Interview Transcripts

Marilyn Schleining Schultz (MSS)
Heather Viets (HV)
November 16, 2016
Transcribed by Heather Viets
Overseen by Steve Schreiber
The Center for Volga German Studies
Concordia University, Portland, Or.

HV: I'm Heather Viets, I'm a graduate student at Portland State University History Department and I'm doing my thesis on the Portland community of Volga Germans.

MSS: I'm Marilyn Schleining Schultz, and I am a descendant of Volga Germans.

HV: And we're at the Center for Volga German Studies at Concordia University. Okay, so I'd like to just ask you some general questions about your experience growing up in the community, and feel free to talk about anything that you feel is important. We don't have to stick to my questions. Can you tell me a little bit about your family background?

MSS: Let me go back to when my grandfather came to Portland. That was in 1906. He had been a soldier in the Tsar's army, and of course the early uprisings in Russia were occurring in 1905, 1906. And as a member of the Tsar's army he was, he was targeted by the Bolsheviks as an enemy of the people. So, in the summer of 1906 he and his wife and their young son, who was just a baby, and that was my oldest uncle, decided they would leave. My grandfather's sister had come to Portland with her husband a year or two before and settled in the same neighborhood as many, many other Volga Germans. They were from the village of Norka, and so they came, um, by ship, of course, to Boston—when I was in New York years ago I thought they might have come into Ellis Island and I searched for their records there and there was nothing. But it turns out they came into Boston and then they took the train from Boston across the country. They came directly then to Portland. Um, at that time the German neighborhood was called Little Russia, and it was from about Seventh to Fifteenth and from Fremont to Prescott. And my, um, my family initially lived on Thirteenth, between Beech and whatever the street north of Beech is. When they arrived of course they didn't have any housing, so they stayed with my great aunt and her husband, and then sometime within the next year my grandfather bought property that was immediately north of his brother-in-law's there on Thirteenth. So ultimately, I think they owned five lots, five buildable lots on Thirteenth, on the west side of the street there. And, um, and in the next year my grandfather built a little house, and this is what it looks like today, and it was only about eight-hundred square

feet, and they lived in that house until they had five children, in eight-hundred square feet, and my father said they used to sleep in shifts and there would be three people to a bed. And my grandfather built what they called the Big House and that's what that looks like [refers to photo]. It has been gentrified, um, it did not look like that when I was a child. It was much plainer. But this house—and then there's the lot in between that has what are now the garages, and then the little house. And then my grandfather bought this house that's next in line from his brother in law [refers to photo]. So, he just owned most of that block on that side. Um, and family lived in all these houses for year and years. When this became a rental house one of my cousins rented that for a while. And my oldest uncle—as I mentioned actually came from Russia—he and his wife actually lived in this house for years and years and years. And then in the early Sixties they decided they needed a nicer, fancier house and so they had one built right over here on Twenty-Third and Holman. So, they didn't get very far away, but it's a nice ranch style house and, um, and they were the ones who always had the Christmas parties. Um, this house had a basement with a bar and, um, anything you would need for entertaining. And so, they always hosted the Christmas parties there. And then when they built the house on Holman then the parties shifted to Holman. Um, and when they moved out of this house then another uncle and his family—actually, Jerry Schleining's parents—moved in here, and so this is where Jerry lived growing up and when he was in high school. And so, you know, this was the Schleining compound, if you will. Um, my parents did not ever live on Thirteenth. My mother was not a German from Russia. She was half German and half Danish, but not Volga German. And her family owned grocery stores, um, consecutively on Alberta. And, um, and they started with a very small little shop, and gradually got bigger and bigger, and finally had a big store on I think about Twenty-Fourth and Alberta—I don't remember the cross street for sure. Um, and they were in competition with Safeway, and they managed to force Safeway out because all the neighbor people shopped at their store, and they gave credit, and I don't think Safeway did, so that may have had something to do with it. But anyway, my parents, when they married, moved into a house on Borthwick, um, just the third house north of Fremont on Borthwick. And that was owned by my grandfather. Now, during the Depression, my grandfather, because he did not trust the government, having lived in Russia and knowing what an uprising does, um, never put his money in banks. And so, his money was all in a box under the bed, and so when the Depression hit, and people were losing their homes for lack of the ability to pay their property taxes, he went in and was able to pay the property taxes, and for that little bit of money was able to buy a house. And so, by the end of the Depression, he owned I think ten or twelve houses in the north and northeast area there. They were all pretty close by, so he could keep an eye on them. So, we lived in one of my grandfather's houses and we were there until I was in the fourth grade, and then we moved out to Rose City Park. Um, but I always felt like I didn't really quite belong with my cousins because we didn't live on Thirteenth or Twelfth where some of them lived. We were about ten blocks away, you know, but that seemed like a really big distance because the culture was different. In the old German neighborhood everybody still spoke

German, and they cooked German foods, and it was, it was a very different atmosphere. On the street where I grew up people were of every nationality and, you know, it was a much bigger mix. When I was doing research for my book, um, I looked at the, um, 1920s census for Thirteenth. And you go down the list and it says, um, country of origin—Russia, Russia, Russia, Russia, all the way down the line. And then it said, um, I think it says native tongue or language—German, German, German, German. You know, it was amazing. And most of those people, I believe, were also from Norka, so they were the same village and they just all kind of moved over and, and were very comfortable in that setting. Um, my grandfather never learned English—I mean he knew a few words, but he really could not carry on a conversation in English. Um, when he came, uh—now the 1920 census lists his occupation as scavenger. And he was a garbage man. And so, he, um, he was one of the first members—I don't know if he was a charter member, but he was a very early member—in 1916 of the Garbage Men's Union in Portland. And of course, I think they all were Germans from Russia. So, um, he started collecting garbage with a horse and wagon, and, and that long garage was like a barn for the horse and for the wagon. And then of course he switched over to a truck, and then several trucks, and then he had some commercial routes, and by his standards I think he became very successful. Um, one of my uncles did far better, and he went to Southern California in the early Fifties and started garbage routes there. And at one time he had a huge section of Los Angeles, uh, and he was very successful. Uncle Ad. Unfortunately, I did not benefit from his success. And so my grandfather, he could pick up garbage, you know, without having to learn the language, but he was also very good at handling money. And that's how he had, um, the money to buy all those houses and he was, he was a strict bill collector, so—well, I have rattled on.

HV: I'm happy to hear about all of that. That's really interesting. Um, can you tell me a little bit about your early years growing up in Albina and your upbringing?

MSS: I was born in 1937, and that was really the height of the Depression. And I think we were desperately poor, although people around us were also poor, and so you didn't really know, I didn't understand fully until I went to Grant High School years later and all of a sudden, the girls were wearing twenty-five-dollar Pendleton skirts, and my mother would have been appalled if I spent ten dollars for a dress. So, um, there, we were poor, and very thrifty, and my parents worked hard. Um, my mother, um, was very creative about ways to make money—I'm the second of four children in my family. And, so, when we were all small my mother didn't have a regular job, um, but she told about during—after my older sister was born, um, at the school that was just two doors away, Boise School, um, they had the women who were making, uh, all of the hand-crafted objects for Timberline Lodge and this, during the Depression, was part of the—what was it called? It wasn't the WPA, was it? The WPA. And so, they were making blankets and all kinds of things, and there wasn't a restaurant close by, and so my mother decided that she could serve lunch to these people. And so, she set up some tables on a little back screened porch, and also had the dining room with I think a couple

of card tables, and so she would serve about twenty women every day for lunch, and then whatever food was leftover we had for dinner. So, you know, she was clever that way. And during World War II of course we had a victory garden, and so we raised some of our own food. By that time my maternal grandparents had sold their last store and bought a farm out at Clatskanie. And so, we got food from the farm. I'm sure we ate better than a lot of people. And of course, so much was rationed during the war, like butter and meat, and anyway. So, um, growing up I wore hand-me-down clothes from my older sister and also from the two girls next door, and it just never occurred to me that most people did not wear hand me down clothes. I was trying to think the other day if there were thrift shops then, and I don't recall that there were. There must have been a Goodwill. We certainly did not frequent any store where you had to hand over real money. We just mostly made do. The furniture that we had, I think it was all mostly second hand that people had given. Sometimes there would be things that my grandfather would get from the garbage route, you know, that people were throwing away. And, my dad had gone to Benson High School, and was kind of a jack of all trades. He could fix just about anything. He knew carpentry, he knew a little electricity, he knew motors, and so he was able to fix things. Um, my mother did a lot of canning. We had a dirt basement, but there were shelves down there with all the canned goods. So, you know, we did okay, but it was always a struggle. And, and I remember in asking f r things sometimes my mother would say, we'll see. And she didn't want to tell me no, but she knew she couldn't tell me yes. So, it was always, we'll see. And that kind of came to me as no. Even when I was in high school and, um, when I was a senior and getting ready for the prom, I made my own prom dress. But after I had already bought the material my mom said, you know, I think we can buy you a prom dress. And I thought, where did that come from? I wore the one I made. I did not buy a prom dress. So, growing up, I played with paper dolls a lot. Um, paper dolls were relatively cheap and there was a variety store over on Mississippi Avenue. You're familiar with Mississippi, with all the restaurants and bars—it was not like that then. There was the old Rio Theatre, and I think for a dime kids could see a show on Saturday afternoon. So that was popular. Um, on Mississippi Avenue we had the first soft ice cream store that I can remember, and it was called the Siberian. And it was magic because they would hold the cone under this machine and it would just pour out into the cone and they'd give a little twist, you know, and I thought that was the greatest treat in the world. So, it was always a struggle, you know, do I go to the movie, do I have ice cream, or do I buy more paper dolls? Um, oh dear, what else. My folks, for their entertainment, they did a lot of card games. They would meet, um, other couples, they'd come to our house or we'd go to their house, and the adults would be playing. I don't think they played things as complicated as bridge, or as sophisticated as bridge, but they had all these card games that they would play. Um, and yes, sometimes it was with aunts and uncles and sometimes it was with my dad's cousins, and sometimes it was just friends. Sometimes it was friends of my dad from Benson High School. When he first left Benson—and I'm not sure that he ever graduated, I tried to find that out and this is something my mother never would have spoken about, um, because my mother thought she was special,

um, but I think he did not graduate, I think he dropped out and went to work, and at that time there was the Doernbecher furniture company. And Doernbecher was an old German man who hired lots of German boys, and, um, and so my father and my uncles, just about everybody, worked for a time at Doernbecher. And then in the late Twenties I think when Mr. Doernbecher died he gave money to start the Doernbecher Children's Hospital. But he was, he was just an old German who was making furniture, and it was, it was, um, it was hard furniture—it was tables and chairs and beds, and cabinets. Um, and it was in Sullivan's Gulch, the manufacturing company. So, it was, you know, very close.

HV: What kinds of traditions or practices were common in the community when you were growing up?

MSS: I'm thinking. I don't know so much about customs and practices. The women in the community had a schedule, um, you know, so they'd wash on one day, they'd iron on another day, they'd bake on another day, um, and it seems like Friday must have been baking day because, uh, we would go—my father and I—to my grandparents' house, and the prize was always a big—well, it seemed big to me then— a big round loaf of rye bread that my grandmother had made. Now, it wasn't my real grandmother. This is a picture of her. This was my step grandmother. Um, and my real grandmother died in the early Twenties with the birth of her eighth child. And the baby survived only a short time thereafter. But my grandfather had all these kids and needed help. And this lady had five or six children and her husband had died. So, they married and here is this huge house of children. And at that time, at the big house they built on some rooms on the back of it that it didn't originally have so there'd be more bedrooms, so in the back here they built on some more bedrooms [refers to photo]. You know, because—and she is the real grandmother of Harold Kammerzell, so—she's my step-grandmother, his real grandmother. Um, so there, there are all these connections. When I was going to Grant High School and I took German, um, here were all these kids whose families were from the neighborhood, and at the time I didn't think that much about it—I mean, you know, it's kind of just the way things were. Of course, kids from German families would study German. Why not? But, um, so customs. Um… This grandmother was very religious [refers to photo]. She went to church several times a week, and it was Ebenezer Congregational Church, um, that's the one that I remember best, and that's the one that had the funeral services, um, for both my grandparents. Um, but she, she was far more religious than my grandfather was. He was, he was a businessman. But, um, and I think she was a little more old-school than he was, and because she was religious, it was like—well, if something happens it's God's will. And so she, she didn't have the confidence that somebody today would, would have and say, no, no, you have self direction and self will. But she was, um, she was a very good housekeeper, and cook, and baker. Um, she was not popular with my father's older brothers. Um, and, and I really don't know why. And especially when they lived next door. But when she needed something done she'd call my father and that's when we'd get to go, and we'd get the bread.

HS: I'd like to hear a little bit more about religion and whether that was a significant part of the Volga German community.

MSS: I'm sure it was. Um, you know, going back to Russia, um, I think that was, that was one thing that was very, very important to the villages and to the communities there. Um, when they came here, they still had their churches, and—but I think probably many of them were less religious than they had been in Russia.

HV: This next question we touched on a little bit earlier when you spoke about the garbage collecting services and Doernbecher, but I was wondering what kind of jobs were commonly held by people in the Volga German community?

MSS: There were some who were merchants. There were the Repp brothers who had the market on what was then Union Avenue, um, and there was a hardware-furniture-variety store just a couple of doors down from there that was owned by a Volga German—I can't remember, was it Weiner's? Weimer! Yes. Um, and so, I'm sure that there were some crafts people, um, George Arndt had a landscaping business. Um, what did Whitey Sauer do? I don't know. Most of my family were garbage men. Um, all of my uncles, um, my dad was not, but all of my uncles were garbage men.

HV: Can you talk a little bit about the role of language in the community and whether the old dialect was spoken in your family or in families that you knew?

MSS: Speaking to my grandfather, um, my fathers and my uncles always spoke in German. Um, old man Danewolf had the grocery store up on the corner, and if I remember right he spoke only German. If I went in there to get something I had to point to it. I don't think he spoke English. Um, all of the adults—I think that's fair—all of the adults there on Thirteenth spoke German. Um, my dad did not learn English until he went to grade school, and, and he went to Sabin, and I believe he was seven years old, um, and that was the compulsory age when you had to start school. So, you know, the, um, the community did not embrace education as we would wish they had. Um, but he was kept out—a seven-year-old can do all kinds of tasks—and, and so the kids were working, they weren't playing when they weren't going to school. Um, and then when they got to be eleven or twelve years old they were old enough to drive a truck. And, of course those were the days when you had to stop at every place and somebody had to get out and get the can, and physically, you know, carry it to the truck, empty it into the truck, and my mother knew all of that, and she said to my father you are never going to be a garbage man, because she was just afraid that it would ruin his health. And, um, so we were kind of the outliers. Um, she also did not like the fact that the Germans drank a lot of beer. Um, and so my father—we never had beer at home. But for the Christmas parties and times when he'd get together with his

brothers he would drink a beer or two, but never to excess or he would incur my mother’s wrath.

HV: I’d like to hear a little bit more about the role of women in the community. I know ou mentioned that there was a certain schedule that a lot of the women seemed to follow with baking and things like that, but I’d like to hear more about it.

MSS: I don’t know of any of the women there that worked outside the home. Um, they were pretty traditional, um, you know, most of them had children to take care of, and then they had grandchildren to take care of, and, so, um, I think their lives were not easy—and again, during that time period, the Depression and then the war, everybody was canning, everybody was raising vegetables, and all of that of course fell to the women to do. Um, and in none of these houses did we have central heat, so you had to have somebody who chopped the wood for the fires, for the stoves, and, um, and sometimes that fell upon the women.

HV: Those are all the questions I have but I’d like to know if there’s anything else you want to talk about or anything we didn’t get to that you think is important to mention.

MSS: No, not that I can think of. I think I’ve rattled on.

HV: I was very interested to hear everything you had to say, so thank you so much.

MSS: You’re very welcome.

Harold and Loretta Kammerzell (HK, LK)
Heather Viets (HV)
November 28, 2016
Transcribed by Heather Viets
Overseen by Steve Schreiber
Center for Volga German Studies
Concordia University, Portland, Or.

HV: I'm Heather Viets. I'm a graduate student at the Portland State History Department.

HK: I am Harold Kammerzell, an individual that was born in the ethnic neighborhood of Northeast Portland.

LK: I'm Loretta Kamerzell, and I did not live in the area. I lived nearby, but my parents came from the area.

HV: And we're at the Center for Volga German Studies. So, to start off can you tell me a little bit about your family backgrounds?

HK: Yes, I'm a second generation, born here in Portland, in the, like I said, in the ethnic neighborhood. And, um, went to the schools in those areas, like Sabin and Highland, and of course, uh, the church was the center of the community, so I was raised in the German Congregational Church. Um, and our families all had businesses in the area, mainly refuse hauling, um, but there were several major manufacturers that other German families worked in, such as Doernbecher, B. P. John [Furniture Coporation], M. & M. [Woodworking], Nikolai Sash and Door, and so forth. It was a very, uh, tight area, and it had its own shops such as butchers, grocery, hardware, dry goods, and we all—everyone patronized those, and we pretty much stayed within the neighborhood until the start of the second war, and that kind of dispersed everyone due to the war efforts.

LK: I have to comment on the grocery stores that I remember. The reason they had these little neighborhood stores were because there were no Safeways or Fred Meyers or any of the big-box stores. So, it seemed like every little area of the German area had its own grocery store. There were a number of them.

HV: Loretta, can you tell me a little bit about your family background? You said you were from nearby the area?

LK: Nearby. My grandparents lived in the German area. Mom did until—both Mom and Dad did until they married, and then they moved roughly two miles away. But Mom did take care of her parents so that she was there almost every day. So when it came summertime and there was no school I was there every day for a matter of

hours while she did housework and helped in the kitchen, and just more or less took care of Grandma as she was quite crippled with arthritis.

HV: Can you both tell me a little bit about your early years growing up in the Volga German community?

HK: It was kind of different because, uh, the people in the area all retained the language, the German language. And so, for us young guys, we had to communicate with the elders in the native language. And it was spoken—at our home it was spoken quite a bit around the table. Uh, in fact when I was in kindergarten, the teacher said you must speak more English, 'cause she could—I was mixing the English and the German together. And she said no, you have to speak English. But I delivered groceries in this area, and so working with the older women in the neighborhood, you know, they all spoke German to me and I had to communicate back. And although I've lost a lot of my German I can still understand. But uh, I'm having a little trouble communicating now. I've been away from it so long.

LK: In my home they spoke mostly English, but when they didn't want us kids to know what they were talking about, they spoke in German. But I could understand everything they were saying. I just didn't speak it quite as well or as often, but I could sure tell what they were saying.

HV: What was your upbringing like?

HK: It was kind of strict, we, my parents were Christian—were very, uh, associated with the church. We had, uh, we always said grace at every meal. We had prayer before bed. But everyone in the neighborhood pretty much did that. There were very few families that I can recall that didn't, you know, but as I said earlier the church was the center. And in the neighborhood, there were about four, five churches. Uh, what I do remember, it might seem a little funny, was before the war—you must remember I'm kind of a young guy—but there was a policeman named Barney that patrolled the German ethnic neighborhood, and uh, if any of the young boys got into trouble, he didn't haul them in or anything like that. 'Cause he knew the elders of the various churches, so he just went to the elders and said that guy, you need to reckon with. And so, the people took care of business.

LK: I find that my family, also, their life revolved around the church. That was our faith, but it also was our social life. It seemed like this is mostly what we did.

HV: And that was the German Congregational Church?

LK: Yes, it was. And something interesting, you might find, is that we all went to

Sunday school, and we went to—Harold and I went to the same church. He says he remembers me when I was five years old, and then we started dating when I was in high school, and then married. So, he's known me for a long time.

HV: Wow!

HK: Doggone.

HV: Can you tell me a little bit about any traditions in your family, like any important holidays?

LK: That's a good one. We always had a huge Christmas program on Christmas Eve, and the whole Sunday school—actually the whole church was involved, because it was the time that the little Sunday school children all, um, had a piece to say or a part in this, and the regular Christmas carols were sung. I always remember how huge that Christmas tree looked. It just seemed huge. And then after the pieces were all spoken and the songs, the ushers went back, came out with white sacks that had an orange in it, nuts in it, and candies. And that was almost one of the most exciting parts of the evening. And then you got to go home and Santa Claus usually had come while you were gone. How he knew, I don't know. And then all the German foods came out. Oh, we had so many wonderful things. Most families had German sausage. There usually were several kinds, and uh, I just remember a meat-type thing that was like a head cheese, it was called Stugen. And it was an ungodly grey color. It wasn't very appetizing looking. But we all seemed to like it. And then it went with our Riewwelkuchen. You had to have that, and rye bread, maybe some cheeses, but it was just a feast. And you got to stay up 'til almost midnight or around that time, and that was exciting to me. Didn't have a bedtime. So that was what I thought of for one of the holidays.

HK: Ours was similar. Very similar.

LK: Can you tell about Easter time when we had confirmation?

HK: That was a big holiday, Easter, again. But Palm Sunday, the Sunday before Easter, the confirmation class was graduated in front of the entire congregation. And um, and usually there was big dinners at the various family homes of those graduates, and it was, uh, a very festive time. One other— aside from the church thing, one of the major events of the year was the garbage men's picnic!

LK: That was not involved with the church.

HK: No, it was really separate. And uh, it was a big to-do. At Roamer's Rest was one of the areas and Blue Lake was another. And um, the big part of that was, you know, the garbage men, they were in all the German churches, I mean the families, 'cause there was so many Portland garbage men. And so, they had this

annual picnic, and this huge group got together and uh, had a day of just having fun at the picnic.

HV: Can you talk a little bit more about the garbage hauling business and, um, why so many Volga Germans were in that line of work?

HK: When they came to this country, in the nine—late eighteen hundred, early nineteen hundreds up to 1910, 1920, these people, you know, they couldn't speak English very well. And although they came to this country and they were craftsmen—there was some, there was a lot of good ability amongst them—but because of the communication part, you know, they had to take—find lesser work. And they actually, um, most of them started the refuse business for the city of Portland. And, uh, one time I looked at the register. We had over six—no, three hundred and sixty-some families that were in the business.

HV: What other kinds of jobs did people in the community have?

HK: Because of their language, language barrier, a lot of them went—I shouldn't say a lot, but a number of them went to work in the railroad, like the Union Pacific and the Northern Pacific. Uh, in the railroad shops, maintenance shops, and down in the Albina district. And uh, of course that was all within walking distance from the neighborhood. So, there was an advantage there. But a lot of them—because they were very good at woodworking, cabinet making, carpentry, uh, real detailed work—woodwork. You know, they found jobs like at Doernbecher Manufacturing, furniture manufacturing. And M. & M. Woodworking.

LK: B. P. John's.

HK: B. P. John's, Nikolai Sash and Door. There were a number of large companies at that time where they also could find employment.

LK: That's where my father worked, before he got into the garbage business.

HK: Speak up. Your voice, they can't hear.

LK: My father worked in the furniture business from the time he was fourteen I believe. And then he eventually had a milk route where he went out to the outlying farms and picked up those big milk cans, hauled them to the, uh, dairies. From the farm to the—

HK: Creamery.

LK: Creameries, yes. And then he went into the garbage business. He retired from that.

HV: Can you tell me a little bit about folk medicine and healing in the community?

LK: Yes, I can. My grandmother was the doctor, midwife, everything, for the German people, and they all seemed to come there. There was another doctor named Dr. Uhle that took a lot of the German people. And um, but Grandma was the one that they came to mostly. And she did like chiropractic-type work. But all of this was because she was a natural healer. God gave her this special gift—she could hardly speak any English, and yet she just had a touch where she could heal. And I honestly saw people that had broken bones that she set and healed. I saw the man across the street had chopped—he was chopping wood, and he accidentally cut off his thumb. Totally cut it off. And he carried it over on a bread wrapper, ran across the street, and I was there at Grandma's, saw this happen. And I watched her, 'cause I used to sneak up the stairs and peek into that room and watch her. It just amazed me. And she would mold it. Her fingers were just like this, and she set that thumb on there and it totally healed back. My brother had his—as a baby he was about, oh, two years old maybe, riding on the back of my bike, got his heel caught in the spokes. I was going so slowly, just giving him a little ride, but it tore his heel off. It was just hanging by skin, and she just molded it back on. And I was told I'd better be babysitting him every day. He was to lay on a blanket out in the sunshine and let that heal. And Grandma had taken adhesive tape and somehow with gauze and that tape she made like a cast, and it just fit on him. And they'd take that off every day and he'd play on a blanket out in the sunshine. And I had to every day play with him and keep him there. And that healed, and he became a Marine, ran marathons, and you—that heel never has bothered him. You cannot see a scar. There's nothing there.

HV: Going back to religion a little bit and the church, um, can you tell me more about the role of the church in the community?

HK: From the standpoint of, politically? Or—

HV: No, just from your experiences. So, you said that it was kind of a community gathering spot. Do you want to talk about little bit more about that?

HK: The church we were raised in had, uh, a lot of functions. One was that during the war the elders of the church got together and said, you know, we need to do something for the young people here to keep them going, uh, occupied so they don't go astray. So, they started a band. They hired a musician, and he came in and he taught these kids—I have a photo of it—um, how to play instruments. Actually, I attended the very first session of his training. And he, uh, the first six, eight weeks, we didn't even touch an instrument. It was all book work, you know, note book work we had to do, and learn about music. And then he brought instruments in and he tested everybody, you know. He gave you a choice, you know, he said what could you—what would you like to play? And uh, you would say, trumpet, trombone, whatever. And he would try you out and he would say no, you should try this instrument. And that's the way he trained. And a lot of these kids went on to—fantastic musicians, they were all, um, what I'd call leaders,

instrument leaders, in the schools that they attended. And um, in my case I, uh, I went on to be first chair trumpeter at Benson Polytechnic. And I was also northwest, uh, honor guy, for trumpet playing in the Pacific Northwest, in a—what would you call it? Contest? And I made all-city band, all-city orchestra. And a lot of the kids that I grew up with that started in this class did the same, and the following—they were very good musicians. And then later on a different pastor came to the church and he started what he called a—he said I want to start a youth group, you know, just keep you together. Called Alumni Association. And you had to graduate from confirmation, and then you got to go into this alumni group. And we conducted a lot of things—had picnics, we had, uh, gosh, all kinds of stuff, didn't we? I can't even remember.

LK: I have to correct you a little bit, because you didn't have to be from the confirmation group, but that is the nucleus of it. But there were some that didn't. But I would like to also comment about the music. I was not one that was in the band. Uh, at five years old I started taking piano lessons until I graduated from eighth grade, and I had continued to take until I was about fourteen, and then because I was so in love with music and evidently did quite well, my mother wanted me to take pipe organ. She had a thing for this—sound of music, and I really liked it. There was one program on the radio, and every time that came on with this pipe organ music I used to always go and just lay my ear against the radio so I could really hear it. So I started pipe organ lessons. And at the church that we went to I started playing full time, and I was seventeen, I was their organist, and I've been playing organ professionally ever since.

HV: Was there traditional Volga German music that you played, or what kind of music was it?

LK: Just the old hymns. That was mostly it.

HK: I'm not very knowledgeable about it, but there was a band, uh, kind of a oom-pah-pah band. And there was a Starkel guy who, he played for dances, Saturday night dances. And there was a store on Union Avenue called Weimer's Hardware and Furniture, and upstairs they had kind of a dance hall. And the Starkels would play there, and other musicians. Hildebrandt was another guy I knew that played the fiddle, and her [Loretta's] uncle was an accordion player that played for dances in that same location. It was, uh—the hall was used for big wedding receptions. People then behaved themselves.

HV: Can you talk a little bit about women in the community? What kinds of things did women usually do?

LK: Way back, I can show you a picture of the Ladies Aid, is what I would call it. I don't know what they called it in German, but this is probably when I was young or just before my time, so you know how old [refers to photo]. But this is a group of the women that got together probably once a week for Ladies Aid meeting, and

I'm sure they had some projects I'm not sure about. But my grandmother's in this picture, so.

HV: Was that a Volga German group specifically?

LK: Yes.

HK: Yes.

LK: This is probably just from our church. And each church had a group of women like this.

HV: Harold, do you have any thoughts about women in the community, or—

HK: They were always after me 'cause I couldn't behave myself. I can still see, picture them running after me shaking their hand.

LK: What I have to add to that though, is in that era women didn't ordinarily work outside the home. You were a housewife, you stayed home, and people usually didn't have cars to get places, so their life basically was keeping up the home, taking care of the children.

HV: Those are all my questions, but I was wondering if there's anything else that you'd like to talk about that I didn't bring up?

HK: The ornery stuff?

LK: You could tell about going to Seesa's farm.

HK: We had a Volga German couple that lived in Ridgefield, Washington, which at that time was a little distance from the neighborhood. And my grandparents on my mother's side would go out there once a week to get fresh cream, eggs, butter, milk, uh, to bring back to the neighborhood women for their baking. They usually did this on a Friday morning, uh, and I got to ride with them a couple of times to go over there and come back. And then my brother and I had the job of delivering that throughout the neighborhood. And, uh, we did this for quite a while. In fact, my mother was so proud of us, going around this neighborhood to all these German women, and furnishing all the eggs and milk and cream, and um, she went and bought us overalls—the blue and striped overalls like the professional milkmen used to wear when they delivered milk through the neighborhood. And everything went well until one Saturday my brother and I got into an argument and we tipped over the wagon with the eggs and the milk and—and we got fired. We lost our job. But it was exciting because, mind you, we were delivering this stuff in the morning, Saturday morning, and that's when all these ladies were baking. And you know, by the time we got through with our route, uh, you know,

we had cookies, we had Grebble, we had all kinds of goodies that the ladies were giving us. Uh, yeah, we didn't need lunch.

LK: Some of the names of these foods that you might be interested in is the women, when they would bake, would, um—first of all we had German rye bread. And it was a light rye that they used, not a dark rye. And, um, that was a weekly thing. Probably some women baked more than once a week. And then they made what we called Riewwelkuchen, that's one name, and it was nothing but a bread, just a white bread, with these crumb—um, what would we call that? A butter, sugary crumb topping. And then we also had, they'd use the white bread dough, and you would roll it out, very thin, cut it into squares approximately this big, and you'd fill it with usually hamburger that you'd browned and cabbage that you steamed down, and that was your filling. And then you'd bring the points up, pinch them down, flip them over on a sheet, and bake them. And so that was our either Friday night or Saturday night dinner every week for a lot of people. And, um, I can't think of any other—

HK: We had Grebbel.

LK: Grebbel would be like a doughnut, a deep-fried doughnut, but they would cut them in a rectangle with two slits and you—it was a knack to learn how to twist those, drop them into the hot oil, and fry them. And that was one of our big desserts.

HK: We had an unusual soup called Schnitzsuppe. It was a dried fruit soup, you know.

LK: Schnitz means cut.

HK: Cut, yeah. And it was dried fruit soup and it had cream—

LK: You first boil that, and then after the fruit has softened then you add sweetening—Mom always used molasses, a little bit of molasses and cream—and you eat it hot. The Scandinavians eat it cold. But, um, the Germans always had it warm or hot.

HK: What was so funny is about half of the kids in the neighborhood, you know, if they knew they were having Schnitzsuppe they'd run home. The other half, find out they're having Schnitzsuppe, and run away! They didn't like it.

LK: Our family always had the Grebbel with the Schnitzsuppe. A double treat.

HV: Thanks so much for talk to me today. It was really nice to hear all your stories.

Loretta Kammerzell passed away on March 22, 2017. Her generous contributions to the Portland Volga German community are fondly remembered.

Roy Derring (RD)
Heather Viets (HV)
Steve Schreiber (SS)
December 4, 2017
Transcribed by Heather Viets
Center for Volga German Studies
Concordia University, Portland, Or.

HV: We're here at the Concordia University Library in the Center for Volga German Studies. It's December Fourth, 2017. I'm Heather Viets.

SS: I'm Steve Schreiber.

RD: I'm Roy Conrad Derring.

HV: Roy, I'd like to ask you a few questions about your experience growing up in the Volga German community. Um, so first, can you tell me a little bit about your family background?

RD: My father was born in the Volga region of Russia, Volga German. Um, he immigrated here in 1912. My mother's from northern Norway, from a place called Kjerringøy, and uh, that's pretty much it for starters.

HV: Can you tell me a little bit about growing up in Albina in the Volga German community?

RD: I actually didn't grow up in Albina. There were other neighborhoods that did have, uh, Volga German immigrants. I was actually born not far from here in Woodlawn [Northeast Portland], and still have the family house, since 1940.

HV: What kinds of traditions or practices were common in the community when you were growing up?

RD: We didn't attend Volga German churches, which there were, like, three churches?

SS: There were actually more than that over time. There were probably four primary churches, but there were a number of other churches that also had Volga German members. Sometimes they were mixed with other ethnic groups. Um, but there was actually a small Mennonite Baptist church just north of Fremont on Sixth, which was founded by a fellow from Norka. But it was kind of out of the mainstream of other churches.

RD: We visited neighbors. That was where I would hear German, the dialect they

spoke in, and although my sisters and I—and I had four sisters, older sisters—they didn't really know, learn any German. I heard a few phrases or words that my father spoke, but essentially, we were just all-American kids. And I didn't know an awful lot about, uh, where my father came from, or for that matter where my mother came from. But we were surrounded by more of the Norwegian relatives than the Germans—Volga German relatives.

SS: Roy, were you ever encouraged to learn German, or did you just pick it up by, by listening?

RD: I did take, um, freshman high school German, and that was about it. That got me going more. But then I pretty much picked it up and then I would hear my father say things, and then I was stationed in Germany in the army for two years, and, um, ironically in the same area—I didn't know it—but in the same area where Germans immigrated from Germany to Russia.

HV: Wow, that's really interesting.

SS: I'm just curious, when you were there in Germany did the dialect sound familiar to you or was it a little bit different or—

RD: No, in fact, I tried my dialect at um, at this, well, it was an on-base restaurant but it was run by Germans, and I tried my dialect and it was like they didn't quite get what I was saying. But I really, uh, didn't practice that much.

SS: Right.

RD: But I would understand, though, when I would hear it. But I think I was a little hesitant and self conscious that I was making grammatical errors, or, um, so since then I became better at that. I wasn't self conscious, and if I made grammatical errors, well, so what.

SS: It was a dialect that had evolved, you know, over two hundred years since our ancestors had left that part of Germany, so probably a little bit different than today.

HV: What kinds of jobs did people in the community usually have?

RD: A lot of them, including my father, worked in furniture, uh, furniture—

SS: Manufacturing.

RD: Manufacturing, yes. And uh, my father was a wood finisher. After the cabinet makers would make the cabinets or the, uh, fixtures, he would spray them. He was, that was his job.

HV: Okay.

SS: Was he at Doernbecher's, or—

RD: He was at Doernbecher's, yes. Doernbecher was a German, and—were they Germans from Russia or just—

SS: No, I think directly from Germany, but they hired a lot of Volga Germans, as did B. P. John's.

RD: B. P. John's, my father worked at B. P. John's. My father also worked, I remember as a kid, like five years old, going to downtown Portland where he worked right on Fifth near Burnside, and it was called Stadler Fixture Works, and there were other Germans there. So, they spoke German a lot because they were in the, that business together. And I think, um—I discovered later that, um, they all, the Germans from Russia that were here also worked on railroads. Is that right?

SS: Yeah, a lot of them worked for the railroads, and as you know, a lot of them got into the garbage hauling business—

RD: Oh, absolutely—

SS: Heather and I were talking the other day about, um, the relationship between Volga Germans and Germans from Germany. Do you remember anything about that or hear stories about that? Did they get along okay together or not get along okay?

RD: No, I think they got along once they, you know, discovered they were German or when they, they would speak with each other, it didn't seem to matter so much if they were from Germany or if they were from, uh, the Volga, from Russia. Uh, it was that they connected because of the language. The language, they connected because they spoke German. We had neighbors from Germany and um, so my father always spoke with them and they spoke with him and it was, uh, a real connection for them.

HV: Those are all the questions I had, so Steve, if you have any—

SS: Why did your dad decide to come to the U.S. and you know, were there relatives who were already here or what kind of spurred him as a young man to come to the U.S.A.?

RD: He was receiving letters, or the family was receiving letters from America from his oldest sister, Louisa, and her husband, uh, Henry Blum, and at that time they were married—they had married in Russia and then they came to America. Also, I believe it was around 1904 when they came. And then his oldest brother who was

ten years older already had a family in Russia and they immigrated as well. So they had an—they were established here, and then they were receiving letters in Russia from them, and um, my father was just chomping at the bit. He wanted to go to "America, America." And uh, and I believe that my grandmother really wanted him to go. Uh, my grandmother, whose leg was amputated and who was very sick [refers to photo.] She looks like she's probably close to ninety but she was still in her fifties, and she's so pale you can't even see the features of her in the photograph. I really felt awful about that, and when my father would talk about missing his mother after he came over, he would kind of choke up and tear up, and you'd go to console him—but he didn't want, he didn't want to be consoled. He wanted—I mean, that was his thing to feel like he didn't want to be.

SS: How old was he when he came over?

RD: He was sixteen.

SS: Sixteen.

RD: In this photograph here he was already, um, well he could have been fourteen. He said because of this photograph he was standing on his tip-toes. He didn't want to look short. His brother was tall, but he was short. And I think he was—

SS: I think I remember doing that when I was younger too.

RD: Yeah. And I think he was hitting his sister in the side—everyone, their mouths are all turned down. I think, you know, when you had photographs taken at that time or you've even seen others from the Wild West or something, you had to look serious. They were so—

SS: I was told by one elderly Volga German woman once that, she said, well—photographs or photography during those eras, you had to kind of stay still longer, so it's hard to even hold a smile. But even beyond that, kind of culturally, they thought it you smiled there was something wrong with you. So, you wanted to be more, kind of, serious. And there's still, I mean, cultures, like in Asia where if you smile they think you're a little bit goofy. They don't take you seriously, so you have to—

RD: That's right. So, they had that somber, very serious look on their faces and they look—they were very poor as well. I mean, you can tell, and the thing is my grandfather wasn't in this picture because he, prior to this picture, um, that was taken, he froze to death on a sleigh that was coming back in the winter time from another village. He was a meat cutter. And so, they lost their father and for a woman to lose her husband is like losing a leg or an arm. Well, literally, my grandmother did lose a leg, and it was because she was diabetic. But um, so it was very difficult raising, I think it was six kids. And her two oldest, her, uh, oldest daughter and her oldest son, were married and they left. So, there was—the older

ones weren't there to take care of the younger ones in the family. And the two old—these brothers—were in the military, from 1914 to 1917, and the only thing that saved my uncle Adam from the firing squad was because he was a prisoner of war, so, the war was over, and the revolution had already taken place, so when they came back they were indoctrinated and not treated very well. And at that time all the livestock was taken away from the Germans. All the farming away equipment was taken away. All the seed grain for planting more crops was taken away. And that was one of the worst parts. That was a systematic thing that I strongly feel was, um, to starve these people to—starve them, which came about where they had the famines of 1921, was it—

SS: Early 1920s, and then again in the early 1930s.

RD: So, these were very hard, bad times, and not only that but when my father was here and his sister and her family and my uncle and his family, there was no longer communication with Russia. You couldn't send letters back and forth. I think it—I can't remember when exactly that stopped but during the revolution in certainly interrupted all communication. So, my father didn't know what happened to his mother, he didn't know what happened to his brother Peter, his sister Anna, and what happened to the two brothers. And it was learned later that, uh, the brother Johannes faced the firing squad—returning veteran. Um, and, there was a story that my father told me he had heard that he had a chance to get away, but he didn't want to dessert his friends, his comrades that he was in the military with. There could have been as many as seventeen of them. And uh, let's see.

SS: Was part of the reason that your dad came over, do you think, was to avoid going into the military? Because he kind of got out a couple of years before he would have been enlisted.

RD: Yeah, because the war in Europe didn't start 'til 1914, I believe. And at that time when my father immigrated it was 1912. They were—I'm sure they really wanted—there were many reasons that they wanted to get him out and they would have needed my aunt to be there for my grandmother, and uh, Peter was there. I, I don't know, you know, exactly what his feelings or what his thoughts were about the whole thing. That his little brother got to go and he had to remain—why, why him. And uh, so it was—from the time that communications stopped until up in the—near 1970, I think it was 1969, so we're talking about over fifty years had passed with no communication. Not knowing what exactly happened. Knowing there were deaths but not the circumstances. My father, through someone who had a barber shop not far from here up on Ainsworth and Thirtieth, um, the building's still there, I think it's a little restaurant or something like that, I'm not sure exactly, but this barber who was of German from Russia extraction, uh, was able to help my father, uh, to find out how he could get in touch with his sister in Russia, where in Russia or even that he knew that he could find her. So the barber told my father to—here's a man who owns a locksmith shop on Union Avenue

which is now MLK [Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard], um, that, to go see this man and he can help you. So my father went there, and I remember hearing this at the time. And so I was happy that my father could find out, but I wasn't interested—I didn't have the desire—it wasn't in me yet to, to be involved with it. And so my father did get my aunt's address.

SS: That's amazing.

RD: I don't know how, but that man helped.

SS: Were they in Siberia, or—

RD: My aunt was in Siberia. My aunt Anna Katrina. So they maintained this back and forth. And I remember being with my father at the post office downtown where he was sending a letter off, and then he got a letter back, he got several letters back, and he got a letter back that—"don't send money," because he was sending maybe ten or twenty dollar bills or whatever, because it would be confiscated. I don't know if she said it would be—just "don't send the money." Now, at the time I was very happy for my dad that he was getting this correspondence with his sister, yet I was still not involved. It just didn't really connect inside for me.

SS: What was the trigger for you? When did you get—

RD: I didn't really get interested until I found out while I was watching TV—since then my father had passed away about eight years ago in 1981 and this was 1988 in the summer, and on television there was a, I think it was called neighbor fair, or neighbor food fair, neighbor fair, and it was, um, down at the waterfront. And there were all these ethnic groups that had booths. And they were also having performances by different places and crafts and things. And I was, just happened to have the television on and watching that, and it came up to the Volga German booth—what? And I just, that's what sparked me. And I was so curious. A Volga German booth, you know, I had never heard of anything like that. Uh, something that got my interest, and my father's Volga German, and so I looked in the phone book and I found the, uh, the church, the one on Fremont, and Seventh? Or not Seventh—

SS: Probably Ninth.

RD: Ninth, yeah. And I called the church up, and they referred me to, I think it was Cliff Haberman and Heimbuck?

SS: John Heimbuck.

RD: John Heimbuck. Those two. And I got ahold of them and that got me to where the meetings were held, and I joined, and I was very enthused and got into it. And uh, started digging up little photographs that I re-photographed and had printed. And,

uh, so I was looking for my father's—his bedroom was still like it was. It was funny 'cause, well one funny part was that here he had a little box and I opened up the box and there were a couple of cookies that were still in there after all those years.

SS: Just a little stale.

RD: Yeah, a little stale. So, I was also looking through other stuff and I found part of his passport, and uh, some other things. His, some other thing, it could have been confirmation or something like that. And um, then I was looking for the letters that he got from his sister because I wanted the addresses, primarily so I could get in touch with, uh, I don't think she—she probably wasn't alive, but there would have been cousins who would have been pretty old, and it would be like second cousins maybe that I could get ahold of. But my father at that time, in later years, he was developing Alzheimer's, dementia. Um, so he had destroyed his letters. He threw them away. And I remembered them being there but then he—uh, didn't do it intentionally. It was just, he didn't know what they were anymore. And uh, yeah. So my interest really grew from back in that time.

SS: What are some traits that define Volga Germans? Because you've got Norwegian ancestry, you've got Volga German ancestry, so you can kind of compare the two.

RD: Yeah.

SS: What would you say are sort of, maybe unique things about the Volga German culture, traditions?

RD: The unique part I guess was the language, but that's really died out which is too bad. Uh, and, we were just like, when I was going to high school I saw all these names in the yearbooks that we had, uh, they called them Spectrums [sp?], and uh, everybody—there were so many people that had German last names because the Albina students went to Jefferson High School. Some on the other side of Fifteenth might have went to Grant. Some went to Benson, or some of the girls went to all-girls polytechnic school. One of my sisters went there, and another went to Commerce, which was a clerical school—

SS: It's now Cleveland.

RD: Yeah, Cleveland High School. And uh, so, uh, at Jefferson all these kids with German last names, and yet none of us—none, I was never approached, I never approached anyone—it wasn't even in the consciousness of their last names being German. No one came up to me and said oh, are you of German extraction? Volga German extraction, or descent? And uh, I would never have thought of approaching them that way. What we were, what we really were, and I really strongly feel this, we were all American kids, doing all American cultural things. And uh, in 1955, rock and roll was just happening, just beginning. Uh, not that we

didn't listen to other stuff before that. But it was totally all-American, and we listened to the radio programs, the mysteries, the comedies, the variety shows, and it was like this magical radio that would spark your imagination. You had to imagine what they were doing, what they were saying. It was like reading a book, you know. So, it was—it was just, we were immersed in American culture. Now—

SS: Do you think that's in part because, like, you said your family sort of assimilated very quickly. So, after hundreds of years of being in Russia, where they actually chose not to assimilate, or they chose not to take on the Russian language or many of the Russian traditions—they very rapidly sort of gave up their Volga German identity—public identity—when they got here to the U.S.

RD: They did. And it was to their advantage, so they could progress, and every generation progressed on from then. It wasn't like they were stuck down, and it wasn't like they were living in a ghetto in Albina. They were, uh, functioning out of—now I would say that a lot immigrant women that were Volga German women who had families, who were stay at home, raising good families, they—a lot of them, well, older ones, maybe they came when they were already in their upper thirties or forties—um, they maintained more, I think, of the—

SS: They didn't assimilate as much.

RD: They didn't assimilate as much. Their assimilation was going to the grocery stores, maybe some businesses to buy some things, um—

SS: But those would have been sort of typical neighborhood Volga German businesses.

RD: That's true. And uh, there were no real large stores, like supermarkets until about 1950. Wait. Actually—

SS: Fred Meyer.

RD: Yeah, Fred Meyer and Safeway were—

SS: Fred Meyer was on Union and Killingsworth?

RD: Killingsworth, for a long time. And I remember seeing Fred Meyer himself in the downtown Fred Meyer, which was on Fifth and, I don't know, it could have been Yamhill or Taylor.

SS: So why do you think people like you and I continue to be interested in this topic? What's your theory? Your father, you know, wanted to assimilate, my parents were pretty well assimilated because they were first generation born here. So, what's your theory—why are we so interested in it?

RD: I think we also have an identity. Or we had an identity crisis—I don't know if it's a crisis, but it was an identity. Because we were not just—let me see how I can phrase this. We were not just a, um, just Caucasians. We have identities, we have cultures, and I think it's that way with many people from Europe. We're not just Caucasians, we're Germans, French, Irish, Dutch, Scandinavian, Eastern European, and uh, I think people want it to be known that you're not just white or Caucasian, that you also have a culture that got you up to this point. You didn't just come out of nowhere. You have a background that led you up to where you are now. And so I think when a lot of—so many people did assimilate, and the language was lost, they were trying to get it back and you don't completely get it. We love America and we love the American culture and what it has afforded us being here. That's why people all over the world want to come to America. So, and—

SS: I think I know the answer to this question, but if you had to sort of rank your identity—we have kind of at least three different identities. We're American, but we have this Russian kind of connection for several hundred years, and then we have a German connection even further back. I mean, if you're identifying yourself, what's the ranking or how do you kind of see yourself in terms of those three different cultures?

RD: It's funny because I was around Norwegian culture more.

SS: Right, you've got four.

RD: My sisters were more, you know, into the Norwegian side because we saw our Norwegian family relatives, aunts and uncles, and uh, and I would hear my mother speak in Norwegian with my grandfather. And so, and he would come and visit quite often. But I guess I felt like I identified with that because I was able to interact with it. But I didn't have it with my German side. I had it with my father because my father told me stories and the stories were like in here [refers to photos] of his growing up in Russia and then coming to America. Uh, so I didn't really have that—I'd go around with him to visit with other immigrant Germans and I would hear them speak in the language back and forth.

SS: Were they mostly conversing it that dialect?

RD: Oh yeah, and of course they'd pick up American words to because, uh, so it'd be a little sprinkling of English mixed in with the German and it was kind of different because—

SS: I think they call it Dinglish—Deutsch and English.

RD: I was never in large groups of Volga Germans, and my father was—we didn't live

in the concentrated area of Albina. I think my, my father would go there every week, he'd go there but he'd escape from there—

SS: That was kind of his cultural fix, if you will.

RD: He'd go there, and a lot of the culture was in the taverns down there.

SS: He went down to share a beer with his comrades.

RD: Yes, and I'd tag along with him so I'd hear all this, and um, but I had no one to speak with because it was—everybody, all the kids that were born here were speaking English, you know. Um, so, but it was fun going to the taverns with him because it was lively. I got to go play the jukebox, and I—he referred to me as his bodyguard. And my father would be around—here's all the garbage men. Mostly garbage men in the taverns. And they had their little allowance to go have a beer. And my father, who was—he would always dress up when he went down there. He was in his double-breasted suit. He would be fully dressed. He was quite a sharp dresser, and uh, he would have his diamond rings on and his jewelry. And here he'd come in and here are all the garbage men in their garbage men uniforms, and uh, they'd love to see my dad come because they'd say, there's Coonie. Coonie is a nickname for Conrad. Coonie, or they'd say Kuh-nee, in the dialect it sounds different. But um, so he would always buy beers, you know, set them up for everybody because he didn't want to be like the poor boy from Norka. And he came out of a poor existence because no father around anymore, and then the older ones leaving, and so it was pretty grim circumstances facing the whole family, and the fact that he got out and he was able to get good employment and uh, buy the food he wanted—he would always shop in the markets and come back home with sacks full of, you know, meat and bread and it was like a sin if you didn't have it—if you didn't have bread when you were having dinner that was a sin. You know, you had to have bread because bread was—took him back to here [refers to photo] and bread was always the filler. If you were hungry you had to have bread. So, there was more than just eating bread—it was, it was the staff of life. Um, so—

SS: He was kind of showing that he'd made it. He was buy food and nice clothes and he'd buy a drink for his friends. He was living the American dream.

RD: That's right. And in German he would use the phrase all the time, "*Arbeit macht das Leben süss*." Work makes life sweet. And so, the work ethnic among Germans generally, culturally, was work—the work ethnic was there. And so—

SS: If you worked hard you could improve yourself.

RD: Yeah.

SS: I think that was all the questions that I had. So, thanks, Roy, for being willing to

do this and talk with us and share your stories.

HV: Thank you so much.

RD: My pleasure. Thank you very much.

Steve Schreiber (SS)
Heather Viets (HV)
February 19, 2018
Interview via Email

HV: Tell me about yourself and your connection to the Volga Germans.

SS: I was born in Portland in 1956, the youngest child of Fred Schreiber and Esther Smith (Schmidt). I was brought into the world by Dr. Uhle, who served the entire Volga German community in those days. In my early years, we lived in the eastern section of the Volga German neighborhood at 4037 Northeast Thirteenth (between Shaver and Mason). My paternal grandparents lived down the street from us and there were many aunts, uncles, and cousins living nearby. I attended Sabin Elementary School. During the turbulent 1960s, there was a good deal of tension in Northeast Portland that created anxiety and some fear. My parents and grandparents moved out to the Gresham area along with many other people in the old settlement. I finished my elementary school education at Lynch Terrace and then attended Centennial High School. After high school, I attended Oregon State University and became the first person in my immediate family to graduate from college. After college, I worked for a CPA firm in Portland, then for the Port of Portland for over thirty years. At the Port, I served as both the Chief Financial Officer and the Director of Aviation with responsibilities for four airports, including PDX. I married Roz Hinchliff (of English and Irish descent) in 1989 and we have two children, Will and Lizzie.

HV: Who were grandparents?

SS: All four of my grandparents were Volga Germans who were born in Russia. My mother's parents, Johannes and Anna Margaretha Schmidt, lived in the colony Brunnental (Spring Valley) and arrived in Quebec in 1907. They immediately came to Portland by rail. My father's parents came to America separately. My paternal grandmother, Elisabeth Döring, departed the colony of Norka with her parents, Heinrich and Dorothea Döring, late in 1903 and arrived in Philadelphia on January 4, 1904. My paternal grandfather, Gottfried Schreiber arrived in June 1908 traveling on his own. Gottfried had two older brothers who had come to Portland one year earlier. My grandmother was about ten years younger. They met in Portland were married in 1918.

HV: Why did your grandparent come to the U.S.A.?

SS: I wish that I would have asked them that question while they were still living. Based on stories and some documentation the reasons seem to be as follows:
1) Poor harvests in the early 1900s led to food shortages and hard times in Russia.
2) The population was growing and there wasn't enough land for everyone to farm.

3) There were early indications of a potential overthrow of the Czarist government of Nicholas II.
4) The Russian government had taken away many of the privileges granted to the Germans by Catherine II in the 1760s including exemption from military service and the right to have their own language and schools.
5) Positive reports from family and friends who had come to America beginning in 1875 encouraged migration.
6) Some pastors, such as Rev. Wilhelm Stärkel (who served the Norka parish and had connections to Brunnental through the Brethren movement), encouraged their parishioners to go to America.

HV: Did you grow up identifying as a Volga German? If not, when did you become aware of your ancestry?

SS: I had no idea that I was part of a Volga German ethnic group until I was in my late 20s or early 30s. I never heard the term "Volga German" when I was growing up. I did hear people use the term "Our People" but I wasn't really sure what that meant at the time. Discussion about life in the "old country" was done in German and we kids couldn't understand enough of the dialect. I was fully aware that we were German. Part of our church services were still in German when I was younger, and the older folks conversed in the dialect. Some songs were sung in German. The part about living in Russia was a mystery until I was older. I used to ask my parents where our family lived in Germany and they told me their parents were from Russia. I thought they were confused and meant "Prussia"! Why in the world would Germans be living in Russia? It wasn't until my mother died in 1994 that I really developed my interest in family history. My mother had documented what she knew about the family and had joined an organization called the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia. As I began looking through what she had collected, a sort of "secret world" opened up and for the first time I began putting the pieces together about my grandparents and their ancestors. I was fortunate to be tutored by some of the older member of the Oregon Chapter of AHSGR when I first became interested in my family history. People like Marie Trupp Krieger and Bill Burbach added greatly to my knowledge about the Volga Germans and freely shared their photos and information. I was also fortunate that the timing of my research coincided with the opening of the archives in Russia. Information, such as census lists and church records that we thought had been destroyed was discovered and we continue to find more information. It was an exciting time. Many of us can now trace our ancestry back to the places of origin in modern Germany and other parts of Western Europe. I've connected with branches of my family that are living in Russia, Kazakhstan, and Germany. I'm still learning more twenty years later. The fun part of genealogy is finding connections to living people that I wouldn't have otherwise met. I made a trip to Russia in 2006 with a cousin who lived in Norka and was part of Stalin's deportation of the Volga Germans in 1941. He had not been back to his home village since that time. It was a very emotional experience and one that I will

never forget. The famines and deportation were never discussed in my family when I was growing up.

HV: Did your parents and grandparents associate with other Volga Germans?

SS: Yes, I think the majority of their social group was family and friends from our church who were also Volga Germans. The church was in many ways the social center of the community as well as the spiritual. We attended the Second German Congregational Church (later the Evangelical Congregational Church). My father's family was part of this congregation. My mother's family belonged to the St. Paul's Evangelical and Reformed Church, but I only visited there on rare occasion or perhaps for a funeral.

HV: How did the Volga German community evolve over time?

SS: As you know, the first group of VGs who were living in Kansas arrived in 1881. A second small group that had first settled in Nebraska arrived in Albina the following year. Migration increased around 1891 and continued up until the First World War. There were about five hundred families living in Portland by 1920 according to Richard Sallet. By that time, they had built their own churches, stores and businesses. Many worked in local businesses that became mainstays of the economy. Of course, they dominated they garbage collection business for decades! These people were a positive factor in the growth of Portland. Of course, there are now thousands of people of Volga German descent living in the Portland area, but they aren't really distinguishable as a unique group. My understanding is the community here in Portland assimilated more quickly than in rural areas where the old culture lasted a bit longer. After the Second World War, the assimilation process was well under way. The younger generations were marrying outside the ethnic group and no longer spoke the old dialect. This caused some tension with the older generation who wanted to keep things the same. I suppose it is a process that most ethnic groups go through as they adapt to life in America. I don't know of anyone in my family who wished that our ancestors had stayed in Russia.

HV: What typical Volga German values were passed along to you?

SS: They were mostly humble people. We were taught to not take ourselves too seriously or be a "show-off." Honesty, integrity and loyalty were highly valued. Cleanliness was another strong trait. Everything had to be kept clean and in good working order. They were frugal people – reusing and recycling everything before it became fashionable. They would never buy something they could make or grow. Borrowing money was somewhat frowned upon, except when buying a house or car. If you did have a debt, you always paid it on time or sooner. We were taught to work hard from an early age. Being responsible for ourselves was also important. Being a "burden" to someone else was to be avoided at all costs. People could sometimes have a gruff veneer, but they were always willing to help

if you needed it. They valued family and made sure that their children felt secure and protected. Overall, I think they had a sense of balance that is sometimes lacking today. They appreciated what they had and didn't worry about what they didn't have. I think many of these values were ingrained in me and have served me well in life.

HV: Why is your Volga German ancestry of interest to you?

SS: I think it started as an intriguing family mystery. At first, I was focused on genealogy and started to piece together how I was related to so many people. My father was one of four children and my mother was one of thirteen children. It seemed like I was related to everyone when I was growing up. It all started to come into focus as I documented the family connections. Later, I became interested in the history, culture, traditions and music of the Volga Germans. I've done a good deal of reading on the topic and have two websites that I maintain. I served on the AHSGR Oregon Chapter board for about twenty years and also helped found the Center for Volga German Studies at Concordia University. I guess you could say that I'm in fairly deep at this point. It's important to me because I've learned so much about my family and about myself. Many of my childhood mysteries were solved and now make sense to me. I learned not to judge my parents, but to accept that they were also shaped by their parents, grandparents, et cetera. Our history does shape the present and future. I've also learned through DNA analysis how people around the world are connected, not just Volga Germans, but all of us. Even though my ancestry is one hundred percent Volga German, I can now see the evidence of how I am related to people all over the world, many of which have no Volga German ancestry. We all have our own important stories to tell, but we are also bound together in a much larger story of human development and migration.

HV: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

SS: Yes, I'm very pleased that you chose to study the Volga German community in Portland as the subject of your Master's thesis. When I first started researching my family, I found virtually nothing on this topic at the established history organizations in Portland. Over many years, I've worked on piecing the story of the Volga Germans in Portland together, but it's important to have a qualified historian like you do this work from an independent viewpoint. The story of these people deserves to be told. I'm very grateful for all you are doing. Vielen Dank! (Thank you!)