From Germany to Krem (Crimea) to US (1840)

by Clyde T. Eisenbeis

The following was written in honor of Theo and Frieda's 50th "Golden" Wedding Anniversary that occurred on 3 October 1979. Most of this information was obtained from Theophil Ricker. The remainder is from his wife Frieda Ricker, Esther Eisenbeis, Ellie Dassinger, Hanna Link, Walter Ricker, and Walter Leibold.

Theo was hospitalized for many weeks with heart problems in the fall of 1979. After he recovered, I took a tape recorder and asked him to talk about what he remembered from his youth. The story he told was extraordinary.

None of his children had ever heard it. No one in any of the Germans from Russia societies had ever heard it. Yet, there is no doubt it is true. The names of the places he mentioned can be found on a map. And the dates match world events and world history.

In August 2005, Ulrich Ricker, nephew of Theo Ricker, visited us. Ulrich lives in Germany. His father, Reinhold Ricker told him this same story many times. Ulrich is the first person I have met who knows of this story. His version has only a few minor discrepancies regarding the trip from Kologriv to Germany.

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Theophil Ricker was born on 27 August 1903, in Neubajaut, Krem (Crimea), Ukraine, Russia. Krem is the southern-most area within the Ukraine and is a peninsula extending into the Black Sea.

South Russia was originally colonized by Catherine the Great in the late 1700's when she made offers of free land to the overcrowded farmers in Germany to live in the Volga River region (Volga Deutsch). In the early 1800's the offer was extended to more Germans, by Catherine's grandson, to live in the Odessa region (Schwartz Meer Deutsch).

In 1840 Georg David Ricker moved from Germany to south Russia. He was a "Webermeister", which translates directly into "weavermaster". He probably moved to south Russia to establish a weaving mill to support the vast numbers of Germans who had immigrated over the past sixty years. 63 years later, Georg's great-grandson Theo was born to Thomas Ricker and Christine Boeshans.

Thomas, born in 1874, did quite well. Thomas was a "Landwirt" which translates into "land owner" or "farmer". He had considerable land and money. His family had grown to five with one more on the way, when everything changed in 1914. Russia and Germany started war then, a war that became World War I.

In the fall of 1914, after the war started, all Germans living in Russia, who had maintained their German citizenship, were interned (imprisoned) by being sent to northern Russia. These Germans had maintained their German citizenship by traveling periodically to Odessa. This included Thomas.

Thomas knew he was going to be interned. Before he was arrested, he arranged with his wife to send coded letters to each other. The letters, which looked like normal letters to the Russian officials, used the first letter of each word on each line to relay a special message. Through these letters, Thomas told Christine to sell all of their wheat and cattle, and then travel to northern Russia in the spring after the baby was born. He instructed them to leave the land since they would be unable to sell it.

Christine took some of the money from the sales and sewed it into the lining of a sheepskin jacket, which she sent to Thomas. Other money she wrapped in a packet of straw and buried it in the middle of a can of lard that she also sent.

After preparations had been made, the family left for northern Russia in the spring of 1915. The youngest Thomas was only two months old when they left. The trip, which covered over 1,200 miles, was made by rail, except the last distance, which was covered (in one and a half days) by horse-drawn wagons. The train was full of criminals under heavy guard who were being shipped north. While the family was not under guard, they and their belongings were checked at every stop. The Russians, however, never found the money they had hidden inside a packet inside a small feather pillow inside a large feather pillow that was for baby Thomas.

The trip was made by Theo (age 12), his mother Christine, his three brothers Reinhold, Oskar, Thomas, and his two sisters Friedolina and Ella. Joining them was a large, poor family whose husband / father was sent to northern Russia with Thomas. As they were too poor to pay for the trip north, Thomas paid their fare.

The family spent the next three years living in Kologriv, which is located about 400 miles northeast of Moscow at 58 48N latitude and 44 25E longitude. (Just as a point of reference, this latitude is about 600 miles north of the U.S. / Canadian border.) While Thomas was considered imprisoned in Kologriv, he was not in a jail. He and the family were under constant surveillance but were able to come and go throughout the city during the daytime. There were always a lot of police around as stealing was quite common.

Within the town was an open market where pigs, cheese, eggs, and cream could be purchased. The town's main industry was lumbering. Thomas had to use the money from the sale of his crops and cattle in Krem to buy food for his family. There was no way for him to earn money in Kologriv. It was quite difficult for Thomas to feed and clothe his family after living in Kologriv for three years.

The Bolshevik Revolution overthrew Nicholas II, the last Tsar of Russia, in the fall of 1917. As a result of this revolution, all Germans living in Kologriv were freed. The Swedish Red Cross was involved in working out the arrangements leading to their eventual release. In May of 1918, when the river was swollen from the melting snow, large ships came to move the Germans. Thomas and his family were lucky to get on the second ship that came to Kologriv. After arriving at Moscow, they boarded a train for the journey to Germany.

The trip was long and difficult because Russia and Germany were still at war. Food was quite scarce, and the train had to stop often to refuel. (Refueling consisted of the train crew's walking around the countryside gathering wood.) Whenever the train stopped, the passengers would find water, build a fire, and make tea. Occasionally, some people were left behind because they wandered too far from the train, and the train always left with little warning. The people usually caught up with the train some time later when the train stopped again to refuel. As this involved a long and tiring walk, people seldom made that mistake more than once.

After six weeks of travel, Thomas and his family made it to the war boundary near Pleskau(?) which was located on the Weichsel River (now the Wisla River in Poland). The journey had taken them across Russia to Petersburg (Lenningrad) and across Lithuania. At this time the Russians pressed Reinhold and Friedolina to stay in Russia to farm in Krem. Reinhold and Friedolina chose to continue to Germany. After three days, Thomas and his family were allowed to walk across the war boundary. They then traveled by train to Stuttgart.

Shortly after arriving in Stuttgart, Thomas, age 44, was drafted into the army, Friedolina was drafted for sewing, and Reinhold was drafted for gardening. Although the intense fighting was over, the war did not officially end until the fall of that year (1918). Theo was allowed to enter school until the summer, when he was drafted into working at a furniture factory. After working for only two and a half months, he was given 11 days of vacation. Theo spent the time visiting farms and was amazed that the milk cows were also used for pulling loads throughout the day. Shortly thereafter, the war ended and Theo was unemployed. Thomas found employment as a bookbinder and later Theo began working for a transfer company collecting bills and making orders and delivery rates. They had lost all of their land and most of their possessions and now had to start rebuilding their lives.

In 1923, Theo's Uncle Joseph Boeshans signed for Theo (age 19) to immigrate to the U.S. Joseph paid for the trip from Stuttgart, Germany, to Beulah, North Dakota. In return Theo agreed to work on Joseph’s farm for a dollar per day for 200 days. Theo left Germany on 18 June 1923, came by boat across the ocean, and landed in New York on 3 July 1923. Theo stayed on the ship until 5 July and then completed the trip to Beulah by train on 10 July.

Theo worked long, hard days (4 am to 9 pm) for two years for his Uncle Joseph. He then worked for his cousin Henry Boeshans and then for Christ Galster over the next years until he began work at Fred and Gottlieb Link's farm in 1927.

Those first years in North Dakota were extremely lonesome for Theo. He spoke only German, while most of the other young people, who could speak German, spoke mostly English. Consequently, he had to rely on help from his cousin John to understand what was being said. However, he learned the "American way" quite well after his first two years in North Dakota. He was tutored English his first year by a male teacher who came to the Boeshans' farm every evening after school for supper. He was tutored his second year by a female teacher who stayed at the farm during the school year. Their assistance was quite valuable to Theo.

It was in 1927 while attending a little church north of Golden Valley with the Link's that he met the "girl of his dreams". He inquired and found that her name was Frieda Henke, daughter of Ferdinand Henke and Caroline Klaus. She was born north of Golden Valley on 14 July 1910, and had spent her life working on the farm with her 8 brothers and sisters. He was tickled when she noticed him and was thrilled when she smiled at him. Frieda, too, was quick to notice this handsome, young man visiting her church, but thought to herself, "Oh no, not another Link!"

A short time later when Frieda was maid of honor for her best girl friend, Theo and some young friends showed up for a Schivari. (A Schivari is when a group of people get together and visit a newly married couple late at night, and wish them the best by making a lot of noise by banging on old plow shears and old kettles and things from the junk pile.) Theo paid Frieda a visit at her home the following week. The second visit followed shortly thereafter, when Theo told Frieda, "I think we were meant for each other". Within a year they began to see a lot of each other.

1929 was a special year. Theo obtained his U.S. citizenship, and on 3 October Theo and Frieda became Mr. and Mrs. Ricker! Their first year together brought both joys and hardships. First, in 1930, came a wonderful baby daughter Esther! What a joy she was to both of them.

Unfortunately, that same year a severe drought hit the area and made their first year of married life a very difficult one. And the following years were not much better, as the "Great Depression" hit, and the income from most farm produce was extremely low. A bushel of wheat brought $.24, a big cow $25, pigs $.025 / pound, cream $.17 / pound, and eggs $.06 / dozen.

But they did the best they could with what they had. They butchered pigs and cattle for meat and sausage; milked cows for milk, cream, cheese and butter; and raised chickens for meat and eggs. They were not rich, but they were not hungry either. The only foods they bought were sugar and flour. They made coffee from roasted barley and wheat.

What really hurt, though, was when they had to sell their only car. Theo had bought a 1926 Model-T Roadster brand new for $470 when he was still single. Now they had to sell the car, as the times were tough, and gas was extremely expensive. It was not until 1937 that they were able to buy another car.

Shortly after Theo and Frieda were married, they needed to buy machinery and horses and harnesses. Frieda ordered household goods from a catalog where the freight charges were paid by the catalog company. $100 was allotted to buy the household goods. She bought a bedroom suite with dresser, vanity, and nightstand for $24, six chairs for $2 each, and a trunk. She was given an old table and an old cupboard, which were made by her Grandfather. They bought a nice new wood stove (range) for cooking and a cast iron frying pan which cost less than a dollar, and a good butcher knife (it is now about half as wide as it used to be) which cost $.47. Nothing was very fancy, but it was theirs.

During those depression years Theo and Frieda continued to live life to its fullest. Their second daughter Ella was born in 1932 and another daughter Hanna was born in 1937. And then 1939. A surprise! A son Walter was born!

But life was not only bringing children into the world. It was also loving them and caring for them and helping them learn. And it meant feeding them and clothing them!

With the depression as bad as it was, Theo and Frieda could never afford hired help. They had to do it all themselves. It happened many times that the children were left in the yard or by the edge of the fields while their parents worked in the fields. And even when they were not in the field, time was spent fixing the machinery. Often times Theo would ask Frieda to "come and help get this old bolt loose" or "help hold this wrench, it will only take five minutes." But the minutes turned into hours and the hours into days, and the work in the house stayed behind. But as Frieda says, "That is farm life!"

Throughout the 1930's Theo and Frieda rented from a number of farmers. First they rented from Gust Henke) then from Gottlieb Link, and then from Fred Leanard. After renting a half section of land north of Beulah for three years, they purchased that farm from the Bank of North Dakota in 1941 for around $2,000.

Times were better now that the Great Depression was over. Wheat brought $.85 / bushel, cows $85, pigs $.20 / pound, cream $.36 / pound, and eggs $.25 / dozen. Now they could afford to buy machinery and build up the farm. In 1946 they bought a brand new John Deere tractor! It cost $1,800 and was Theo's pride and joy. He could now do things never possible with a team of horses! It was a fantastic machine!

Throughout those 23 years on the farm the children grew up and married and produced grandchildren. And the grandchildren spent many happy times visiting Grandpa and Grandma on the farm and spent parts of their summers there, working and playing and helping and learning.

There was making homemade ice cream, making homemade root-beer, using a horse to herd cows while they ate grass in the ditches, milking cows by hand (while singing), feeding calves, gathering eggs from the chicken coop, raking hay with a team of horses, shocking grain, using a team of horses to haul the schocks to the threshing machine, hauling hay bales, driving the John Deere tractor, feeding cattle in the winter by using a sled (a wagon with the wheels replaced with runners) pulled by a team of horses, rounding up cattle, branding and vaccinating calves, playing in the old stone house, playing in the junk pile which had an old car, and playing games.

Those were happy times for everyone, and many memories exist today about life on the Ricker farm.

In 1961 Theo and Frieda moved to Bismarck, where Theo worked as the head janitor for the G.P. Hotel, and Frieda worked as a seamstress for J.C. Penney. In 1966 they moved to Beulah for a long-earned rest.

And with that rest came time to travel and see friends and relatives. They traveled to Montana and Canada and the West Coast and Texas and Minnesota.

In 1969 they traveled to Germany. What a memorable trip for both of them. This was Theo's first trip back since he had left 46 years earlier. The high point was visiting his brother Reinhold, who had visited them in North Dakota the previous year. But things had changed over the many years, and Theo and Frieda were glad to come back home to North Dakota.

With the extra time that came with retirement also came the time to do other things they enjoyed. Theo spent time in the yard, and Frieda spent time sewing and knitting and crocheting. Frieda crocheted blankets and doilies and Christmas ornaments and sewed stuffed animals from scratch. In the summer they worked in their garden and made wine and jelly and fruit sauce and canned vegetables. Chokecherry wine was their specialty. They both loved to sing and they both loved to play games. Even in retirement they had a busy life!

Many of the things they did will remain unknown. But that is the life story of humble folk. As an example, throughout many of their farming years they sent money to Theo's family in Germany, even though they could have used that money for themselves. They helped poor families during those early years with gifts of food. Generosity!
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Theo Ricker died on 6 May 1982 at the age of 78 after a long struggle with heart problems and fluid in the lungs. He was survived by his wife, Frieda, his four children, thirteen grandchildren, and six great-grandchildren.

Frieda Ricker continued life at a busy pace. She continued to crochet until age 90, making many things for her friends, children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. She loved jigsaw puzzles. She loved to play games, especially Durak (a Russian card came), Rummy Cube (a modern board game), Chinese Checkers (an old board game with marbles), and Wahoo (an old board game with dice and marbles). She was good at playing games, with a competitive spirit and well played logic. She won as often as anyone else.

At age 90, things changed. Her mind was not as sharp, and her health started to deteriorate. Her last couple of years were difficult for everyone.

Frieda Ricker died on 5 February 2007 at the age of 96 after suffering a stroke a couple of weeks earlier. She is survived by her four children, thirteen grandchildren, numerous great-grandchildren, and great-great-grandchildren.
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