

The Volga Flows Forever ~ Book Two

*The Volga
Germans*

Sigrid Weidenweber

The Volga Germans
The Volga Flows Forever - Book Two

Typography by Lori A. McKee.

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Summary: A novel about the establishment of the German colonies along the Volga River near Saratov in the 18th century and the development of these colonies through the 19th century and up to the point of the Russian Revolution, drawn from historic source material.

1. Russian Germans – History. 2. Germans – Russia (Federation) – Volga River region.

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To Andrew and Alexander,
in the hope that they might learn to appreciate history.

S.I.W.

In Appreciation

This book could not have been written with the same accuracy without Brent Mai's invaluable help. His books – compilations of all relevant data on the Volga German settlers and their villages, complete with geographical locations, allocations of land and population sizes – were a researcher's dream. I also was able to reduce the tedium of small item research by extensive use of his gazetteer. Furthermore, to ease archival search even more, Brent was able to answer many of the questions that arose in the process. He is a Volga German descendant, of course, and his research and compilations were difficult and stressful work – the Russians are not very co-operative.

His work, combined with the impeccable, diligent searches performed by many Volga German or Russian German offspring amazed me, leaving me in awe. This research – meticulous to a fault, and therefore, accurate in the smallest detail – revealed their ancestors' single-mindedness in solving a difficult task.

I am still in awe – and if anyone doubts my observations, I invite them to intern at one of the annual Russian German meetings, which attract a thousand or more participants.

However, I digress. I would like to thank Ed Wagner for his interest and involvement with my work; Nicky Larsson for her editing and humorous support; Hans Spalteholz for his erudite polish of the final product; and dearest Don and Anne for their continuing support.

Thanks is due the Hergert family, especially Sandy Twigg, for allowing me the use of the family name and the historical Reverend Hergert in a fictitious role. I must mention here that there never was a Carolina, nor was there a Michael Hergert in the portrayed roles.

The German poems and folksongs were with two exceptions copied from Volga German schoolbooks provided by Sandy Twigg. In Sandy's materials I found heartbreaking personal accounts from the victims of the Stalinist excesses. The veracity of their emotional and physical torment is mirrored in my work.

All translations from German into English are the author's endeavor to be true to German poets.

Last, but not least, I thank Lori McKee for again producing an appealing, intriguing cover and polished lay out.

As always, many people were involved in the publication of this book – too many to mention singly. To all of them my heartfelt thanks.

S.I.W.

Preface

The fate of the Volga Germans has been on my mind since young girlhood. Then, long ago, I heard an incredible story from two teenage sisters – a tale so bizarre and wonderful, it rivaled the best fiction tale ever prevaricated.

All my life I carried with me this daunting tale of two Volga German women, their mother and aunt, who had been imprisoned in one of Stalin's gulags where they had been slated to die. They had the heroic fortitude to walk, in the midst of the Siberian winter, into the wilderness of the Taiga, where a native, probably a Yakut, rescued them, passing them on to other tribal members until they could safely be smuggled out of the country.

During my lifetime I noted with astonishment that Stalin's genocides – in numbers much greater than Hitler's murderous outrages, were mostly ignored by the world press; or, if addressed at all, were treated with unbecoming gentility.

It irked me that the genocide of numerous Russian minorities, assessed at perhaps twenty-two million people – no one knows the correct count – should be forgotten by the world only because it had been carried out under the Marxist philosophical banner of elevating the living standard of the factory worker and the farmer. An enormous amount of those killed were exactly these tillers of the soil and the minor bourgeoisie for whom the worker's paradise supposedly had been created.

I traveled to Russia, searching from Saratov down the Volga for Volga German villages – most no longer exist. Katharinenstadt, now named Marx, still stands – its beautiful churches, especially the Lutheran church – defiled and in decay. I met Professor Igor Pleve and he kindly presented me with a signed copy of his latest work. In Moscow I met the head librarian of the Volga German Library, a motherly, passionate woman who in two hours gave me a crash course on the most important materials to study for such an endeavor. Besides Pleve, she suggested a long list, containing foremost James W. Long, Fred C. Koch and Jacob E. Dietz. These books were the sad archives of broken lives – eminently daunting and exactly precise.

When I told friends and family fifteen years ago that I would attempt to write a coherent story of Volga Germans, the announcement was greeted with pity and ill concealed derision.

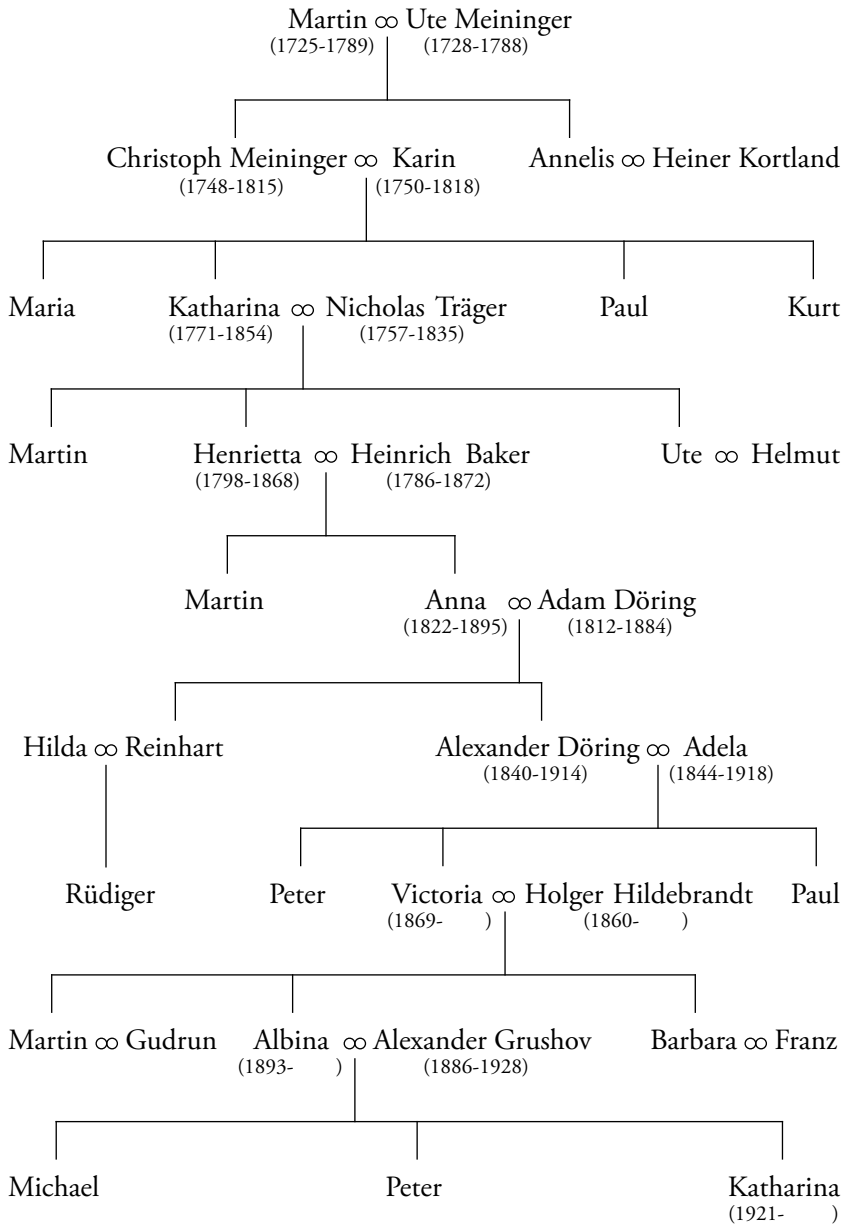
“No publisher in the world will touch this subject. Who is interested in a theme of bygone history that did not make the headlines when it happened the first time around?” said some. “Who cares?” asked others. “If you want it printed write something with sex, violence and gallons of blood – that sells.”

Oh, I agreed that my undertaking smacked of eccentric, stubborn individualism; however, I knew there had to be Volga German descendants with an interest in their antecedents. These were the people I believed would care about my story: people who had heard tales of the hardy, stoic people who had abiding faith in God – their ancestors – who had persevered against the greatest odds; who were robbed, disowned, deported to Siberia and killed by millions under Stalin.

I hope that despite all odds the books will be widely read, thereby allowing the Center to prosper and grow, becoming a place where the history of the Russian Germans will be kept alive and vividly remembered forever.

S. I. W.

Cast of Characters

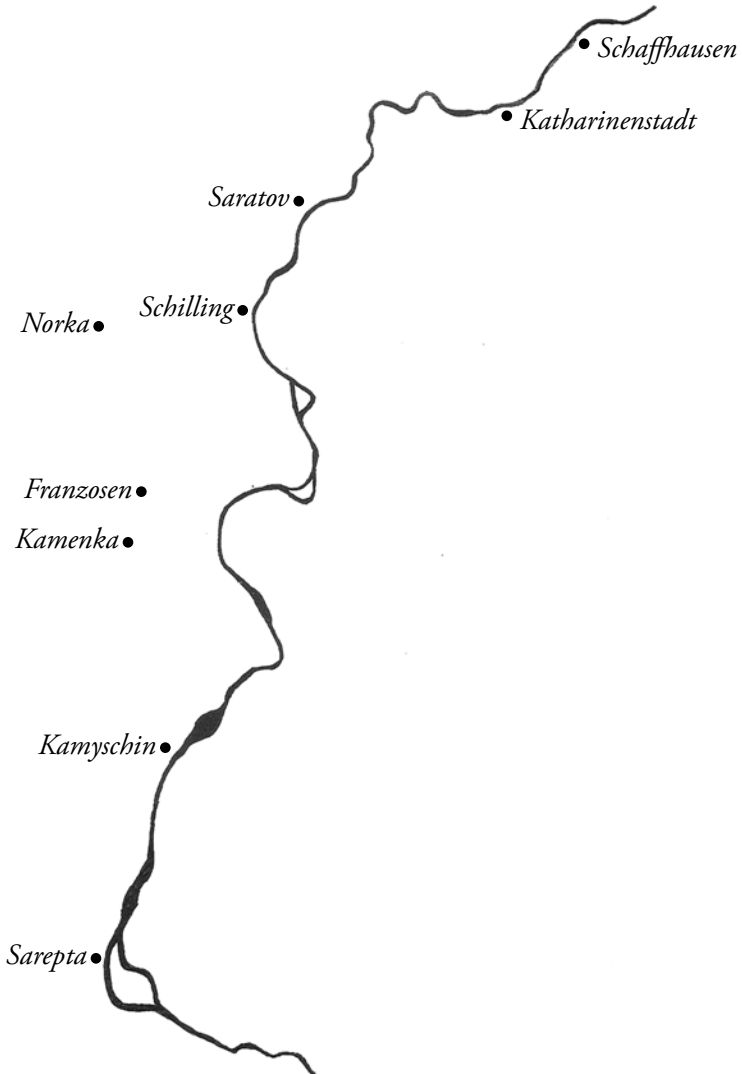


Chronology

- 1521 Reformation divided the German nation along religious lines resulting in the Thirty Years' War 1618-1648
- 1729-1796 Catherine the Great
- Aug. 21, 1745 Catherine marries Peter Ulrich – grandson of Peter the Great
- 1756-1763 Seven Years' War
- June 28, 1762 Overthrow of Peter – Catherine is proclaimed Empress
- 1762 Tsarina Catherine's First Decree of Invitation is issued
- July 22, 1763 Second Manifesto inviting immigrant-settlers is issued, the Tutelary-Chancellery in St. Petersburg is established
- 1763-1765 Migration begins with a few individuals, soon becoming a flood
- March 19, 1764 Solidification of the Agrarian Code in the colonist's area
- June 29, 1764 The oldest Volga German colony, Dobrinka, is founded.
- 1765 Moravians establish the colony of Sarepta
- June 27, 1766 Katharinenstadt – later Marx – is founded
- Aug. 15, 1767 Founding of Norka
- 1767 Kamyshin is founded
- Aug. 13, 1767 Schaffhausen is founded
- Aug. 9-13, 1774 Pugachev's militias plunder the Lower Volga Region
- 1774 Colonies of Keller and Leitsinger are destroyed by Kirghiz raiders
- 1812-1813 War with Turkey; Russia gains Bessarabia; Napoleon moves into Moscow
- 1814-1815 Vienna Congress. Tsar Alexander I, Catherine's grandson, as Kaiser of Poland, is handed the area of Warsaw
- Nov. 11, 1838 Tsar Nicholas I certifies colonists' privileges

1861	Emancipation of Russia's serfs
1867	Panslavistic Congress in Moscow – Slavism under Russia's banner
Jan. 1, 1871	Fürst Bismarck investitures the German Reich
June 4, 1871	Ending of the colonial status and the self-administration of the colonies
Jan. 1, 1874	Germans are required to serve in the Russian army
1874	Massive exodus for America, North and South
1879	German-Austrian Alliance
Mar. 13, 1881	Alexander III Tsar – strengthening of Panslavism
1891	Obligatory introduction of the Russian language into German schools
1894	Nicolay Alexandrovich Romanov – last of the Romanovs – ascends the throne as Nicholas II
1901-1911	About 105,000 German settlers leave Russia for America
Sept. 9, 1911	Stolypin assassinated
Aug. 1, 1914	Beginning of World War I – Germany is declared enemy of Tsarist Russia
May 27, 1915	Pogroms against Germans begin in Moscow
Mar. 15, 1917	End of the Romanov rule through the February revolution
June 16, 1918	Murder of the Romanov family in Ekaterinoslav
Nov. 11, 1918	Revolution in Germany – Kaiser Wilhelm dethroned – however, Trotsky's World Revolution fails in Germany
Autumn 1919	The Bolsheviks confiscate the entire Russian harvest

Settlements along the Volga



*The Volga
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Matushka Volga, mother of Russia,

Let me tell you about the Volga, my Volga, the heart of Russia. Her main artery pumps lifeblood into all the land along her 3,690-kilometer length. She catches 150,000 rivers, rivulets and seasonal streamlets to her breast, submerging them into her body. What other river in all of Europe can measure up to her? As a beautiful woman forges relationships, she connects the peoples she meets. Volga connects the peoples of Northern and Western Europe with those from the Caspian Sea and Central Asia.

Once, long ago, Volga was the protector of Christianity against the advances of the Muslim adversaries from the East. Now, she is our parent. Oh, my beloved, you feed your children with delectable fish, you water their fields and transport their needed goods. You delight us with gentle breezes and your ever-changing shape and dress each season. Along your banks flourish grand estates. You nurture wooded copses and water the wild animals of the steppe; everything thrives because of your blessed presence.

And in winter, our strong, cold winter, you blanket yourself, allowing us to tread upon you. You wear a crown of cities; first among them Saratov, Nizhniy Novgorod and Kazan, the old, black pearl.

From the diary of Alyosha

The Earliest Settlers

RUSSIA 1767.

A CONGLOMERATION OF HOUSES 65 KILOMETERS
BELOW THE CITY OF SARATOV

They stood high on a riverbank, looking into the forever. Long ago the sun had passed its zenith. The shadows grew longer, falling toward the swirling muddy water of the Volga. The river here was as wide as a lake; the other side was so far away that a man needed perfect sight to spot it. Even today, the river flows so placidly that only by the progress of drifting debris in the loamy water is it possible to know it is a river.

A small assembly of somberly clad farmers had wandered down to the Volga bank. Their meager ranks swelled by arrivals from neighboring places, they stood calmly talking on the bank's highest point, scanning the horizon of the upper river. They expected a boat to come today with new arrivals. Upon landing, the vessel would tie up to the long, wooden finger reaching out into the river. The Volga bank was high in this area, but the water's depth close to shore was variable. Therefore, the pier extended into deeper water. In this region the river flowed, for most parts of the year, tranquilly and slowly, depositing silt in unmeasured quantities in its mighty bed. The captains of boats carrying loads needing depth did not dare approach close to shore.

They had been standing here, waiting patiently for hours. Finally, with the sun already low in the western sky, a blond youth with exceptional eyesight cried out: "There, Papa, I can see a boat rounding the bend."

With that cry, the small group became animated. Tall men scanned the horizon with eagerness. Women stood on tiptoe to better see the river's bend, while a few small children scurried about excitedly. Looking with concerted effort, the others also saw the object of their secret dreams and hopes.

The caller, nineteen, tall, with the alert, piercing look of a hunting falcon, had good reason to be excited. If all was well this boat would bring his mother, sister and grandparents to the few houses valiantly striving to become a village. For three years Christoph Meininger had lived in anticipation of this reunion. In the summer of 1763, pressured by famine and

poverty, and lured by the promises of the Empress Catherine's recruiters, Christoph and his father, Martin, began a torturous journey to this foreign land, Russia, a land, so vast and far from Lauterbach, Hessen, Germany that they could not imagine it; a land so immense, that its sheer geography forced them to journey by a series of boats and carriages.

On July 22, 1763, in her second ukase concerning immigration to Russia, the Empress Catherine had promised to pay for the transportation and relocation of anyone wishing to settle along the bank of the Lower Volga River. This generosity, however, did not include comfort and speed. The port of Lübeck had been designated as the exit port. Waiting for their ship to be filled with colonists, the settlers were promised comfortable quarters and per diem allowances. These allowances ranged from seven *Schillings* for a man, five *Schillings* for a woman, and three for a child regardless of sex.

Before boarding the ships in Lübeck, they were supposed to receive fourteen days' worth of per diem money to supply themselves for the journey. All this was straight forward, generous even; however, the emigrants were required to stay some distance away, in Hamburg, until a large enough number would congregate, filling a designated ship, one clean and proper, used only for the transport of humans.

Another promise in the Tsarina's decree concerned housing in the new provinces that were to receive the settlers. The decree had announced that houses would be built in advance, awaiting their arrival. Following the advice of the recruiters, men who were paid a per body fee, Martin Meininger had decided that they should set out immediately, while there was money available. He reasoned that funds could dry up once more people decided to leave.

Accordingly, they set out on their adventure in mid-July. Father Meininger said it mattered little that their arrival in Russia would coincide with the onset of winter. "It's not a time for planting," he declared. "One can set up the house, build stables for the livestock and see to many things to be done before spring."

The women in the family, however, railed against his plan. "You will arrive in winter and freeze to death. What if there is no house and no barn where you are going; where will you sleep at night in the Russian harsh winter?" exclaimed Christoph's mother, Ute, to which his grandmother, Anna, added acidly: "And if these two don't freeze to death they will die of starvation. They will have no harvest, no animals, no provisions for winter."

“Nonsense,” countered Christoph’s father, “we will buy supplies. We’ve been promised wood for stables and they say the houses have been built. What better time to arrive than in winter when you cannot plant. We will build what is needed, pens and sheds, and if the frost is not too bad we can clear land. We will be given virgin land, and that means it will take hard work clearing it before we can plant anything.”

The women did not like the idea of leaving their home, their country. “Why must you go at all, we can find a way to stay and work,” they lamented.

“There will be no neighbors to help you once you get there, for you will be the first,” cried his wife with tears in her eyes. But nothing would deter him.

“We have no money to pay the taxes any longer. We owe the landlord and you know what that means. They will come soon enough and take the land, the house, everything. Then what? We will be homeless, slaves to whoever will pay for our food. No, I won’t have it! My wife is not going to be a washer woman or kitchen drudge.”

“Better a kitchen drudge with a husband and a family around her than one with a husband frozen in Russia,” Ute spat hotly. Martin’s temper flared. He looked about the room, his eyes ablaze as if lit by a green fire, the kind one sees flashing in the swamps at night when conditions are right. He had thought it all out: he wanted Christoph out of Hessen before the cursed military could lay hands on him. If the taxes could not be paid, they might take the boy instead.

He would get what he needed in Saratov. The Empress’ agents had told him he could get help in the form of loans and materials. They had been very persuasive. Convinced, he believed most of what he had heard to be true. And so it happened that, covered with tears and kisses, they left for the port city in the middle of the night like thieves before the taxman could stop them.

Later, aboard ship, looking dreamily into clusters of clouds, Christoph would remember standing in the kitchen of their small house in Lauterbach. A small village, impossible to find on maps, Lauterbach had been one of many miniscule, impoverished parishes devastated by the Seven Years’ War. His father, worn and tired, although only forty years old, had sighed when contemplating the ill fortune besieging him, ill fortune – far beyond his control.

“I don’t know what else I can do but leave this land. This is the third year I can’t pay my taxes. The tax collectors will squeeze me until I sign you over to the army. You are almost fifteen and you have the height of six feet, just what the Hessian prince covets.”

“If it helps the family, then sign me over. I am strong. I can fight, and who knows what will be when I come back.”

Christoph felt invincible. Why should he die? Death did not come to one so young and so alive. Dying was for others. It was for the unlucky, the aged, those without the effervescent vitality flowing through his young body, making his very cells burst with vigor.

“If you do come back! I would be damned to hell if I sold you to die on foreign soil. The prince hires out his Lange Kerle Regiments to whoever pays him best. Good, strong German boys die in foreign lands for his gilded palaces and fancy carriages. No, we will leave. I’ve heard that the Russian Tsarina Katharina asks for Germans to settle along the Volga River. Others have gone already, and so we will not be alone. Then there is the other reason for folks like us to leave. We never know if and when another regent decides to punish us for our Protestant faith.”

His father sighed again, as if the unbearable weight of this thought forced the breath from his body. Christoph knew his father to be a good, strong man who in the past had well provided for the four members of their family, and their grandparents as well. But the cursed war had finally broken his spirit like a wheat stalk broken in a hailstorm. He despaired and had no more heart for this farm. Their twenty hectares of land had always provided what they needed. They had a couple of cows, two horses, raised a few pigs, sheep and chickens, grew their own feed, spun wool and grew vegetables. Besides that, they had to sell enough to pay the rent on the land, the cottage.

Their life had been predictable, frugal, but ordered and sufficient. Their activities revolved around their Reformed Lutheran church, instilling in them the spiritual values of faith in God and obeisance, of goodness for God’s sake, and a sober approach to all aspects of village life. Peaceful submission and yielding to authority had eased most confrontations and ensured tranquility in their village.

The war, beginning in 1756, had changed all that. German citizenry, barely recovered from the Thirty Years’ War, which ended in 1648, a war later used in textbooks as an example of man’s lunacy and unending capacity to perpetrate atrocities, fell victim once more to the power plays of the mighty. This time, the conflict had encompassed Europe, North America, and India, with several combinations of alliances between Austria, Russia, Saxony, Sweden, and Spain, Prussia, Great Britain, and Hanover.

Lauterbach, a place of no import, had not been considered worthy of being touched by the combatants, but marauding renegades had still

found it on several occasions. As was their wont, they had raped and pillaged, destroyed crops, killed and maimed the stock. When the war was over the Meininger family had counted themselves lucky to be alive.

During the Thirty Years' War Christoph's great-grandfather had dug out a hiding place right below the planked kitchen floor. The family had hidden there a few times, but the mercenaries became experts in finding even the best-concealed hiding places. That was long before Christoph had been born; yet the mercenaries of the new war remembered the tales of the hellions of yore. Immediately upon entering a house, they tore open the planks of the kitchen floor.

When the first assault on Lauterbach happened no one but his grandmother had been at home. The renegades were a flock of rough, odd characters, deserters of D'Estees French army. Having fought the Duke of Cumberland's army at Hastenbeck, they had lost their stomach for bullets and cannonballs and had deserted, although their army had seriously wounded Cumberland who was in retreat.

Dirty, polluting the very air with their stink, this ragtag bunch had made forays into the German countryside, which lay wide open and defenseless because militia and law enforcement were deployed elsewhere in the defense against the invaders. By concentrating German fighting men along the battle lines, the *Hinterland* was left open to be plucked and ransacked in the most horrid fashion. Even small Lauterbach received its share of unwanted attention.

Christoph's initiation to the worst human kind is capable of doing came when, with the rest of his family, he was in the meadows raking the year's overabundant hay crop. Of all the work on the farm, making hay was to him sheer joy. He loved the sweet, honeyed smell of the cut grasses and flowers, reveled in stirring up the surprised pheasants, or quail and hares, rejoicing when the wild hawk or falcon dived after the game. If he could have been a bird, he would have chosen to belong to their independent, proud, fierce brotherhood.

He remembered the day well, for it had been an exceedingly pleasant day. The sun shone warm, yet did not burn. A breeze had kept flies and gnats away, and the smell of drying wild flowers had been intoxicating. Since the day Christoph had turned six he had been working in the fields. Now, toughened at thirteen, he felt like a man, because he had been given his own row to rake. Yet the work took its toll on the arms. Long gone were the constant blisters on his hands, now covered with calluses. However, after the first hours he needed to rest his arms ever so often, falling behind

Father and Grandfather who turned their hay over with practiced easy rhythm. It would have galled him to be slower than the men; he always tried to measure up to them. Yet it was consoling that his mother and sister, aged five, were even farther behind.

Whenever he now thinks of the scene that followed he is transported back, living in the presence of the war. So many years have passed and yet, when his mind returns to this day, the years fall away and he stands again in the meadow, as he once stood.

His mother saw them first. She possessed the same fine eyesight God had given him.

“Down Martin, down. All of you, down. Christoph, Annelis, *Opa* – down. These are marauders, Frenchies, deserters. Get into the hay slowly so your motion won’t alert them. Cover up with hay.”

Taking her own valuable advice, Mother gently sank to her knees and then flattened herself beside the row of hay. The mention of deserters and her vivid example brought the others to the ground one by one. Even Grandfather, still in possession of all his reflexes, managed to go down without arousing attention. One minute he was standing, the next he was gone. Christoph, seeing the ragtag bunch the very instant his mother had set eyes on them, had followed her lead and lay on the ground. His father hesitated moments longer, scanning the horizon, then eased himself into the grass. With a feeling of sick panic Christoph noticed Annelis still standing, looking about with the curiosity of a newborn calf.

His mother anxiously whispered, “Down, Annelis, down, now!” But Annelis, unused to danger, was filled with excitement and gazed fascinated in the direction of the raiders. Christoph was closest to her and inched, crablike, sideways and backward at the same time, toward his sibling. He reached up, getting a hold of her hand, and gently pulled her down next to him. For a moment he held her, hissing: “Keep still! These men are very bad. They might kill us if they find us.”

Annelis, child of a farmer, knew without doubt what killing meant. From the very moment she could toddle across the farmyard she had witnessed the cruel reality of life: man kills to eat. Early exposure to the quick demise and the bloody butchering of livestock had not desensitized her, but taught her the difference between life and death. The little girl hated the killing, but having been told that it must be, accepted the fact.

Her mind invoked a picture of her throat slashed like a chicken’s, claret red drops falling to the ground. That picture infused her with grim fright and numbed her limbs. Christoph unobtrusively covered her loosely

with hay and whispered that she should wriggle along behind him, hugging the ground. Watchfully, he observed the exchange of signals between his father and grandfather, indicating that they should move toward a copse of blood beeches a few hundred meters to the left.

A prudent move, thought Christoph, because the renegades, approaching on their right, straggled toward the village. At first Annelis did not respond to his coaxing, but his mother's anxious urgings set her moving. Not long, and they were bathed in dust and sweat. Dust and pollen clogged their noses, inducing them to sneeze, a desire they stifled valiantly, for sound travels in the flat landscape and can attract attention. Sensing that Annelis might succumb to the stimuli, Christoph reached for her nose and gently tweaked her nostrils shut, while gesturing to her to keep absolutely still.

Fear and the exertion from their enervating crawl had taken its toll. Christoph was breathing so hard he believed that the enemy, a quarter mile away, could hear him exhale.

They reached the edge of the copse and crawled into its shelter. For a while they lay motionless; slowly their strength returned. The feeling of safety removed some of their helpless anxiety. Christoph was close to Annelis and listened to her sighing breaths, following their exhausting crawl.

He replenished his own lungs with deep draughts of air. Down flat, his only view was of the soles of his father and grandfather's shoes. Thick, cobbled-together leather, scratched, bruised, and dirt streaked, these shoes represented the reality of the farmer. He could not see his mother, but knew she was nearby. Slowly his father rose to his knees, scanning his surroundings carefully. Not sensing danger, he stood, looking about as attentively as the big bucks Christoph had observed when, at twilight, they stepped from wooded cover into the open meadow.

Reassured by the peace of the copse Martin called softly, yet cautiously: "It's alright to stand. Let's walk deeper into the trees for better cover, but first I shall have a look."

Agile, like a dancer, he felt the ground with his toes before shifting his weight onto the whole foot, not breaking a twig, not making a sound, moving silently from tree to tree to the edge of the copse. There he halted, silently scanning the landscape.

The rest of the small group remained huddled together. Christoph's mother, Ute, hugged her children close to her body, then, reassured that they were well, she began nervously picking hay and seeds out of their clothes and hair.

Their grandfather, sturdy and square, of short stature, strode toward his daughter. Devoted to his family, he, too, nervously began picking his grandchildren clean. And through this comforting, familiar task they released some of the fearful tension. The peaceful moment passed and Martin joined them once more. "Brace yourselves," he said quietly, "they are heading straight for our place."

The awful news broke Ute; she burst into sobs and moans. "Oh, my God! Oh, Jesus – help! Mother is all alone. Dear Lord, I beg Thee, protect her."

She fell upon her knees, rocking, praying. Grandfather turned and walked away to hide his eyes. All by herself, in the house the renegades were heading for, was the woman with whom he had shared his life for forty-five years – the girl he'd chosen to be with forever when he was just a stripling of seventeen years; the woman he'd never stopped loving. He dared not think what her fate might be when these men, abominations to God and men, came upon her.

They had heard tales and had seen what happened to unfortunate people caught unawares. The marauders killed, maimed; they hurt and raped, no matter the age of the victim. They tortured the babe and the ancient crone if it pleased them; at their worst, when they looked for strong drink, torture was their pleasure.

'Misfortune is upon us,' he thought, because there was no wine or beer to be found in the staid, sober Lutheran village. It was not as if they never had a draught of beer, or the women a glass of wine, but such diversions were only for holy days and celebrations. Having been ransacked by outlaws twice before, not a drop of alcohol could be found in the village.

Knowing that, the old man helplessly prayed the same litany over and over again: "God save her and preserve her. Cover her with Your grace, so she will be invisible to the eyes of men." The rest of the family prayed with him.

Thus they consoled each other and began to walk deeper into the trees. They were not familiar with this small wooded area. It belonged to the neighboring farm, and they had never trespassed before today. The sound of voices halted their steps. They listened attentively. French phrases rang ominously in their ears. Martin motioned with his hands for them to lower themselves to their knees, to disappear in brush and undergrowth.

They had come to the edge of a small clearing where the ground sloped gently down to a small, clear spring in the midst of a sweet meadow where the grass was woven through with wildflowers. Kneeling, they eyed

the clearing from the perspective of woodland creatures beholding the gentle, inviting green. They rose to see the whole expanse. Once they focused on the middle of the glen, what should have been peaceful to the mind and a blessing to the spirit turned to horror. Christoph felt his father's hands move across his face and cover his eyes. The older man turned the boy around and buried his head against his chest. Christoph felt his father's heart pounding like a sledgehammer pounding stakes into the ground, and he knew why. His keen eyes had seen what his father would have liked to erase from the landscape. In one instance he saw the nude, white bodies of women and girls, their limbs tied to stakes on the ground. Above and around them towered the half-clothed bodies of their rapists, their naked asses shining in the sun.

He shuddered. Unbidden, the face of the neighbor's daughter, Hannelore, appeared before his closed eyes. "Please, dear Lord," he prayed, "don't let it be Hanna. Not her." They were of the same age. As youngsters they had often played together, but lately they had become shy with each other. She had blossomed into a delicate flower, with curly, chestnut brown, long hair, and dark eyes that made his heart sing whenever he saw her. He did not know why, but lately he had felt gangly and awkward around her.

He knew what was going on in the meadow. He had heard enough descriptive detail from the older boys in the village to know what the French men were doing there. In an instant his mother regained her wits and hissed sharply: "Down! Now! If they see us we are done for." They sank back onto the ground. Christoph, released from his father's grip, felt a wave of nausea wash over him. Overcome by the urge to purge himself he crawled away from his family.

When the retching stopped he felt better. He cleaned his face with leaves of *Breitwegerich*, a common weed, and chewed on sour grass to get rid of the disgusting taste in his mouth. Approaching his family in a low crawl, he saw his father kneeling. A commotion had ensued beyond the copse. They heard excited voices and hasty activity. Christoph, beside his father, slowly knelt and raised his head. There seemed to be little chance of detection, because the renegades, disturbed in their awful activity, were pulling up pants and yanking on shirts.

Grandfather knew a few French phrases and explained that the sudden commotion was due to a report shouted across the meadow by a scout. Apparently some of the rascals had located a few kegs of wine at the Catholic church; kegs well hidden, they claimed, but their good French noses

could always ferret out wine, matching their wits with those trying to hide it. At the first mention of wine, they abandoned their former activity.

Silence fell on the meadow. A red deer, deceived by the stillness, stepped from the bushes into their midst and, startled, jumped back into the undergrowth. Martin turned to Ute and cupped her dear face between his brown, rough hands. "I have thought this over," he said, looking deeply into Ute's blue eyes, as if seeking strength from her.

"We must do something, and we must be quick about it. They have left a guard of two men with those poor women. If we are to live with ourselves in the days to come we must act. Father, Christoph and I will sneak up on the renegades and jump them. Father and Christoph can take one, I take the other. We shall have only one chance, so we better get it right the first time."

"Yes, you must do this," encouraged Ute, "I can't get their tormented faces out of my mind."

Christoph's breaths were coming quicker, shallower. Excitement engulfed him. There was no fear in him; to the contrary, he was ready to be a man doing a righteous deed. With quick strokes his father laid out the plan. "We sneak up on them from the right. There is good cover there. We will have to bash them on their heads and pray they can't get hold of their bayoneted muskets. I have some good twine to bind them up with."

Searching the ground he soon spotted a few likely oak branches. They looked solid, club-like, and resisted his attempts to break them. Christoph's sharp mind immediately grasped his father's intent, and he reached for a branch appropriate to his body weight and height. Father's club was enormous, looking as if it could bring down an ox, while his grandfather seemed set on quality. He weighed his weapon in his gnarled hands, pulled his knife from a pouch sewn onto his pant leg, and with fast, sharp strokes of the blade fashioned a handhold to his liking.

Father turned to Annelis and Ute. "Take off as many of your clothes as you can decently spare. We will need them." Saying this, he removed his own long sleeved shirt and undergarment, handing them to Ute. Christoph and Grandfather followed his lead and did the same. Martin cast a hard look at his wife and Annelis. "Wish us luck, Wife," he said, "better yet, pray." Then, crouching, he began to move into the greenery, followed by the old man and Christoph.

Martin led them in a semi-circle, as they slowly, painstakingly, made their way toward the meadow. Moving cautiously, they observed the antics of the guards. Left to their own devices, the devils at first had amused themselves by throwing rocks and twigs at their victims. Keeping count of their

successes, they wagered money on direct hits of breasts and nether parts, but soon they grew tired of such pursuits and, turning their faces toward the village, they followed the progress of their fellow bandits. Creeping forward as silently as they could, Christoph thanked St. Christopher, his patron saint, for closing the ears of the renegades. They remained oblivious to their danger, conversing rapidly in their execrable French.

Christoph, almost breathless with excitement, crouching behind his grandfather's back, had been deprived of a full view of the villains. Yet, suddenly, he saw Father and Grandfather side by side raise their arms high into the air. Two enormous clubs were in their hands and, as their arms struck downward like lightning bolts, the clubs connected with two heads in gruesome, bone-crushing certainty. Arriving too late for the assault, Christoph shuddered as he stared at the results. The men had fallen forward from their former sitting position; their faces were almost between their knees; blood and gray matter oozed from two terrible wounds.

"We killed them," exhaled his father, awe in his voice, as if he did not think it possible for him to kill a human being. Grandfather, in a much grimmer tone, confirmed: "Yes, we did. Not much else we could have done." He tossed his club into the bushes. Motioning urgently, he commanded, "Come, come, there is no time to waste. If they find spirits, the rest of the pack will be back for the women."

Without further ado the old man bent to the ground, getting hold of the boots of one man, dragging him toward the nearest thicket of shrubs and blackberry vines. "Help me, Martin," he called. Martin dragged the second body over to him, leaving a trail of blood and slime adhering to the crushed vegetation on the ground. Martin reminded himself to cover the tracks before leaving. Jointly they lifted each body, flinging them into the middle of the bramble. The brush received the bodies with a deep sighing sound, softly giving way, letting the weight slip to the ground among its thorny stems and roots.

Ute had watched the killing of the Frenchmen. Although, normally, the most tenderhearted and mild of women, she suppressed her horror and never hesitated. She knelt beside the first of the staked-out women, cutting her bonds, speaking softly to her. She called Christoph to her side, bidding him to help her cut the thongs. She made Annelis hand the women the miserable clothing items they had assembled. "Do not look at them, Christoph!" she sharply admonished her boy. "These women are nothing to gawk at. They have been defiled, hurt and humiliated. Now do your best and treat them with dignity."

Christoph did as he was told. He cut taut thongs from stakes, but try as he might, he could not ignore the white feet and legs, the hands and arms tanned by the sun and roughened by hard work. There was blood on a pretty face that he barely glanced at, while going to the next body. He shivered and quaked in his soul, feeling strange and horrible. He was astounded by the strength of most of the victims. Freed from their bonds, they rose, shuddering and crying, clasping the bits of clothing to their bodies. There were six of them. One young woman, tall, dark-haired, with very white skin, so different from the women raised on the farm, had pulled on Grandfather's shirt. It barely covered her body. She stood straight, without shame, almost proud, and asked with the husky voice of a strangled throat, "Are they dead?"

"Yes, two of them are dead; the others are looking for drink. They will be back soon. We must hurry and get to safety, all of us. If they find us they will kill us!" There was urgency in Martin's voice.

"Let me get some clothes. There must be a pile of our things somewhere." The tall woman, obviously in pain, walked with strangely controlled steps to the dead men. Peering through the bramble, her face was an angry masque as she tried to identify them. "This one," she pointed at the body, "has had an appointment with the devil for a long time. He now kept it."

Listening to the educated voice of the woman, her way of speaking so differently, distinctly from the common folk, Christoph suddenly realized who she was: the educated wife of the richest man in this valley. How did one such as this end up raped in a copse among farmers' wives and daughters? However, he dismissed his thought instantly, for the tall one, having taken a few more steps, called out to the others that she had found most of their clothing. Hastily the pile was divided up among the women.

Among the six women was a young girl. She was small, thin, and plain with enormous eyes that seemed to have lost all focus. Wrapped in Ute's ample apron, she was held upright by two of the women, for her legs were not supporting her. Christoph watched her unobtrusively, and a feeling of great pity washed over him as he saw her frailty and imagined what she had endured. He suddenly noticed that his cheeks were wet, and he hastily rubbed them as if pesky flies had irritated them.

Nothing escaped Ute's motherly eye. Secretly, she rejoiced that her boy had a tender heart. The progress of their retreat was slow and painstaking. Although the women realized that their tormentors could be upon them at any moment, they were incapable of greater speed. Their faces were grimaces of pain and discomfort, but by now their tears had dried

and they grimly trod along, supporting two of the victims. Martin was in the lead as scout; Christoph and his grandfather brought up the rear.

Some moments in life, some hours, are so long that they will seem henceforth to have lasted a lifetime. Christoph later recalled very little of the seemingly endless march toward the village; not the hours spent hiding in a steep ravine till night fall before finally creeping to their house; not the family's torturous suspense of not knowing what had happened to Grandmother. All events paled, becoming mind numbing and nondescript by comparison to the mayhem, rape and murder earlier in the day. He vaguely recalled the sad, raped women leaving on a wagon for the next village after Martin had found a few men he could trust to keep a secret and who would safely deliver the women to their families.

However, in later years Christoph remembered vividly that by midnight they had found Grandmother, unharmed but shaken, stuck behind the kitchen stove, a place so small that even the roving rebels could not conceive it to be a hiding place. It was her luck that early in the morning it had been so hot already that no one cared for hot food or drink. Therefore, the stove had been cold, allowing her to squeeze into the space behind it. There she was, still stuck in the tight place, barely able to breathe and ever so glad that someone came to her rescue. To free the poor woman they had pulled the heavy stove from its resting place, damaging in the process the stovepipe and the floor. However, that was no great loss compared to the danger avoided. In later years, when a Meininger wanted to describe a tight spot, they'd say, "It was tighter than Grandma's hiding place."

Grandmother Anna said that the men looked only cursorily through the house. "They seemed to be in a great hurry, only wanting to grab quickly what they could."

"They were on their way to the Catholic church for the wine," chimed in Christoph, proud to be contributing to the family chatter. When at last, exhausted, they found their beds, their fervent prayers expressed the hope that the marauding Frenchmen might be rounded up by the law – by whatever law was left. God must have been listening, for the next morning they watched the chained evildoers, their clothes in tatters, their faces sodden with drink, march down the main street in their filthy high boots. Surrounding them, prodding them with their guns, were a complement of spiffy Hessian soldiers, called to action by the priest's anguished complaints to the head of the small duchy.

Besides the aforementioned terrible episode, many other hardships had to be endured by the population. To finance the war, taxes had been

raised to new heights. When the people could not pay, the few things they called their own were confiscated. First the livestock was led away, then their implements and furnishings were claimed, until, at last, the land, the house, and the outbuildings disappeared in the open maw of the principality.

The Meiningers were indebted, as was the rest of the village. No matter what Martin and Grandfather did, how hard they worked and how valiantly the women economized, they could never satisfy the tax collector fully. Seeing young Christoph about the house, tall and good looking, the tax man suggested that they could rid themselves of their burden by sending him off to the army of the Hessian Prince.

These rude suggestions to sell their child drove Ute and Martin to distraction. They felt it was only a matter of time before the authorities would claim him. As their fear and despair rose to a high pitch, Martin heard one day about the edict of Tsarina Katharina of Russia. Although Martin was past his prime and would never have dreamt of leaving the Hessian land to begin a new life elsewhere, in the end, the guaranty that no German émigré should ever become a Russian soldier, was Martin's deciding factor to leave. His boy would never bleed to death for a silly monarch's conquests.

Another haunting reason motivating him to leave stemmed from his Protestant faith. With many in the village, he belonged to a God- and Bible-centered faith that eschewed much dogma, concentrating instead on goodness, forgiveness and living the Word. After all was said and done, Martin did not have to consider the facts very long. Circumstances weighed heavily on the scales of fate in favor of seeking a new life elsewhere, against staying in the land of their birth.

Beginning the Journey

And so father and son headed for Hamburg, hitching rides any way they could, on *Fuhrmann's* wagons and farmer's carts. When necessary, they traveled on foot, traveling light. Their destiny was a bureau established by the *Tutel-Kanzlei*, the Guardianship Chancellery in St. Petersburg.