

*On July 19, 1996 Mike made a speech to the annual convention of the Germans from Russia Heritage Society. The Germans from Russia are a distinct ethnic group in the Dakotas. They are descendants of Germans who were invited into the Russian Empire in the 18th century, then emigrated to the U.S. in the 19th century. Their history in Russia and in America in many ways parallels that of the Jews.*

I have a picture in my mind, sharp and clear, the way pictures are when they are burned in during childhood.

I am at my grandfather's house, David, my father's father. The year is 1949, the year of his death. He is sitting in an overstuffed chair reading a newspaper written in Hebrew letters. My grandmother is---where else?---in the kitchen, fulfilling the definition of a grandmother: one who cooks and never eats.

My father is seated at the table with his three brothers. My mother is watching and helping. My older sister and younger brother are with me. It's a medium-sized room in a brick house in the older section of town in Marion, Indiana. I live only ten blocks away.

There is a warmth in the room, and not just from the steam radiators. There is the smell of fresh bread out of the oven and chicken soup on the stove. Mostly there is the warmth of family, of a happy occasion when three generations are in one room.

In my imagination, I go back to that room. I see myself at the age of seven. I see my father younger than I am today, and I wonder, why didn't we ask then what I want to ask now?

Too soon old, too late smart.

Grandpa, I want to say, you won't believe it but two months ago I was in the village where you were born. That's right, I was in Dzigovka, that little village that occupies two hills on either side of a stream. I came there through wonderful farm country, traveling the road from Kiev. It's just a few miles from the Dniester River that separates Ukraine from Moldova, the two modern states that were once part of the Russian Empire.

It's no longer Podolia Gubernia. The region is Yampol, and the town of Yampol is only five miles from Dzigovka. It was in Yampol that your eldest sister, Malkeh, was killed by Nazi soldiers in 1942. Your little village was turned into a ghetto.

I want to ask him, grandpa, do you know all this? Do you know about your sister's murder? About what happened to your three other sisters and your only brother who stayed in the country of their birth? I look at my grandfather sitting there, and wonder, how much did he know? By what means did he get his information? How was he able to communicate with an area that underwent revolution, famine, war, and political oppression?

There is such a moving and rich family history here. Yet he didn't say much to his son, my father. My father never inquired. And now, grandpa, there is so much we want to know! But my grandfather reads his Yiddish newspaper. He cannot answer the questions asked of him almost fifty years later.

My grandmother invites us to the table. There is borscht, kreplach, varenikis, blintzes. Grandma I want to say, when I was

in Ukraine, I saw varenikis on the menu! I couldn't believe it. I thought they were only made here in your house. I had blintzes for breakfast. Only they were called blinis! The borscht I was served was green made from vegetables, not red like yours.

I had your marriage certificate translated, grandma. You call yourself Rose; now I know your real name was Ruchel, Rachel. I didn't visit your native village, Rashkov, but I was in Odessa, where you and grandpa courted and were married. What it was like when you were growing up. What did your parents do? How is it that you never learned how to read or write? Why did you and grandpa decide to emigrate to America in 1906?

Was it the push of Czarist anti-Semitism, the pogroms, or the lack of work? Or was it the pull of grandpa's aunt, who encouraged her favorite nephew to make the journey? How did you get from Odessa to Liverpool, England? You were pregnant when you made the long ocean voyage. Were you afraid? What were you thinking? Who did you know? Where did you and grandpa get the courage to come to the new world?

But my grandmother pours the chicken soup from one cup to another back and forth, cooling it down for her grandchildren. She too cannot answer questions from a future she will not see.

In my mind's eye, I go around the room. I want to ask my father and his brothers why they didn't learn more about their parents' life in Russia. Why didn't they ask then what I ask now? Weren't they curious? Didn't they want to know?

The picture dissolves to the present. Even though I have so many unanswered questions, I know that I am more fortunate than most third generation families in that I have a good deal of information with which to work. The reason for this is a remarkable correspondence that began in 1956, three years after the death of Stalin.

A letter written in English, was received by my father's eldest brother, Meyer. It was from David's younger brother, Joseph, who lived in Kishinev, the capital of the then Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic. Through Joseph and later through his son, Amnon, we were able to learn about our family, now spread through Ukraine, Moldova, Russia, Israel, and most of all America. In May I made the trip my late father had long wanted to take, to visit the relatives still living in the "Old Country".

In ten days, I went from Kiev to Dzigovka to Mogilev-Podolsky to Kishinev to Tiraspol to Odessa to Chernigov and back to Kiev. I saw my uncle Amnon, who is eighty two and slowed by three strokes but who speaks 10 languages. His knowledge and interest in the family is as sharp as ever. I saw the gravestones of my relatives, including my grandfather's father Solomon, the patriarch, who is buried in the weedy, overgrown Jewish cemetery in Dzigovka.

I came across documentary evidence of other "Meidenbergs", as our name is properly pronounced, who lived in the Colony of Lublin in the town of Soroki. They go back as far as 1818. Were they swept into Bessarabia by the same historic forces that brought the German colonies there? Or did they come there propelled or drawn by some other cause?

While on my genealogical quest, I met an American studying Germans from Russia. His name is Bob Heilemann and he heard me speaking English in the dining room of the decrepit Chornoye More Hotel in Odessa. Bob and I exchanged notes and information. I told him of my family discoveries, and he told me of his research in some important German colonies near Odessa. Bob knows many of the people in this room. I reflected how fortuitous it was that my newspaper career took me to a part of the country where my ancestors and the ancestors of a large number of North Dakotans---many of them our readers---shared a common historic geography, if not a common culture.

My trip last May was a wonderful and emotional experience. I was exploring two worlds, the one that existed one hundred years ago and has been destroyed by Communism, Nazism and World War II; the other which is seeking to be born today out of the ruins of the Soviet Union.

When I look at our family tree, the portion that is in America has blossomed with children and grandchildren. It is the picture of health. The portion that did not emigrate---the lines of descent of my grandfather's sisters and brothers---are thin and shriveled.

Thankfully, there are new shoots growing from the generation which emigrated to this country within the last five years.

And so when I close my eyes and travel back into that room at my grandparents house in Indiana, even though I have learned so much, I remain full of questions.

But there is something else I want to tell them. I want to say, thank you. Thank you for making the choice to come to America. Thank you for your courage, your fortitude, your sacrifice. Grandma and Grandpa, you made a better life for your children, and you made this country a better place for all of us.