

Interview with Katherine (Helzer) Schnell in 1988, age 77 (conducted by Wayne D. Schnell)

The interview begins with a discussion about the famine relief efforts in Norka in the early 1920's.

K: = Katherine Helzer Schnell

W: = Wayne D. Schnell

K: "...they had sent out rice, cocoa, sugar, lard, and white flour, and there was a lot of kids they didn't even know what white bread looked like."

W: "That was after the Revolution when this happened?"

K: "It was in 1921-22. That was just after the Revolution when the Commies took over."

W: "That was just for the kids, though, was it?"

K: "Just for the kids. There were a lot of poor people. There were some that had a little more than others. They were just picking out the ones that needed most."

W: "So was that like a food bank, where you went and picked up all of that stuff and brought it home?"

K: "We didn't pick it up. They cooked it right there in the kitchen, and everybody went there and had their little dish and their spoon and they filled their glass with hot chocolate or coffee."

W: "So there wasn't much food then, after the Revolution?"

K: "No, no. Because in '21 they took everything. When the communists came they absolutely took everything. My mom (Elizabeth Helzer) raised a lot of pumpkins that year, and there were people coming from other villages begging. And people didn't have much for themselves, and they'd say, 'Well, if you can't give me a piece of pumpkin, give me potato peelings.' They'd wash the potato peelings and eat them. Grandma (Elizabeth Helzer) raised a lot of pumpkins that year, and she cooked soup once a day and then she put a half of a pumpkin in the oven and baked it. And before we went to bed we ate the half pumpkin. And I remember Auntie (Christina Helzer) and Uncle John and I kneeling around the chair, and mom put it on the chair, and we were eating pumpkin, and Mom and Dad were standing and eating pumpkin. Yeah, that was after the Revolution. Oh, there were lot of little kids, four and five years old, and their arms were just skin and bones and their stomachs were great big stomachs. And you could press their little arms, and the dent would stay in there—real swollen. Oh, it was sad. And so many people from different villages, they just died. They starved. They died of starvation. And every day they would go around in the village and pick them up and haul them to the cemetery and have a great big hole, about 30 feet by 30 feet. They'd lay them side by side until it was full and then they'd cover it up. Then they'd do some more. Sometimes they had dogs in there. They'd find an arm or a leg and the dogs would scratch it out. They were hungry, too. Oh, it was sad. It was horrible."

W: "Yeah, it sounds bad."

K: "Oh, ja, it was."

(How did your family come to the decision to come to Canada?)

K: "My dad had cousins, you see..."

W: "Is that the Henkels?"

K: "Ja, Aunt Emma and Uncle John (Henkel). He had two brothers here, Pete Henkel and Henry Henkel—'Henkel Zwei' they call them."

W: "That would have been why you came to Canada then, instead of going to the United States, right?"

K: "Ja, because they sponsored us. That's why we came here, you see."

W: "You had to have a sponsor to come?"

K: "Ja, you had to have a sponsor."

W: "That was the Canadian government that said you had to have a sponsor, right?"

K: "Ja, because you could leave Russia if you had a sponsor. Uncle Henry (Henkel) borrowed the money and sent it."

W: "For what? Tickets to get out?"

K: "For the tickets. They cost a thousand dollars for the five of us."

W: "Wow! That was a mighty sum back then."

K: "So after we got here, we worked and paid it off."

W: "So you lived in Stony Plain then while you did that?"

K: "Not in Stony Plain—way out in Burtonsville. That's where Uncle Henry lives. That's where we went. You see, our ticket went as far as Edmonton. We got off the train in Edmonton and there was a minister. Uncle Henry told this minister to come and pick us up. And this German minister came and picked us up, and we went to his place and had dinner. And Uncle Pete—Uncle Henry's brother and Uncle John's brother—he came and picked us up and took us to Duffield. And from there Uncle Henry picked us up and took us to Burtonsville. And here we got off the train and we had a little basket with our stuff in there and this porter, he was a negro. And he wanted to carry this thing and you think Uncle John and I would give it up? No way! We wouldn't do it. Then we sat and waited for the..."

W: "Was that the first negro you'd ever seen then?"

K: "Well, no. The first negro we saw when we landed in Quebec. We opened the porthole, looked out, and here was these negros. I thought, 'I've never seen such dark people in all my life!' The white in his eyes and his teeth—oh, they really show up, huh? And when we got to Edmonton here was this man who wanted to carry, and we wouldn't give it to him. My grandpa's mother had 3 brothers that went to the States, and one came back with his family. He didn't stay. Two of them stayed in Lincoln, and one

came back to the old country, and they were telling us that there was negro people and they had seen them there.”

W: “Who was this? Grandpa’s brother? Or Grandma’s brother?”

K: “Grandpa’s mother’s brother.” (son of Peter Henkel and Anna Maria Schnell)

W: “Oh, so your uncle, was it?”

K: “No, his uncle. And the one came back, and they were telling us about Negroes, but we had never seen one until we got to Quebec. And we saw these all around. My uncle—the lady who used to write to me—her dad—he used to get papers from Germany and it showed Indians. And they called them the ‘wild people’. I never thought we’d ever see ‘wild people’. Now we live right next door the ‘wild people’, with the feathers, you know, like they are here. They call them the ‘wild people’ and oh, boy—we never thought we’d see the ‘wild people’ and negroes.”

W: “How long were you up in Burtonsville?”

K: “We were there three years and then we moved to Castor, from 1925-1928.”

W: “So 1925—that was when you came out from Norka?”

K: “Ja, 1925 in the fall. We came out in September.”

W: “Were they still letting people out then?”

K: “Ja, they were letting people out until 1929. You know Natalie Pauly that Auntie (Christine Helzer Loose) always talks about? They came out in 1929, and that was the end of it. Grandpa’s brother—Grandpa wrote and told him, he said if he wanted to come out, he would borrow the money and have him come out. They had 2 children yet. And he said, ‘if you want to come out, I’ll borrow the money and you can come.’ And he wrote back and said, ‘No.’ He said he didn’t think he wanted to come because things had improved so much. They had gotten electricity in the house and everything, so he didn’t think that he wanted to come because things had changed. And then, it was only a year or a year and a half, he wrote back and told Grandpa he wanted to come, but he couldn’t come out. Grandpa wrote back and said, ‘when you could’ve come you didn’t want to. Now you can’t.’ Because they wouldn’t let him anymore. So he had to stay and he died of starvation, him and his wife both. The kids—the one girl used to write to me—Elizabeth. Her younger sister wrote to me a couple of weeks ago. I got the letter and she wrote and told me that Elizabeth passed away this year. That’s why she wasn’t writing anymore. And grandpa’s brother’s children are there where she is, and she wrote and said that they are not going to write to me because they’re scared to.”

W: “They’re scared to write?”

K: “That’s what she said, ja.”

W: “Where do they live? Do they live close to Norka then, or not?”

K: "No, they live out in Siberia, I guess."

W: "So are they some of those that were sent to Siberia?"

K: (yes)

W: "That was during the Revolution, was it?"

K: "Right after the Revolution they sent them. In 1931 or 1937, that's when they sent them all out to Siberia."

W: "And so they're scared to write to you now."

K: "Ja, that's what she said. They don't want to write. And one of grandpa's (George Helzer's) nephews was writing to him all of the time. Finally he wrote, "I can't write to you anymore," because he married a Russian woman and she didn't want him to write. So he quit writing. So they're still scared. They're not free. Ja, it was no easy life, I'll tell you."

W: "What about before the Revolution?"

K: "Before the Revolution it was okay, you see, the war broke out and dad's brother (Conrad Helzer) went to war. And after the communists came the Revolution started. When they came that's what they were looking for all of the time, was these soldiers that had been in the war."

W: "World War I?"

K: "Ja, WWI—1914 to 1918—and they were looking for them and they were hiding these men all over the place. Grandpa had some cousins and they were in the war, too, and they were hiding. And they were digging holes underneath the houses and putting the men there. They used to come with their guns with the bayonets on them. They'd go right through you. They'd hide them all over the place. Grandpa's mother (Elizabeth Henkel Helzer) had some clothes (uniform). They were looking for soldier's clothes. If they could find the clothes they knew that there was a soldier. She had some clothes and she went and put them under her bed and she was sleeping on them. And they usually always came at night. You never saw them in the daytime. They always came at night. And they went into the bedroom where she was and I guess she was just so scared because there were the soldiers and she had these clothes. She was just so scared. I guess she was just stunned. And the one guy wanted her to get out of bed. He was going to look in the bed. And another guy said, 'Leave her alone. Can't you see the woman's crazy?' So they left her, and it was her that saved Grandpa and all of the rest of them. It was always two of them would take Grandma, and she had to go first, and two soldiers would take Grandpa with them."

W: "For what?"

K: "Just coming and looking for soldiers and clothes and just being nuisance!"

W: "But they'd take them where?"

K: "Well, if they found one they'd just lock them up and then the time came when they were going to destroy the whole village. And Grandpa came home and he was crying, and he said they want to destroy

the whole village, so we waited in the big house with the shutters, and the shutters were closed, and he said, 'we're going to go in here and have prayer.' So we went in there and we had a meeting and they said that they weren't going to destroy the village, but they would take seven soldiers and shoot them, and they did. They took seven soldiers—killed them all. One officer, the first one, gave a glass to one soldier to get him a drink of water, and he had figured that he was supposed to just take off and hide someplace. The man got the glass of water and came back and gave it to him and he shook his head. He figured he would run away to save his life. But if there was any dead person in the house or any sickness—there were a whole bunch of kids that went around and wrote on the gates "Typhoid". There wasn't any, but the kids just wrote it on there, and they wouldn't go in there."

W: "The soldiers wouldn't?"

K: "Oh, no. They were so scared to get sick. And if there was a dead person they would never go in there. Somebody could hide there if there was a dead person. They called it a "canoby". It was like a chesterfield, but underneath it was hollow and you could crawl underneath. They would never go in there.Here is our passport."

W: "It's in Russian and French. You got this in Russia, did you?"

K: "Ja, those pictures were taken in Russia. That was all made in Russia."

W: "I wonder why they had French on it, too."

K: "I don't know just how it was, but we had to have our picture taken and put it on there. There's Elizabeth Helzer, and there's Uncle John (14), and Katherine (12), Kristina (11), and she was 12 when they had to stay in England. Grandma and her were in England for 3 months on account of her eyes."

W: "So what did they do for a passport then?"

K: "Grandpa sent it back to them. No, they left it in Quebec and when they came they could pick it up there. There was always people who would..."

W: "This passport was just for Grandma and Uncle John and you two (girls). Grandpa must have had his own then?"

K: "Ja, he could have had his own, but that's the only I've got. But they left it in Quebec when we got off the boat. We left it there and they were to pick them up there, so they did."

W: "So this is dated 25th of August, 1925. That's when you got to Canada. Looks like you left around the 29th of July. It looks like it says it is valid from the 29th."

K: "No, we left the 15th of August and we arrived here the 17th of September. See this is the lady that wrote me the last time and told me that this other woman had died."

W: "So how big a place was Norka?"

K: "What did it say—5,000 people?"

W: "That's a pretty good sized town."

K: "Ja, it was."

W: "They were all German people there?"

K: "Ja, all German. And they had their herdsmen. Every morning two herdsmen would come and get the cattle and the sheep and take them out."

W: "Everybody's?"

K: "Ja, they put them all together. Every cow and every sheep knew it's place where to go. And when they used to come home they put a little salt on the ground for the cows and sheep to lick. And when they'd come in, they'd come up the street and everyone knew where it belonged. It would go there."

W: "So everybody's house in town had a barn there, too."

K: "Oh, yeah. Everyone had one. Well, they had more than one barn actually because there was a horse barn and a cow barn and a sheep barn. Everybody had that."

W: "Did you guys have all of that? You had horses and cows and sheep?"

K: "Yes, we did. But when the communists came they took everything. They came riding up the street—"die Gasse" they called it—and they had horses that were mangy and sick. They'd leave them and take the good horses you had and carry on. And people had all their sick horses and they couldn't raise crops and pick them up. Oh, they took everything. Grandpa had a horse and he put them in the big house in the bedroom to save him. And of course the oxygen got too hot—he couldn't stay in there—and all of a sudden that horse started pounding. And you could hear it all over. That was no place to keep a horse, so they took it out of the house and put it in a grain garden. It was just outside of the village. They took it over there and put hay in front of the door, just enough so the horse could go behind it. When they opened the door all they could see was the hay. And dad put a horse in there, and his uncle put one in there. When the communists came riding past—there was a road going past there—their horses were neighing, so these horses neighed, too. So they knew they were in there, and so they'd just leave their sick ones and take them, and off they'd go. Grandma (my mom), she was only 5 feet tall. She was just like Dianne, she was only 5 feet tall and Grandpa's (my dad's) cousin, she was that size, too. And here these two stood in front of the door. One had a pitchfork and the other one had a hoe. They were going to come and take this horse. They were really going to scare this guy! And they came and walked right past them and took the horse and out they went, and they were still standing there with the pitchfork and the hoe."

W: "It's probably a good thing they just stood there."

K: "Ja, I guess so. Oh, yeah, that was quite an experience."

W: "The big house—was that your winter house? Or your summer house?"

K: "Winter house. It was where we lived in the wintertime. The Shutters were always closed and it was always dark in there."

W: "Was is bigger than the summer house?"

K: "Oh, yeah. It had one bedroom and one great big room, but of course it was as big as this whole house here, and they'd have a bed in every corner if the family was big. The big kitchen and the big entry with a pantry. That was the big house, and the other house had just 2 rooms and an entryway where the big stove was to bake their bread. And you could go upstairs in that one, too."

W: "Why did they have two houses?"

K: "It was for the summer and the winter. There was no store so they could bake bread in the big house. It was in the other house, so in the wintertime they baked bread a lot at a time so they didn't have to bake often. In the small house was the cellar, too. And they put everything in there."

W: "Like a root cellar."

K: "Ja, potatoes and all their canned food. They had big barrels where they put cans, and watermelons, and cucumbers and cherries, and apples, and all of that.:

W: "And you grew all of those things right there?"

K: "Ja, you could grow anything. Well, you see when spring would come—by the time the snow was gone the ground was thawed out. It was thawing from the bottom up. And by the time the snow was gone you could go out and plant your garden. You could raise anything, but when the communists came, they spoiled everything. That was just awful."

W: "Did you go to school after that or before?"

K: "They had German school when I started and then when the communist came they were to start taking away German because they started speaking Russian—teaching Russian and that's where I went one year. I went through grade six in German and one year Russian. And all I learned was: 'ruhga, nocka...' and I forgot what that means."

W: "Count to ten in Russian is about it?"

K: "Ja, that's what I learned, too. We were glad to get out of there. A lot of people had to suffer."

W: "So you lived there about a year after the communists came?"

K: "No, we lived more than a year there. The war stopped in 1918, then the revolution started, you see. Then the communists came and they took everything. They took absolutely everything. They used to come and Grandpa's mother (Elizabeth Henkel Helzer)—they took her big house and made an office out of it. They all came there to get their whatever. And the guy that was the overseer, he used to come and bring all this stuff that she was supposed to cook for these soldiers. And they were stealing everything they could get their hands on. They'd come with little pigs and chickens and eggs, and they were stealing

them for her to cook. And she used to cook—and they'd clean out your flour bin. They'd just sweep it right out—took everything. And they'd take all of the harnesses. Dad had a sort of hammock hanging—they called it a 'Bludawoya' (sp?), that's a Russian name—it was just a shed. It had a door on it, but it was all made out of mortar. And he had it hanging on the ceiling and he used to put in there bells for the harness—bridles and that. One guy came in there and said, 'what have you got in there? Have you got a "dilgarima (sp?)?"' Well, Grandpa said, 'No, there's none in there.' Well, he pulled the thing down and found one. And he said, 'You big liar!' and he was going to slap him, and Grandpa moved (back) and he took the skin off of his nose with his nail. And Grandpa left and went into hiding. He went hiding for 3 days. Nobody knew where he was. He just left and went into hiding. After 3 days he came home, and he said he was two houses down. He went into the people's hayloft. That's where he stayed for 3 days. Oh, they were mean. It was awful."

W: "So Grandpa was still trying to farm then, after that."

K: "Oh, ja. Up until he left. Had to make a living."

W: "Pretty hard when they take everything that you make."

K: "Well, that's right, and you have to start all over again and a lot of them were put in jail. They'd take them away and put them in jail. Grandpa had an operation on his lungs in 1915, so they didn't pick him. But there was a neighbor, and he was taken. And people were doing anything to stay home. And they used to bite their flesh and put spit in it or something to make it fester. Make it sore, so they wouldn't have to take them."

W: "This was the communists that wanted them for their army?"

K: "No, they'd just take them and lock them up like they do here in Africa. They get people and they don't even know what they're there for. That's what they did."

W: "They didn't have conscription or anything like that for the war—Grandpa's brother didn't just volunteer, did he?"

K: "No, they were called. He was of age. So he had to go in the war."

W: "But how did Grandpa miss that?"

K: "Grandpa was married, and his brother was still single, you see. Grandpa was married and had a family and he was keeping the family going. Somebody had to look after the family. So he had the family and his brother was single. His brother had to go and he didn't have to."

W: "That's how they decided?"

K: "Ja. Oh, that was awful."

W: "The land that grandpa farmed was out of town. That was his land?"

K: “No, that was just land that they got. If they had a boy in the family they would get land. So they weren’t very happy having girls because boys were only getting land. And they weren’t getting it in one place. It was different places because there was good land and bad land. So they had to take from both. So they were making their hay ‘in karnish’ they called it, each family got so much from this that they could make hay. They had their different places and they used to leave Sunday night for seeding or harvesting. They’d leave Sunday night and come back Saturday night—stay all week.”

W: “Was it far away?”

K: “It was quite a ways, but they couldn’t come home every night.”

W: “Where did they stay when they were out there?”

K: “They would just stay right where their property was—where they were working. Like Grandpa’s cousin in Greeley here Amelia—she was a cousin. She was a Mrs. Helzer in Greeley, that was Grandpa Helzer’s cousin. She said that her brother and her sister were out getting the crop in and they were cutting it and the women had to tie it in bundles. And she said they were so tired. All they ate was glease (phonetic pronunciation of Klöse). They cooked glease or baked potatoes. She said they had glease and they were so tired that they actually just went to sleep right by the fire there. She said all of a sudden there was such a noise and their dad came out and he hollered and said, ‘What? You guys are lying here sleeping yet and the sun is up?’ And she said that she woke up in a start and she still had half a piece of glease in her mouth. She never even chewed it. That’s how they worked. The last year we were out there they took a few people—about 20 families—they could build their little houses out where their land was and they could stay out there for the summer and have their cattle out there and everything. I was out there one summer and I was only 10 years old. I had to milk the cows and churn the butter and send all the butter home and all the milk and cream home. I was only 10 years old and they had me out there all by myself to look after these cows. But there was more people there that had the same thing—mostly women out there, women and girls. When the crop was in, there was nothing much to do until haying started. But we had to look after the watermelon patch.”

W: “So that was all grown out there, too, on the land outside of town?”

K: “Ja, that was all outside of town.”

W: “But these houses outside of town—is that where the men would stay when they were harvesting?”

K: “Ja, they would come out and stay there until harvest was over, and everybody would go home. But when the communists came that all fell apart. It was done with. They just took everything they wanted.”

W: “Did you have a garden in town, too?”

K: “Ja.”

W: “How much land was your house on?”

K: "There was a town block. It was quite big. There were four people on a block. They were smaller than a town block, but they had their houses and their barns, and the little bit on the corner was their gardens."

W: "Did they have granaries there, too?"

K: "No, our granary was down the street. There were six houses and then an empty spot and there was quite a few granaries there. And everyone had one there with the people around there. An 'ambar' they called it."

W: "An ambar was a granary?"

K: "Ja, that's where they stored their grain."

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K: "All the kids had to go herd the pigs—take the pigs out and watch them."

W: "Where did they take them?"

K: "Out towards the grain garden—the grain that you gave to the government. They had their ambars. They were separate."

W: "Was that like a tax then?"

K: "Ja, that was paying the taxes—giving them grain."

W: "That was for the local government?"

K: "Ja, they'd cut the grain, and the women would tie it, and then they'd haul it home with the oxen, loaded on wagons. They'd have three or four wagons, and the oxen knew exactly where to go. They used to load up and on the way home they could sleep and the oxen knew the way home. When they got home they would put it into great big stacks and when it was all home they would put it on the ground and it was all smooth. They'd put water on it and make it real hard and then they put the grain on with these stones. They'd go around and around and thrash it out. Every evening they had their machine where they would clean it. The grain came out the front. We always had to sit there and shovel it back in. Oh, we always dreaded that. Out of the back was the chaff and out of the side was the rough stuff and they'd always use that stuff. They'd haul it home and in the wintertime they'd feed their horses with that. Everything was used. There was nothing wasted."

K: "But people were satisfied. They were left alone. But when the communists came they ruined everything. There was a lot of people who died of starvation. Now the younger ones—they're not talking much. Gorbachev is going to change things. They want more freedom. That's why they didn't want anybody to write to their relatives out here. They didn't want the people to know how they live in Canada or the US. But with the Olympics they come to this country and see the difference and they're getting restless. They see how people should live. But those people that went through this awful thing—like the one cousin and her sister—she said they worked all week long, and all they had was one dress. They'd go home Saturday night and their mother would wash their dresses and patch them. And they'd

be sleeping on top of the oven. It was built of mortar, and they'd sleep on top of the oven naked and cover with rugs. That's all they had while their mother was washing their dresses and patching them because Monday morning they had to be at work again."