

ONCE IN A LIFETIME

The expression “once in a lifetime” is perhaps over-used, but Sunday, 28 September was, for me, truly a once-in-a-lifetime experience. After all, a 200-year Jubilee can only occur once. The year 2008 marks the passage of two hundred years since the first Rhineland Germans ventured into the Kutschurgan Valley, Odessa district, having been enticed there by the promises of Czar Alexander I. The Germans built six villages there, which served as the foundation of their culture and Catholic faith for 136 years. The central economic and administrative center for those villages was the village of Selz, today called Limanske. It lies 60 kilometers or 40 miles (straight-line distance) WNW of Odessa city center, nestled up against the big liman or estuary which connects to the marshy delta of the Dniester River. To the west, several miles across the water, is the Autonomous Transniester Republic of Moldova.

Selz is special for me, because it is the birthplace of my father’s parents. My grandparents married there and had three daughters before they emigrated to Canada in 1913, the peak year of outward migration of Germans from South Russia. They sang in the choir of that great cathedral, The Church of the Assumption, which today exists in a sad state of ruin and neglect. My grandmother’s direct ancestor, Michael Fetsch, was the first mayor of Selz, and her second cousin, Alexander Fetsch, was the last German mayor of Selz. Selz was home to the Weiss and Fetsch families for five generations before my grandparents, Konrad Weiss and Brigetta Fetsch, decided that the unknown of North America was a better option than the growing turmoil of South Russia.

Selz has survived, but it has endured much. Once considered the most prosperous German colony in Odessa district, the village today looks poor and beaten down, by North American standards. It still holds bitter memories for those Germans whose families remained behind. There are many yet who remember the onslaught of a new economic order in the 1920’s, the persecutions and banishments of the program to collectivize agriculture, the Holodomor or great famine of the 1930’s, Stalin’s great Terror campaign of 1937/38, and the final abandonment of their villages in 1944. I can feel the burdens and pains of those years still today as I walk the streets of Limanske. The tired-looking homes still seem to weep for their former German inhabitants. The flocks of ducks and geese wander and quack and honk, as if they still wonder, “Where did they go?”

Life in the small villages of South Ukraine is still mostly a subsistence livelihood, relying on the bountiful gardens and vineyards, and on those ducks and geese. But the promise of better economic times for Limanske can be seen in the new highway from Odessa, in the new and modern restaurant in which we ate, in the three wineries now operating in Limanske, and in the new regional airport being built to the east above the town. (Limanske, as a municipal entity, now incorporates the former German colonies of Baden, Selz and Kandel.)

I was in Selz on Sunday, 28 September. This was my fourth visit to my ancestral village, and I now enjoy the comfort of familiarity when I am there. I was in Selz on this day as a

member of the Robert Schneider Tour Group, to help the village celebrate its two-hundred year Jubilee. I remember reading Konrad Keller's description of the Kutschurgan villages in 1908 when they celebrated the toils and accomplishments of 100 years of German colonization. I imagined the pride the Selz people must have felt for their new and beautiful cathedral. But throughout the day I could not quit thinking about the sad and tragic history of the second one-hundred years, as those Germans were beaten into serfdom and dragged through thousands of miles of Europe and Siberia and Asia. But this was 2008, and I was in Selz, and we were there to celebrate.

Light rain throughout the day, following a week of rain, obscured the many preparations by the residents of Limanske to clean up their town, to clean up the church grounds, to put up anniversary banners and balloons. But it was obvious from the moment we arrived on Sunday morning that this was no ordinary day in Selz. People with and without umbrellas were wandering everywhere on the streets around the old church. Inside the church, several hundred people had gathered, waiting to celebrate Holy Mass. Once again, the Cathedral walls echoed with the liturgy and the songs of the Holy Mass in German and Latin. I was in a daze, as long-forgotten memories of those sounds surfaced and took me back to Fox Valley, Saskatchewan where I grew up. Incredibly, also inside this old cathedral on this day were five Eresman siblings, members of another Fox Valley family. And as we received Holy Communion, how could we not think about our grandparents doing likewise in the very same spot.

The church service may have started late, but the parade band struck out at precisely 11:00 am, interrupting my reverie inside the church. We followed the band to the "Palace of Culture", an old Soviet term for what we would call a community theatre. An extensive program of entertainment interspersed with presentations and speeches would fill most of the afternoon. People stood in the aisles and entrances long after the five hundred seats had been filled. I was one of the several Guests of Honor, presented with the traditional loaf of bread and salt (called korovai) on a cloth. I was interviewed by television and newspaper reporters from Odessa and Kiev, interested in speaking to a North American descendant of original Selz colonists. It was "my" day in Selz.

What we in North America do not realize is that the German presence in South Russia was never recognized by official Soviet history. Before 1991, children in the Limanske schools would not have learned that their village was built by Germans. After the Germans were forced to leave in 1944, families from elsewhere in Russia were forcibly re-located to occupy the empty houses of Limanske. So the families living there today have no connections to the German history of their village. The recognition given to the Germans on this special day of celebrations in Limanske is all the more amazing, given that background.

This recognition has come from the work of people like Luise Riesling. Born in Selz, but forced to leave in 1944, her life story mirrors that of thousands of Germans exiled to scattered corners of the Soviet Union. A strong-willed woman, she returned to Limanske in the early 1990's and re-claimed her family home. She lives today in the house her grandfather built, across the street from the Cathedral, with her daughter and

granddaughter. I had visited with Luise each of the previous two days, and she talked about her efforts to educate the local municipal council about the German history of their town. The museum she has begun in a vacant classroom of the school has done much to help school children learn their local history, and has attracted many visitors from Germany and North America. The number of out-of-country visitors to Limanske in the last five years has really grown, again reinforcing for the local people that another culture once lived in their town.

Luise's work locally has been validated by the writings of local author/historian Vladimir Jakovlovich Bukovsky, who has written three books, the latest about the Germans of Odessa District, particularly Selz, called "Bitter Truth". Luise also receives help from people like Alexei Köhler, Georg Moser, and Valentina Weisbeck, all of whom have various official responsibilities to represent the Germans who live in Ukraine.

I cannot think of Selz now without also thinking about Johannes Derzap. Johannes was also in Selz on this day, having brought several other Germans with him from the München or Munich area. Johannes's father was born in Selz, and his mother in Baden. His parents now own a summer home in former Baden. They, like several other families from Germany, now come back to Limanske every summer, to live the quieter and simpler life style of former times, and to reflect on their history, and the path that has brought them back to their "heimat". Johannes' grandfather was one of the 11 men from Selz shot at the Majaki ferry crossing on Good Friday, 09 April 1944. Johannes has made many trips to Odessa district, on his own and with the German Red Cross, to ensure that the history of the Germans is not forgotten.

When it was finally my turn to speak, there were many things I wanted to say. Of course, most of the day's program reflected the area's Ukrainian and Russian character and history. But I was very grateful that the people of Limanske were recognizing the German colonists who first ploughed this land, and built this village. But what I wanted most to say was to tell the people that my grandparents loved Russia. They did not leave because they hated Russia. The Germans always spoke fondly of the Russia they left behind. Both of my grandfathers fought as soldiers of the last Czar's army. Russia was their motherland. But when they recognized the changing character of Russia's internal politics, they left. They left for a huge unknown on the Great Plains of North America, and the new beginning had many challenges and obstacles to overcome. Many times they "second-guessed" their decision to leave Russia, and many times, they wished they could return. And I wanted to tell the people of Limanske, that even though I was born in Canada, my roots have led me back to the Kutschurgan Valley. I am as German as the people who came to this valley in 1808, and I am as German as the Germans who were forced to leave this village in 1944. This history is part of who I am, and I want my children and my grandchildren, and the people of Limanske, to understand this about me. This history is why I came back to Selz to celebrate this Jubilee. I am grateful that my friends of the Schneider Tour group were able to share the day with me. I know that they understood the relevance this day held for me. It is my hope, that in another 200 years, the people living in Limanske will still remember the Germans who first colonized the Kutschurgan valley, and who built the village of Selz.