Carl Ehrlich and Elizabeth Bitter

The Russians Are Coming! The Russians Are Coming!

An interesting branch of the Bartlett-Ehrlich family tree is one that grew along the Volga River in Russia.

The word “Russia” raises all kinds of images: nested Matryoshka dolls, autocratic tsars, stout women in babushkas, onion-domed churches, and the кириллица (Cyrillic) alphabet that looks like it was scrawled backwards with a leaking pen. Not much of it, with the possible exception of the stout women, applies to our relations in the old country.

Carl and Elizabeth (nee Bitter) Ehrlich, who immigrated to America in 1903, were Volga Germans. Though they lived in Russia along the Volga River they spoke German, worshiped in a Lutheran church, and farmed in a small, tight-knit German community within the Russian Empire.

The story of the family’s arrival – and departure from – Russia is an interesting one.

Germany in the mid-1700s was racked by war, high taxes, economic strife, and routine conscription into military service. Farmers could only rent, rather than own their land, putting them under the thumbs of the landlords. And central Europe was a patchwork of small feuding kingdoms, hardly a place that offered freedom or a stable, peaceful, and economically optimistic future.

To be sure, Russia had problems of her own, with roving tribes ravaging the lower Volga River basin, driving off anyone who attempted to settle there. But Tsarina Catherine the Great had an idea on how to settle her sprawling country and tame the lawless Volga: invite foreigners, particularly Germans, to settle and farm the area.

In 1763 Catherine issued an invitation to resettle in Russia, offering free transportation, no taxes for 30 years, religious freedom, interest-free loans, and no military conscription. Over the next four years, about 30,000 Germans accepted the offer, and almost all of them were steered to the lower Volga area. The Bitter family moved from Darmstadt, Germany to help establish the town of Lauwe on the east bank of the Volga River.

According to a family historian, all of the Bitter families in Lauwe (now known as Yablonovka) are descendents of Peter and Anna Bitter, born in 1706 and 1717 respectively, who were married in Arheilgen near Darmstadt, Germany. Peter and Anna were persuaded by a recruiter to take – along with their four children – a year-long, 2,700 mile journey by land, sea, and river from Germany to St. Petersburg and southeast to the Volga in 1766.

Dozens of small German colonies were established on both sides of the Volga near the frontier outpost of Saratov [see map at left, in which the dots show the small colonies and the red arrow points to the town of...
Lauwe]. Lauwe at its inception in 1767 had 58 households with a population of 169. By 1897 the population had increased ten-fold – all but a handful of whom were German.\textsuperscript{8}

The unanticipated trade-off to the economic incentives and freedom was a hard life in the treeless Russian steppe, or prairie land. The pioneers arrived during a decade-long drought and were faced with the peril of nomadic Tatar raiding bands. The pioneers and their descendents had to adjust to the harsh winters, torrid summers, and uncontrollable seasonal epidemics.\textsuperscript{9}

Furthermore, the small German communities were isolated from Western Europe, threatening their cultural vitality and resulting in the stagnation of their education over time.\textsuperscript{10} Yet they clung to their language and Germanic ways, with the inevitable incursion of the occasional Russian food, drink, or word into their lives. They lived in wooden (from trees lining the rivers) homes in their small dirt-street towns, and farmed the surrounding fields, primarily in grain crops. The Volga River, Europe’s longest, was the dominant feature of the landscape and its transportation artery, wide enough in some spots that the opposite shore couldn’t be seen.

As difficult as life was, it probably would have remained the home of most Volga Germans except that the terms of settlement offered by Catherine the Great were not honored by subsequent tsars. The German colonists’ special status was nullified under the Russification measures begun under Tsar Alexander II in the last third of the 19th century. There was pressure to assimilate into the Russian culture and military conscription was instituted. As a result, between 1871 and 1914, large numbers of the Volga German people emigrated from Lauwe and its sister colonies to America.\textsuperscript{11} Carl Ehrlich was born in the Volga region in 1868 to Heinrich and Eva (nee Krant) Ehrlich. The surname was common in the town of Shcherbakovka, about 40 miles south and across the river from Lauwe, though it’s unknown where his family actually was from. In 1897 he married Elizabeth Bitter, daughter of Heinrich and Katharina (nee Hermann) Bitter in Lauwe. Elizabeth had a brother and two sisters, as well as a step-brother and -sister by her step-mother, Christina, who raised Elizabeth from about the age of six.

**INTERESTINGLY, ALL OF ELIZABETH’S FAMILY,** apparently a close-knit group, emigrated to America in the decade between 1902 and 1912, settling in Wisconsin and Michigan. The lone exceptions were her birth mother, who had died, and her father, who most likely had also passed away.

The Bitter siblings followed a pattern of getting married in Lauwe, perhaps having some children, and then emigrating to the U.S. where they rounded out their families with more kids. Elizabeth fit the pattern. In 1902, after five years of marriage, she and Carl Ehrlich had their first child, Theresa, later known as Rose.\textsuperscript{12} In October of the following year, at the ages of 35 and 29, they left Russia for America to join her sister Mary.
Deiss, who had emigrated the previous year and was living with her husband and children in Wausau, Wisconsin. At various stages of the journey Carl identified his occupation as joiner, laborer, and farmer.

Carl and Elizabeth had three more children in Wausau between 1904 and 1910 while Carl worked as a laborer at a veneer factory. They originally lived with Elizabeth’s sister Mary Deiss and her family; later moved into their own home; and subsequently shared their house with Elizabeth’s step-mother Christina and Elizabeth’s sister Anna Johannes and her family – for a multi-generation household of twelve.

Carl and Elizabeth moved to Michigan in 1911 to try their hand at farming, and in 1912, at the birth of their fifth child, Alfred, were living in Bennington Township, just south of Owosso.13

Three years later their sixth and last child, Theodore, was born in Owosso, where Carl was now working at a furniture factory. In the 1920 census he was a gluer at a factory, and by the time of his death in 1927 he had worked at various furniture factories in town.14 He died at age 59 of cancer, from which he’d suffered for five months. All of his children were still living at home. He was buried in Owosso’s Oak Hill Cemetery.

Elizabeth Bitter lived another twenty-six years, raising the last of the children to adulthood. She passed away in 1953 at the age of 79 after having suffered strokes that left her blind and partially paralyzed. She was also buried in Oak Hill Cemetery after a Lutheran service.

A genetic trait Carl and Elizabeth seem to have left their progeny is hair loss. The photograph above shows that neither of them had much hair. At least three of their four sons went bald. Occurrences of baldness also appear widely in their grandsons and great-grandsons. One of life’s ironies is that Carl’s youngest two sons became barbers by profession.

It’s estimated that by 1920 over 115,000 Volga Germans were living in the United States.15 Carl and Elizabeth’s family were part of a wave of immigrants looking to restore their freedom and Germanic way of life. Most of the Volga Germans settled in the mid-western plains states, finding familiarity there with their farms in the Russian steppes. Some settled in the towns and cities of the mid-west. The Ehrlichs established a presence in the Owosso area, and their descendents are now spread throughout the United States.

The Russian Families16

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parents</th>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Born</th>
<th>Married</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Heinrich EHRLICH</td>
<td>Carl</td>
<td>1868</td>
<td>Elizabeth Bitter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&amp; Eva Krant</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heinrich BITTER</td>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>1864</td>
<td>Johann Johannes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&amp; Katharina Hermann</td>
<td>Heinrich</td>
<td>1866</td>
<td>Paulina Reifschneider</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>1874</td>
<td>Carl Ehrlich</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>1876</td>
<td>Carl Deiss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&amp; Christina (nee unknown)</td>
<td>August</td>
<td>1882</td>
<td>Catharina Markus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>1885</td>
<td>Konrad Bitter</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## The Next Generation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parents</th>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Born</th>
<th>Where</th>
<th>Married</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Carl EHRLICH</td>
<td>Theresa (Rose)</td>
<td>1902</td>
<td>Lauwe, Russia</td>
<td>Henry Dudley</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&amp; Elizabeth BITTER</td>
<td>Edward</td>
<td>1904</td>
<td>Wausau, Wisconsin</td>
<td>Eula Watson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>1907</td>
<td>Wausau, Wisconsin</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bertha</td>
<td>1910</td>
<td>Wausau, Wisconsin</td>
<td>Kenneth Schultz</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Alfred</td>
<td>1912</td>
<td>Bennington, Mich.</td>
<td>Irene Parker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Theodore</td>
<td>1915</td>
<td>Owosso, Michigan</td>
<td>Ruth Noe</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Jamie Schutze, Sierra Vista, Arizona, January 2014*
Endnotes

5 “Why Did the Germans Move to Russia?”
6 “Lauwe, a German Village on the Volga River.”
7 “Descendants of Peter Bitter,” attached to email from Jack Saunders to Jamie Schutze, October 9, 2013, subject: Elizabeth Bitter.
10 Ibid, 50.
12 It is possible, and even likely, that Theresa (Rose) was not actually their firstborn child. The 1910 U.S. Census reports that Elizabeth was the mother of five children, of whom three were alive at the time. That indicates that there were two children who died prior to the family's sailing from Liverpool to Quebec in 1903 (since only Carl, Elizabeth, and Theresa boarded the ship to cross the Atlantic Ocean.) One of Carl's great-granddaughters recalls hearing that one or two children “made the trip over but didn't survive.” [Email, January 8, 2014, from Tamara Osborne to Jamie Schutze, subject: Carl and Elizabeth Ehrlich.] That wasn't the case, but one or two may have died in Russia or in transit from Russia to Liverpool. Certainly, with Theresa not being born until the Ehrlich couple had been married five years, there was time for two older siblings to have been born.
* Photo source was “Germans from Russia Now Second Largest Immigrant Group.” North Dakota Studies, accessed November 25, 2013, http://www.ndstudies.org/articles/germans_from_russia_now_second_largest_immigrant_group
** Photo courtesy of Tammy Osborne, granddaughter of Theodore (Ted) Ehrlich.