

## Prologue

I have lived a life of contradictions:

Love and loss,

Joy and sorrow,

Hardship and prosperity,

Thrown into an arranged marriage and then falling in love,

Being German and being American during a world at war.

I am the oldest of seven children and have five amazing sisters.

I have lived upon two continents, crossed the Atlantic Ocean and have seen the turn of the century. As this remarkable life I have lived is coming to an end, I feel I must tell my children and grandchildren all the wondrous and exciting things I have been blessed to have experienced as well as the unnerving and challenging events I have had to deal with. This is not only my story but that of all my sisters.

My sisters and I all married and had many children; our lives have touched hundreds of people; our sons and daughters multiplied and now our descendants are scattered across America.

Where has the time gone? It seems like just yesterday I was that young girl in the small Russian village of Futtor in Volhynia.

## **Katy's (Katerina) Mueller Family**

Uncle Johann Mueller & Aunt Maria Schrag

- Katherine (30)\*
- Jacob J. (20) (Big Jake)
- Peter (15) (Big Pete)
- Freni (12)

Uncle Andreas Schrag & Aunt Barbara Mueller

Uncle Jacob Mueller & Aunt Marie Schrag

- Katherine (15)
- John J. (14) (Big John)
- Peter J. (9)
- Anna (7) Ann
- Jonathan (4.5)
- Elizabeth (1)

**Christian Mueller & Anna Schrag**

- **Katerina (5) Katy**
- **Anna (2)**

**\* Katherine, 30 year old daughter of Johann and Maria, did not come over with the rest of the family in May of 1874. She will join the rest of the family after leaving Russia in July of 1874.**

## Chapter One: Welcome Home ~ September 1873 - Futtur, Russia

January 1941

In my mind, I can still picture the unique home I was born in and lived in for the first five years of my life in the province of Volhynia, Russia. Our house, which holds such warm memories, was low and long constructed of heavy, tooled tree trunks and covered with a large, thatched roof. The barn was connected to our house with a 12-foot-wide hallway between the two structures. We could only enter our home through a door from this hallway. Another hallway door led to the barn. At the front of the hallway, a door led to the front yard where our water well was and another door in the back of the hall led to the orchards and pasture. On the side of our house, we had a large garden surrounded by a willow hedge. A little way from our house was a shed for Father's tools and a forge where he hammered red glowing iron. I still see those fiery sparks flying in all directions as Father worked in that forge.

The living area of our dwelling consisted of a single large room with a floor of hard ground. The walls and ceiling which were whitewashed had numerous small windows without curtains so enough air could enter. We had a large brick oven with a chimney and hearth where our meals were cooked. A bench surrounded the oven. At the other end of our home was a table, bench, two chairs, and a cupboard and chest in the corner. Behind the oven were two small rooms. My uncle Andreas and Aunt Barbara slept in one room and my parents occupied the other. In front of the bed in my parents' room hung a long basket woven out of willows hanging from four cords attached to hooks in the beams, a cradle for my baby sister, Anna. I slept in a trundle bed which pulled out at the foot of my parent's bed. I remember my family being very content and happy in this simple, rustic residence.

Now, as I think back to my early life as a little girl, one of my first recollections is my uncle Andreas returning home from his adventures to America. This memory comes crashing back to me as if it were yesterday. I was four and a half years old. Andreas had been gone all summer that year. He was one of twelve men who had been sent by the Mennonite villages of Russia to explore America and find us a new homeland. . . . .



September 1873

I am helping my father with our afternoon chores and have my arms full of vegetables for supper when Father asks me, "Katy, who's that coming down the lane?"

I look up to see where Father is pointing and see a figure approaching.

"Father, Father, that's Uncle! He's home! He's home!" I cry. I drop the vegetables I am carrying, race down the lane, and leap into Uncle's arms.

Uncle picks me up in his arms with a huge hug and exclaims, "Oh, my little Katy, I've missed you so much. I have so many stories to tell you, as well as the family and the rest of the village.

I burrow my head into his shoulder, squeeze his neck, and whisper, "I'm so glad you're home. I've missed you so much."

"I also brought you a little keepsake of my travels to America. I'll give this to you tomorrow after I unpack. But now, my dear little rose, I'm exhausted and want to rest and spend time with my Barbara. I'll tell our congregation about my trip tomorrow at our Sunday church service. Then, at Sunday dinner, I'll share some exciting things that happened to me on the way to America."

Soon, Mother and Aunt Barabara join us in welcoming my uncle home with hugs and many questions.

Uncle Andreas is married to my father's sister, Barbara. Since they have no children, they've always lived with us, spoiling me and my baby sister, Anna. As much as I want to hear everything about Uncle's trip, I let him take his trunk to his room to unpack and rest.

"Katy, we must get ready for tomorrow's Sunday church service. I'll put Anna to bed, and then we'll practice our Bible verse for tomorrow's service," Mother tells me.

After she returns from putting Anna down in her willow cradle, Mother and I sit at the kitchen table.

"Katy, you should know that our lives are going to be changing in a significant way in the coming year. Many things will be happening that you might not understand, but I want you to know that we are doing all of this to give you and your sister a better life."

She then opens the family Bible to the book of Joshua for Sunday's Bible verse. Mother reads, "*Have not I commanded thee? Be strong and of good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed: for the Lord, thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest. Joshua 1: 9.*"

Mother repeats the verse in small portions, and I recite them to her until I can do the whole passage myself. It takes forever to memorize our Bible verse for church tomorrow. Still, I am proud to finally do it all by myself. I, too, am tired and ready for bed after the memory work and willingly retreat to the bedroom.. As I lie in my trundle bed, so many questions are swirling around in my head. "What surprise has Uncle brought back for me?" "Why was he gone for so long?" "What tales does he have to tell us?" "What changes is Mother talking about?" Soon, I am sound asleep.



"Katy, hurry! We need to get to Uncle Johann's for church services and to hear from Uncle Andreas and learn about his trip," Mother tells me as I finish my breakfast of ruhrei, and she prepares Anna to leave.

Our village is quite small and does not have a church or school. We meet in Uncle Johann's house for worship. Since there is no Sunday school, the little children usually don't attend the Sunday worship services. My older cousins help me learn the stories of the Bible as well as important verses on Sunday afternoons. Since Uncle Andreas is talking at today's service, my parents allow Anna and me to attend.

Families from two other nearby villages also come to worship with us. Father and Uncle Johann are ministers elected by the members of our village, just like their father was before them. Today, my uncle is in charge of the sermon. Benches have been arranged in the house to form two rows. Father joins Uncle Andreas and the other men on one side of the aisle, and Mother with baby Anna, and Aunt Barbara go to sit on the other side. I sit on the floor in front of Mother with my cousins, Freni, Peter, Ann, and Johnathan. Uncle begins by welcoming Andreas back and thanking God for his safe return to Russia. After a series of hymns, Uncle Johanna begins his sermon, which centers around Joshua and the other scouts Moses sent into the land of Canaan. He compares these scouts to Uncle Andreas and the men who went with him to America, exploring and examining the land that we might move to. I'm becoming restless and start to fidget when Uncle Johann finally invites Andreas to come to the front and tell us about his trip to America.

"Praise God that I have safely returned to my family and friends. I have so much to tell you about my adventures. Given the task of investigating land for our resettlement for the past five months, I traveled by train and wagon for hundreds of miles and sailed on boats up and down many rivers; America is a vast, vast land.

After much searching, I found suitable land in the Red River Valley similar to what we have here in Futtur. It is a land of plenty. I viewed a splendid landscape with many trees along the river. Good land with woods filled with wild plums, cherries, raspberries, and blackberries is abundant. We met a local German farmer who had planted potatoes and corn. He showed us corn he had planted only five days prior, and it was already two inches tall! He informed us that they had planted two bushels of potatoes the previous year. Without further attention, they dug up 95 bushels! This story was like other seed production. Another man reported he had raised potatoes weighing five and a half pounds each and onions with a circumference of 12 inches. Yet another man told us he had planted barley on May 6 and harvested it on July 10. We could hardly believe these reports."

"An abundance of suitable land awaits us all. We will be able to raise wheat and other products, and a man willing to work can make ends meet very well in this country. Many types of fish and wildlife can also be found here. The land along the Maple and the Rush Rivers was plentiful, with fine soil, timber, gravel, water, and sufficient meadows for our livestock. Fruits such as cherry trees, grapevines, gooseberries, currants, and strawberries grow abundantly in this land. It is indeed a promised land for us. Land in the Red River Valley is rich in cedar trees, just like we have here in Futtur. I was reminded of all of you when I saw these trees and brought home some cedar leaves pressed in my diary," Uncle tells the congregation as he holds up the cedar leaves for all of us to see.

"Throughout my travels, I met many kind American Mennonites willing and eager to help us resettle. They have already started collecting funds to assist us in our move to America. This is when we must begin preparing for our new life. Members of our group met with President Ulysses S. Grant, the leader of America. He informed Paul and Lorenz Tschetter that we would be welcome to come and homestead in this new country and keep the freedoms we would be losing if we stayed here. The elders and I have scheduled a village meeting for Wednesday to plan our departure. In the coming days, each family should pray and contemplate whether they want to make this journey or stay in Russia. May the Lord guide you in your decisions."

Although I am happy to hear about Uncle's travels, I am getting hungry and impatient. I have been sitting as quietly as I can for the past two hours, but I am relieved to hear Uncle Johann start the benediction to end the service.



Once services are concluded, the grownups leave the house and linger in the front yard, excitedly talking about Uncle Andreas's account of his travels. My mother shoos me outside with Anna in tow so she and the other women can prepare our Sunday dinner.

Every Sunday, we have a big family dinner with my cousins, aunts, and uncles. My extended family all live in the little village of Futter. I have 11 cousins. My father, Christian, is the youngest of four children. Uncle Johann is his oldest brother and married to Aunt Maria; they have four children: Katherine (30), Big Jacob (20), Big Pete (15), and Freni, who is 12. She often looks after me and my younger cousins when our parents are at important meetings or in the fields. She is exceedingly kind and tries to help us learn our ABCs and memorize Bible verses.

Aunt Barbara is my father's only sister and the next oldest. She is married to Uncle Andreas, and they have no children.

The third sibling is Uncle Jacob, who is ten years older than my father. He is married to Aunt Marie; she is my mother's sister, so two brothers have married two sisters. My cousin Ann is seven years old and my best friend in the family. Ann has a baby sister named Elizabeth and a little brother, Jonathan, four. Peter is nine and sometimes lets us play with him if he's not helping in the fields. Peter tends not to think sometimes and gets in trouble frequently. Ann has two other older siblings, John J., 14, and Katherine, 15. We don't play with these two because they are always expected to help the grownups but are always kind toward us.

Once we get outside, Ann asks me, "What did you think of Uncle Andreas's talk today, Katy?"

"I thought it was a little boring," I tell her and her brother Jonathan, who is walking with her. "I hope he tells us more exciting things this afternoon. I want to hear about all the wild animals he saw in America and the exciting adventures he said he had. Do you know when we'll leave our home and go to this new land?" I ask.

"You know, Katy, that we're only told what the grownups think we should know, and then they tell us only what they want. We'll have to keep our ears open, listen carefully to their conversations, and report back to each other so we can piece together what might be happening soon," Ann replies.

Finally, the rest of the church members depart, the men get busy pulling tables together, and the women begin to arrange all the food they have prepared. Twenty of my family will be eating together. As the grownups prepare for our Sunday meal, the young cousins all run to the orchard at the back of the house to play before it's time to eat. All of a sudden, I feel a hard splat on my back. When I turn around, I see Peter and Jonathan laughing and running to hide behind a tree.

"Oh, Katy! You have rotten apples all over the back of your dress. My brothers are so annoying. I am sorry they did that to you," Ann tells me.

I try not to cry, but Mother will not be happy seeing what they have done to my dress.

Ann yells at the boys, "You better watch out. You know I'm faster than both of you, and when you're not expecting it, I'll get back at you. Come on, Katy, let's go play over by the weeping willow and swing from the branches until it's time to eat."

We have a large, full weeping willow tree right beside the little stream that runs along the back of Uncle's orchard and separates it from the shared pasture. All the families of our small village use this pasture for their sheep and cattle to graze. The village men have constructed a makeshift bridge with planks of wood over the creek in this wide section so they can get to the pasture without going down to a narrower place to cross. Ann and I love to spend time by this willow. It's our favorite place to play. The thin, wispy branches fall like a waterfall of green leaves, giving us a hideaway amongst the branches. We can go inside these boughs into our make-believe house and hide from the world around us, or we can swing from the tree's limbs like monkeys trying to see who can fly the farthest. We spend many hours playing here.

"Ann, I love our home here in Futtur. Why do the grownups want us all to leave this beautiful place?" I ask when we get to our willow tree.

"I don't know for sure, Katy, but I think it concerns Czar Alexander II. I've heard my father discussing this with my mother. When we get a chance, we should ask my sister Katherine; she is older than us and spends a lot of time with the grownups and will probably have more details to share with us," Ann says.

Just as we begin to go inside the branches of the tree, we hear Aunt Maria call out to us that it is time to eat. We are quite hungry by now and quickly run to the house. I don't know what I want most: to eat or to hear more of Uncle Andreas's stories from his trip.

After everyone is in the house and situated, Uncle Johann leads our family in prayer, thanking God for his family and blessing the food we are about to eat. The adults sit at the main table, while the young children sit at a separate table that the men created before the meal. We are celebrating Uncle Andreas's safe return, and it feels like a feast with all the food the women have prepared for us. Summer borscht, cottage cheese pierogies, smoked pork sausage, bratkartoffeln with bacon, and dill pickles are passed around the table, and everyone takes as much as they want. Mother and my aunts have extensive gardens in the back of our houses, and we've been blessed with an abundant harvest this summer. We've been lucky to have never had to go hungry or without tasty, healthy food. There's not much talking as we eat this celebratory meal because we are enjoying the food. All the children are eating very quickly because we want to hear more



about Andreas's adventures. After we finish our meal, the older girls, Katherine and Freni, clear all the dishes as the women put the uneaten food away. Anne and I help clear the dishes, and Katherine and Freni wash them. The boys never help with the kitchen work but are sent to check on the sheep and cattle in the back pasture.

Soon after the dinner chores are done, Uncle Johann says, "Everyone come to the sitting room; Andreas will tell us more about his adventures to America."

"Family, I am so happy to be back amongst all of you. My journey was one of many surprises and wonders. Before leaving the continent, I was astonished by the cities I traveled through to get to the ship that would carry me across the ocean. We came across cities with paved streets and large Orthodox churches with full-color religious paintings above their entrances; it's hard to describe these vast, marvelous buildings.

When I arrived in Berlin by train, the other delegates and I visited a large, ornate Catholic cathedral and the Berlin Zoo. Children, the zoo was a marvel. Two colossal stone elephants greeted us as we entered. Once inside, we saw real elephants and striped horses known as zebras. Strange African creatures called hippopotamuses, majestic lions, and funny monkeys were on display. We saw bears and a peculiar animal with a hump on its back called a camel. Dozens of wild birds could be seen and heard throughout the zoo. They had enormous birds called ostriches that they say come from Australia."

As I listen to Uncle describe the zoo, I try to picture all the strange animals he tells us about. I hope I will be able to visit the zoo and see these creatures for myself.

"We left Germany in rather windy weather and proceeded towards France on the ship *Frisia* and arrived in La Havre in the middle of the night, around 2:00 A.M.," continues Uncle. "Our ship would leave for America at noon with the tide, so we had time to explore the town. We found it quite beautiful with flowers such as roses, gardens fenced with pickets, chestnuts, apricots, and clean streets on which huge horses traveled."

"At twelve o'clock, our ship left the French port and sailed into the immense ocean. Soon, we could see nothing but Heaven and water. The first four days of our trip were cloudy and foggy, with some winds that created large rolling waves, but on the fourth night, we experienced a frightful storm. The ship rocked back and forth; dishes fell and broke to pieces. It was a terrible night, and it appeared as though we might perish. Many of us thought the sea would be our grave. The storm continued into the next day. Great waves were thrown against the ship. The water was a foot deep on the deck. I called upon the Lord to save us and recited scripture throughout the day and night. Thankfully, the comforting hand of God was watching over us as the new day dawned, and we were greeted with a mild and cloudless day. "

"The next day, however, it was windy and foggy again. We nearly met with a severe accident. Another ship coming from the other direction almost collided with our boat. It passed so close to us that we could have reached our hands together with the people on the other ship. "

"Four days later, we met another ship in yet another storm. This storm forced that ship against ours. This collision broke the mast of the other boat. Thankfully, our ship was not damaged. In the morning, the end of our voyage was in sight when land was seen in the distance. A white boat from New York exchanged signals with our captain by firing three cannon shots and then escorted us into the harbor. We remained all night in the port, and on May 28, after breakfast, we stepped upon American soil with immense joy. My heart could not cease to thank God for His protection over us on our way to this new country."

Uncle's description of his journey across the ocean has only made me scared and worried about leaving my home of Futtur. As I look at Ann, I see the concern on her face, too. The boys have been on the edge of their seats, listening to the dangers Uncle experienced crossing the ocean. Even my mother and aunts seem worried as they shake their heads and wring their hands.

"Let's take a break from your adventure, Andreas. I'm afraid your voyage across the ocean has scared the little ones from the looks on their faces," Aunt Maria, Johann's wife, speaks up. "We should eat our dessert now. We have made roll kuchen and have watermelon and syrup to go with it and plomimoos, cold plum soup."

"I don't want to go on a ship across the ocean," I tell Ann and Freni after I get my kuchen and begin eating.

"Katy, I don't think our parents would put us in such danger if they didn't believe we could handle it," Freni tells us. "We must trust them and the Lord to keep us safe."

I know Freni is correct, but I still feel uneasy about the journey ahead of me and the rest of my family. After we finish our dessert, Andreas continues talking.

"I know that my trip across the ocean was frightful for all of you, but you must remember God is always with us and will protect us on this journey. We must trust in Him; that is what faith is all about. It is our destiny to leave Russia and resettle in America if we want to continue practicing our Mennonite beliefs and have the freedoms the Czar will soon be taking from us," Andreas tells us.

"The trip over the ocean was the most harrowing experience of my journey. Once in America, I encountered nothing but kind and helpful people. We have many people there who want us to come and will help us create new lives there. I had many more experiences on my trek across America, touring the lands available to us, which I want

to tell you about. Still, I know you are all tired and need to rest with the time that we have left this Sunday. We will have much to do in the coming months to prepare for our departure in the spring. Please be patient, and I will continue sharing my adventures. For now, go home and rest."

Slowly, each family begins to leave for their own homes. Uncle Jacob and his family go up the lane to their house. My family, Uncle Andreas and Aunt Barbara, set off in the opposite direction toward our home.

When we get to the house, Uncle calls me to his room, "Katy, I want to show you what I brought back for you."

I'd forgotten that he told me he had a surprise for me. I anxiously sit beside him as he takes his Bible from his bedside table and opens it. "Katy, you know I've always called you my little rose. It's my special name for you. While we were in America, we explored many different places. We were welcomed by valleys of wild roses when we were in the Red River Valley of Dakota Territory. At one time, we counted over seven diverse types of roses.

These roses made me think of you, and I knew I wanted to bring some back to show you." Uncle Andreas pulls out some of the roses he had pressed between the pages of his Bible. They are a beautiful pinkish color with very delicate petals.

"Uncle, they're beautiful!" I exclaim. "I'll be very careful with them and put them in Father's Bible to keep them safe."

"I know you will, Katy. Please look at these roses and think about the beautiful land we will soon be moving to. It will be a hard journey for us, but we'll have a wondrous and bountiful new homeland, and it will be worth the trials and struggles we'll face. Remember, your whole, big family will be with you, and together, we'll be strong enough to build a new life in America."

I hug my uncle and thank him again for the pressed roses and go to show my mother the gift he's given me. Mother helps me place the flowers in our family Bible in the book of Joshua on the page that contains today's verse: "Have not I commanded thee? Be strong and of good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed: for the Lord, thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest. Joshua 1: 9."

We all go to bed early after a light supper of cheese and bread with rice pudding. When I finish my bedtime prayers, I lie in bed imagining what the next few months will be like for my family and me. Thinking of the ocean we'll have to cross still scares me, but I know I must trust the Lord just like our Bible verse says, and I know Uncle Andreas and my father will protect me on this adventure. Soon, I'm fast asleep

