who did not behave at home. He would have learned to play cards with a variety of card games, including "durakel". He would have learned mild profanities from his father, like "A G'witter noch amol!" and "A Starndunnerwetter". He would have eaten the same foods that I did growing up: kuchen, borscht, schmutzkiechel, Kässeknepfle, Schwartemaje, palatchinta, koladetz, and many others. Joseph lived his German culture in peace and freedom. Only as an adult, raising his growing family, did he begin to feel the effects of a Russian backlash. As he lived through the apex of German culture in South Russia, so he also lived to see the beginning of the end. Joseph died in Selz in 1921, according to the EWZ record of his son-in-law, Friedrich Thomas. I don't know the cause of death, but 1921 coincides with the first large-scale famine which followed the October Revolution and the Russian Civil War. Joseph died in his sixty-ninth year, coincidentally the same age at which my father, Remigius, died.

By 1912, Selz had become quite a sophisticated town. It had grown to 2,966 people, keeping in mind that many families had already left to settle in daughter colonies and to emigrate. In 1912, there were 298 yard-lots in the town. While agriculture had been the principal occupation of the villagers for most of the preceding 100 years, by 1912 almost half of the householders were engaged in some craft or trade. There was simply not enough land. The majority of the artisans were fork makers and wagon smiths, whose products were sold all over Russia. As well as being the administrative centre of the Kutschurgan district, Selz became known as an important manufacturing center. From Joseph Height's book: "There were nine flour mills, of which three were steam-driven, an iron foundry, a plumbing shop, 4 paint shops, 6 cabinet shops, 49 wood-working shops and 29 blacksmith shops...(as well as) 32 stores and shops". A number of wine taverns, whiskey stores, and even a tobacco mill attested to the prosperity of the town. During Joseph's time, pipe-smoking was common among the men, and snuff was a great delight to the older women. In 1912, Selz had a large parochial school, a Progymnasium or Junior High School, an orphanage and a 40-bed community home for the elderly, sick and poor, as well as two credit unions. Selz held a weekly "bazaar" or market where farmers sold livestock and farm produce. Twice a year the town hosted a "Jahmarkt" or country fair. Up until World War I, Selz was considered the wealthiest of the Kutschurgan towns.

But rising above all these accomplishments, the Selz people were most proud of their church, "The Church of the Assumption". A veritable basilica, this monumental cathedral was built in classical Renaissance style with two neo-baroque towers. Constructed of quarried limestone, it was 167 feet

long, 77 feet wide, and 47 feet high. The twin towers stretched to 190 feet. Every feature inside and out reflected the best materials and workmanship. It had no equal anywhere in the diocese and was generally considered one of the finest churches in all of South Russia, (Joseph Height). My grandparents would get married in this church. It was financed entirely by the voluntary contributions of the 370 families of Selz. The building committee was headed by Rochus Rissling, and driven by the indomitable spirit of Father Joseph Nold, a native of nearby Franzfeld. (Father Nold married my grandparents.) Begun in 1897, the new church was consecrated by Bishop Anton Zerr on Sunday, November 25, 1901. No doubt, Joseph Weiss was present at the celebrations, having provided some of the voluntary labor and contributing his share of the 130,000 rubles cost. It is commonly said that “necessity is the mother of invention”; likewise the story of Selz gives proof to the dictum—agriculture is the mother of civilization.

Sometime in the 1870's, Joseph Weiss married Margaretha Goldade. Margaretha was born 23 March, 1849 in Selz, making her 3 years older than Joseph. Margaretha's parents were Stephan Goldade and Genoveva Thomas. Joseph's and Margaretha's marriage certificate was not located in Selz Church records, although both had grown up in Selz. Joseph's older brother, Ludwig, was married in Selz in 1869, as was Joseph's older sister, Cecilia in 1871.

Children of Joseph Weiss and Margaretha Goldade:

1. Joseph Weiss was born 12 Jun 1874. I assume this child died young because no further evidence or reference has been found.
2. Anton was born 24 October 1876 and his marriage record gives his age as 22, when he married Barbara Mueller on 02 August, 1899. I have records for six children—Margaretha, Fransiska, Joseph, Caspar, Eugenia, Peter. They would be first cousins to my Dad. The 1944 village map of Selz shows a resident “Pet. Weiss”. It may be assumed that this is the same Peter.
3. Elizabeth, born 11 May 1880 in Selz. Elizabeth married Johannes Schwab on 30 October, 1900 in Mannheim, another Kutschurgan village. I have the EWZ record of their daughter, Magdalene, who was married to Johannes Weisbeck. Magdalene made the trip back to Germany with five children in the summer of 1944. Another EWZ record indicates that Elizabeth was married to a Ludwig Schwab, so she was possibly married a second time.
4. **Konrad**, born 14 December, 1882. He married Brigetta Fetsch on 10 August, 1908. My **grandparents**, Konrad and Brigetta were born in Selz, grew up in Selz, and emigrated to Canada in April 1913. Konrad was the only Weiss from this family to come to North America. (A retrieved birth record actually gives Conrad's birthday as 09 December, 1882.)
5. Dorothea was born 26 March 1885, and I assume she died young as I have found no further reference to her. So far, her name has not appeared in any death records.
6. Genovieve was born 18 October, 1887 and named after her maternal grandmother. Genovieve married Dominik Baumstarck in August of 1910. EWZ records show their children as Margaretha born 02 April, 1922, Johannes born 17 May 1924, and Elizabeth born 29 July 1927. All were born in Selz, cousins my Dad never knew.
7. Margaretha was born in Selz on 21 July, 1890. Because this Margaretha is not part of oral family history, I can assume that this girl died very young, or perhaps in child-birth because we know that Joseph's first wife, Margaretha Goldade, died and he re-married.

Joseph Weiss married a second time to Fransizka Weichel in Selz on 22 November, 1893. I have conflicting records on the marriage date, but Fransizka is listed as a widow, 28 years old. On an EWZ record, her father's name is given as Martin Weichel. I do not know the name of her first husband, but

family lore is that she brought a daughter, Regina, into the Joseph Weiss family. I have found no confirmation of this. On their EWZ records, Jakob and Brigetta agree that their mother Fransizka died in 1933, but one says she died in Selz, the other in Elsass. Elsass was another Kutschurgan village. You will note that 1933 coincides with the devastating famine years of 1932-33, as Stalin enforced his system of collectivization of agriculture. While the entire country starved, he sold every kernel of grain the country produced to obtain foreign currency to fund a growing military. In January, 2004 I received a death record – 08 Nov 1901-- for a Fransisca Weiss, 13 years of age, with parents recorded as Joseph Weiss and Fransisca Weigel. A thirteen year old in 1901 would have been born in 1888, and thus could not be their child. Is this perhaps the girl, Regina, Fransisca Weigel's daughter, about whom Conrad told his children? Or is the age incorrect, and this is really the daughter born in 1899? See below.

Children of Joseph Weiss and Fransizka Weichel:

1. Jakob, born 31 July, 1894. He married Margarete Liebham on 02 October, 1918, and their EWZ forms list 3 children: Agnesia, Joseph, and Jakob. The form says that Joseph is in a Hitler Youth Camp in Prussia. He would have been 17 that summer they were forced to leave Selz and trek to Poland. All boys and young men were pressed into military service. Keep in mind too, that nearly all of the Germans from Russia that survived WW II were claimed by Stalin and forcibly re-located to Asiatic Russia after the war. Jakob's name appears on a list titled "The Selz 1919 Military Lists" found in the Odessa Archives. His father is given as Joseph and his year of birth is listed as 1894—definitely the same Jakob, half-brother to my grandfather Konrad.
2. Stephan. I only have this name from Aunt Betty's and Uncle Frank's notes. I have no information on Stephan.
3. Fransisca, born 21 Jan 1899. Retrieved from Saratov archives. No other information.
4. Brigetta, born 01 May 1901, married Friedrich Thomas of Selz on 20 October, 1920. Brigetta and their 21-year old son, Nikolaus, are listed on Friedrich's EWZ form.

Except for Konrad, I do not know the ultimate fate of any of Joseph's children. From EWZ records, I do know that Elizabeth, Genovieve, Jakob and Brigetta survived the turbulence of post-revolution Russia and the two great famines, because they were registered in 1944 in the holding camps in Poland. In the fall of 2004, I established contact with Jakob Weiss, son of Jakob, and Luise Weiss, widow of Joseph Weiss, son of Jakob.