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# RESEARCH

## The Helzers From Norka, Russia

**Campbell, Ellen. "The Helzers From Norka, Russia." *Grand Island Independent*, 18 February 2005.**

ST. PAUL -- Among the multitudes of Germans emigrating to the United States from Russia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were John and Emma (Traudt) Helzer, who settled in Central Nebraska.

Today, Mamie Helzer Leth, 82, and her sister Frieda Helzer Oakeson, 84, are the last surviving children of Henry and Elizabeth Helzer. Henry was the oldest child of John and Emma, both born in Norka, Russia.



**The children of John and Emma Helzer were (front row, from left) Marie, Kate, Lena and Henry, and (back row) Louie, John, Anna and Phillip. Henry was the father of Mamie Leth and Frieda Oakeson. Courtesy Hezer Family**

"They were all farmers," Mamie said of grandparents Henry and Emma, "and life was rough for them. Grandma Helzer was from a rich family and her parents didn't want her to marry our grandfather because he had little money. Families had to live together, two or three generations in one house."

Much of the family's history can be found in a Helzer-Trout family book compiled by Phyllis Lorene Helzer Pressler of North Platte, a cousin of Mamie and Frieda. Their early family story is similar to that of other Germans from Russia, which began with Russian Empress Catherine the Great in the 1700s.

The village of Norka was established on Aug. 15, 1767, with 957 inhabitants, people who had left the German regions of Hesse-Darmstadt and Hesse-Kassel the year before. It took the settlers a full year to travel from Germany to the Russian frontier, first sailing from the port of Lubeck to Kronstadt in Russia. After going overland for 200 miles, they continued the difficult journey on rafts down the Volga River, 1,100 miles to Saratov.

The last leg was by wagon over roadless expanses to village sites on the Russian frontier.

When assigned to a village, it was extremely difficult to change because the colonies were established on a commune basis, and land was assigned according to the number of males in each family. Once a village was established, newcomers were not welcome. So it is reasonable to assume the Helzers were among the first settlers of Norka.

It is probable there were many family lines of Helzer (originally spelled "Holzer") in Norka. When people in Germany first adopted surnames, they often chose the name of a thing or place in their vicinity, adding an "umlaut" to the vowel and an "er" at the end. The German word "Holz" means woods, and likely the families with the Holzer name were either woodcutters or lived in the woods.

A number of Helzer families eventually came to the Midwest. Most of those who settled in Central Nebraska are related to one another and can be traced back to another John Helzer, who was born in Norka on March 12, 1842.

However, the direct ancestors of the family branch of Frieda Oakeson and Mamie Leth were another John and his wife, Mary Emma Traudt (Americanized to "Trout"), both raised in Norka. The village was about the size of Central City, and was abolished by the Russians in 1946, long after the Helzers immigrated to the U.S. in the spring of 1892.

At that time they had two sons, Henry (father of Frieda Oakeson and Mamie Leth) and Phillip. John's brother Louie, who had come to America earlier, sent them tickets (\$130) and acted as their sponsor, a necessary part of immigration. Taking a freight boat from Saratov, Russia, the family landed in New York three weeks later, then took a seven-day train trip to Grand Island.



**Henry and Elizabeth (Bader) Helzer**

John's first job was as a section hand for the Burlington Railroad. He was hired because he had a team of well-trained horses that would work without lines. John gave them verbal orders of "gee" and "haw." This job was in Edgemont, S.D., where their son Louie was born.

Deciding to return to Nebraska, the family made the trip in a covered wagon, which took about 30 days. They first located on a farm in Hamilton County, then went to a farm on Hall County land that later became part of the ordnance plant. They were renters on several other farms before buying a farm near Cairo in 1906.

John had taught himself to read and write English, and became a naturalized U.S. citizen in Grand Island on Sept. 11, 1906.

Henry, father of Frieda Oakeson and Mamie Leth, was born in Norka and came to the United States with his parents at age 4. He married Elizabeth Bader on March 8, 1910, and the couple had six children: Emma, Albert, Walter, Martin, Frieda and Meta (called Mamie). Henry and Elizabeth raised their family on a farm in Gage Valley, located between St. Paul and Palmer.

In recalling family stories, Mamie's strongest impression was of the hard life the Germans had in Russia.

Grandmother Emma worked as a hired girl before marrying. She remembered the homes in Norka as being wooden, with papered walls and dirt floors covered with white sand. Her five brothers all came to America together, arriving on June 28, 1889. They embarked from Bremen, Germany.

Frieda recalled that the Henry Helzer family spoke German in the home until the oldest sister, Emma, started school. Their church services were also in German for many years.

"Emma didn't learn English until she went to school," Frieda said. "The other kids picked it up from her and also from our parents who, at that point, began speaking English in our home for the sake of their children. They had been told that in the United States, they had to speak English."

Frieda and Mamie didn't see their grandparents much. In those early days, it took awhile to get from rural Howard County to Grand Island, so the entire family didn't make the trip very often.

The above story uses much information from the Helzer-Trout family history book, which was compiled by Phyllis Lorene Helzer Pressler of North Platte.

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