Ort und Vertreibung: My Mother of the 1920s

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For my mother

This narrative was constructed from material in Mom's journals, and from interviews I did with my parents in 1996, printed as "The Past inside the Present: a family story." The experience of hearing the stories, and getting to know my parents as persons, led to a profession as a personal historian. I credit my mother for teaching me the value of stories, of teaching me how to see and write about the details of life. I was unteachable in the kitchen, but oh, how wondrous and delicious this cooking with words!

Displaced from Love into Light
into collision of sperm and egg
formed into human being,
from womb into slippery chute
into first breath on earth, displaced
from cradle to shared *Schlafbank* bed…
into times and events clamped
in her memory, and re-lived, still now -
my mother's life has been a series

of place and displacement.
Two sides. One coin. Flipped
by circumstance, choice,
and mystery. The paradox
of living inside Eternity.

Susanna Siemens Klassen was born in Neuendorf, Ukraine, on March 21, 1926 – the fourth of eight children. Today, on October 21, 2017 she is 91 years and seven months old. I will refer to her as Suse.

She was born in the bed in which she was conceived, in a home on a nameless street, a place inhabited by former Kulaks (land-owners). The half-hectare place included a large vegetable garden, and a 50-tree fruit orchard. Beyond the street was a meadow, ringed by hills the children slid down in winter. In spring, snowdrops appeared, followed by violets, and honey-sweet air. In May, the children ran barefoot – with their mothers' blessing.

Then came the Famine. Children trapped field mice for Mother to fry, and foraged for edibles in forests, and harvested gardens. Suse caught drifting acacia blossoms, and imagined them hearty food. Mother Susanna displaced the forks and knives; they were redundant. Hunger was a noun and a verb.

Somehow, they survived.

School was a place Suse flourished and enjoyed until the order came to wear the red Pioneer scarf, a show of support for the Communist Youth Party. Suse followed her older sister Tina's example, she refused to wear it, and when interrogated by her teacher, insisted it was by her choice – not her parents' instruction. The sisters were shamed, teased, and disdained. But Suse stood her ground. Life on earth involved much suffering, but faith held a promise of heaven.

Then, a horrifying displacement.

February 3, 1938. The Black Raven car arrives in the village. Father Siemens is a marked man. He does not support the Communist party, and his deceased father was a preacher. Two strikes!

He tells his wife the car is back, and then prays, "Not yet!" But at 3 in the morning, the dreaded knock. "Heinrich Siemens!" Another knock. Father refuses to open the door. He gathers his children around him, and one-by-one, takes them on his lap. Then they form a circle on the floor. "*Und wie hat er zu Gott geschrien, um uns zu bewaren*," Suse will write in her journal. And how he cried to God to save us!

The hand on the door knocks harder. Louder! "*Gleich nach dem Dorfrat kommen*!" Immediately! Father and Mother take their leave in the next room.

And then he is gone. Suse tells the story over and over for the rest of her life.

She is 12, and life goes on.

At 14, Suse is no longer required to attend school, and helps out at home, and in summer works on the collective. Life is harsh in this place, but there is love. At 15, Suse falls in love with Waldemar Klassen.

Then, another displacement. World War II. The Germans advance into Neuendorf. The church re-opens! There is more food! The future looks bright.

The reprieve is brief.

October 10, 1943. Suse is 17. The Germans are retreating, and all Germans must follow. Pack minimally.

October 11. Late afternoon. The family – Mother and children Suse, Gerhard, Greta, Mika and Peter – boards a 75 car long cattle train. Terror and prayers. A child is born that first day on the train. A bomb hits the train; no one is killed. A third train in the convoy is hit; everyone's killed. When the train stops – jump off! Find a spot, do your business, and rush, rush. When the whistle blows, finished or not, get on board.

First stop: Litzmannstadt. Everyone is deloused.

October 19, 1943. Kulm an der Wechsel, at the border. Safe in the boundaries of the *Reich*. Now they aren't Germans in Russia; now they are Russians in Germany. A week in the barracks. Guards at the door. A room in an old convent. Bedbugs. Red welts.

Everyone assumes this place is a permanent home.

Three weeks after arrival, Suse is assigned to work away from her family, for a farmer's wife whose husband is in the army. That winter, she is diagnosed with trachoma, and admitted to hospital in Amalienhof. Displaced again. Upon release, she is reassigned to work for an elderly woman in Kulm.

July 10, 1944. Another train. Next stop Warthegau, Poland, at the Banhhof Wilhemsbruek. Now the family works for a Bessarabian farmer. Older brothers Heinrich and Dietrich are drafted into the German army. Suse is sent to Charlton Panski, Poland, to dig trenches. Germans supervise the work. Twenty women share living quarters. The girls sleep on the floor, compact as fish. Soldiers discover the girls are German, reassign them to kitchen to help cook for hundreds of people. No meat, though sometimes worms. Curfew after dark, windows covered. Guerillas roam the street.

January 3, 1945. A new year. Suse receives a letter from her brothers imploring her to come home for a visit before they leave for the Front. She pleads for, and is granted, permission.

January 18, the brothers depart. Advise Suse not to return to her place of work; it's too dangerous. She's torn. Consults the mayor, who advises the same. She stays.

At four that afternoon, the family is given two hours to prepare for evacuation. The Russians are coming! Outside, a snowstorm, and freezing temperatures. Their Bessarabian employer, an old woman, is ornery, resists military orders to provide transport for the family. Mother Susanna begs, and climbs onto the wagon with her two youngest children, and two suitcases. The other three follow.

The caravan convenes in Bolkenburg. The wind howls. The fleet proceeds slowly. How far that first night? Suse recalls only people, wagons, and military leading the way. Gunfire; the Russians are close! Then stop again, start. Stop. Start. Foot forward, foot forward, foot forward… Suse clings to the back of the wagon, dozes as she walks. The world is a whirl of white. She kneels in the snow and prays.

Mother Susanna is all fret and worry. How will daughter-in-law, Lena, with three young children, survive? "Stay," she says to Suse. "Wait for her." As if in that sea of people Suse could walk on water. Suse complies. Spots familiar faces. "Have you seen Lena Siemens and her three?" No. No. And no.

Suse turns, and after much searching, finds her mother again.

Two or three nights later, they reach a seemingly vacant estate. Exhausted and cold. The chickens are already butchered and broiled when, suddenly, "Who do you think you are?" The estate owner had stayed to protect his place. He snatches away their meal.

Two days later, the Russians arrive, but the group has moved on. They cross the Oderbrueck, the following day the bridge is bombed.

In Breslau, real beds. An elderly man hosts them. At four in the morning, they set out again. Mother frets constantly. Where are her sons, Heinrich and Dietrich, and daughter Tina, who is travelling with her infant son and in-laws?

They stay with the Bessarabian woman until the 24th of January. In Goldberg, Suse registers at the agency, inquires about family. Some are being hosted in Weissenfels (Sachsen). Train tickets are granted. On January 25, 1945, they travel from Goldberg to Friedland, then to Sudetenland, and arrive in Wiesback on the

27th. Shelter in an inn, conditions overcrowded. Suse works in the kitchen. The family feels safer.

The Russians advance.

February 19, transported to Boglenz. Tall mountains, snow and glaciers. Warm food. A night's sleep.

February 20, by refugee train to Prague in Czechoslovakia. Not a Mennonite among the them.

The screech, faint whistle and kaboom! Boom! Boom! of dropped bombs is constant.

The next day Patschief, a small farming village. The locals despise Germans. More terror. They shelter in a schoolhouse, along with other women and children. No more work. Food involves a walk, lineups and ration tickets. German soldiers urge them to cross into Germany; if they are here when the regime collapses, they'll be interned. What does "interned" mean? Suse is too afraid to ask.

Springtime arrives, the weather is lovely, all is quiet. No gunfire. In May, the radio announces the Germans' defeat. Czechs storm into the school, tear pictures off walls, smash furniture, beat anyone in their path. They swear, curse, scream at Mother and the children, hurl stones at them all.

The school director arrives, chases the Czechs out, locks all the doors. He has the keys. Twice a day they may go outside for water and to relieve themselves. Otherwise, stay inside, be quiet, don't look out the windows.

Now, Americans surround them.

May 7, 1945. American soldiers escort the group out of the school, onto the street, to fend for themselves. The weather outside is cursing and spitting; the family walks on. Overnights in a granary with other Germans. Americans guard them; otherwise, who knows?

Next shelter is in prison barracks near the German border with several hundred other Germans. The floor is their bed, and they are pressed together. Food is scarce or rotted. Long lineups for a few tiny potatoes or mouldy bread.

On May 9, they are interned. So this is what the word means! Ten days later – release, and another train travel for several hours till they're forced off. They continue on foot. No map. Small mercies. A milkman picks them up, they travel to Betowitz. They beg for food; some are kind, others refuse to share even their water. Bad Germans! Bad!

Now earth is their bed, and the night-sky a ceiling. Somehow they find train transport, past Janowitz, are evicted again – young and old ordered to clean the train station.

They walk on, up to Neuern, to Gruen, to Eisenstrasse. May 21. The border between Czechoslovakia and Germany. And what's this? They'd reached the border before! Czechs had deliberately given them false directions. The Czechs have no mercy, for they had been shown no mercy. German soldiers are viciously beaten; they scream like animals. No one says a word.

On May 23, a passing truck stops and offers them passage to Platling, where they rest for three days. The youngest children – Greta, Mika, and Peter – beg from farmers, while Suse and brother Gerhard keep watch nearby. They are always hungry.

They travel on, actors in a gray wasteland. Find transport with another milkman, sit in the back of his open truck, milk cans clattering all around.

Starubing. Suse locates a train station, occupied by Americans. Interpreters translate her request. The family travels in open rail car to Faddorf...receive permission to travel to Bamberg. "Where are you going? Stay in the West!" German soldiers advise. "Don't go to Sachsen, the Americans will relinquish it soon to the Russians."

How outrageous!

On May 30, from Bamberg to Hanover; on May 31 to Weisenfels. On June 1, Trebnitz (Sachsen). A reunion with Mother's sister who is living in a castle. Then, Sister Tina with son Jake arrives. Everyone is ecstatic. Three days later, sister-in-law Lena (Heinrich's wife) arrives with her three children. Lena's youngest, Peter, not yet two, is emaciated and lethargic, his body covered with open sores. He sits for hours on the bed.

The family huddles together, ponder the fate of their two older brothers.

Summer now. Rumors of a Russian invasion persist. Impossible!

But sure enough, one morning the British and Americans are gone. The Russians are in command. Everyone is to register; they will be sent back, to resettle the places they left. Some – like Susanna's mother-in-law and her two sisters – believe this lie, and will be repatriated to Siberia, not their former homes. Mother Susanna does not register. She plans their escape. Sends Suse to the station with a bit of money and cigarettes. Suse places the items before the station-master. "What is the purpose of your trip?" he asks. "We want to go West to visit our father who is in an American prisoner-of-war camp. The young ones are too frail to walk the distance," she pleads. It is a lie, spoken with terrible guilt. The bribe works, and she acquires 11 train tickets. She rushes home, they pack up and leave, quietly, and then hurry, hurry to the station at 4 am.

November 8, 1945. Rain! They reach the border on November 10, along with thousands of others. They line up. Wait all day. A group of Russians close in behind them. Fists, bats, screaming. Suse takes several blows. The crowd disperses. No one sleeps that night; there isn't a dry place.

November 12, 1945, on Mother's birthday, they cross the border. American soldiers transport them to barracks in Friesland.

November 13. Another train. On November 14, they arrive in Ostfriesland, in the rural village of Ayenwold. The mayor arrives, a list in hand. The family is about to be sundered. Suse steps forward. "For two years we've tried to stay together, you have no idea what we've experienced. Our fathers are gone, and now you want to tear us apart. Obviously you don't understand our situation!" she says.

"Not far apart," he replies. "You won't be far apart."

Farmers arrive, and the family is divided.

Suse's hostess has heard of Suse's outburst. Places food before her – wordlessly. Suse kneels and prays. Eats without speaking, makes no eye-contact. Her host sits beside her, gently questions her. She weeps without restraint. Is shown to her bed. In the morning, she eats, and without telling anyone, leaves to find her mother. When she returns at dusk, her host advises she comply with the rules, and they'll work it out together. And so they do. Arrangements are made for Mother Siemens and youngest son Peter to move in with daughter-in-law Lena (son Heinrich's wife) and her three children. Suse stays in her assigned place. Relieved her mother does not have to be on her own.

Here, in Ostfriesland, the family receives the sad news that younger brother Dietrich is missing-in-action, and older brother Heinrich has been repatriated and imprisoned in Siberia. He will not be permitted to emigrate to Germany until 1977.

June 1948. Suse, her newlywed husband Waldemar, and infant son, immigrate to Canada, and settle in the Fraser Valley. When they arrive at their sponsors', the cabin constructed for their use is occupied by an uncle whose home has been flooded. Displaced even before being placed.

The adjustment to life in Canada is not easy. The language, food, customs, even the expression of faith, is foreign. One evening, after Waldemar has gone to bed, Suse is interrogated by their hosts and their home Bible Study group. "Why don't you pray aloud?" "When were you saved?" "How were you baptized?" "Won't you pray aloud now, and accept Jesus?" The hosts (cousins) are Mennonite Brethren; they were born in Canada, and know nothing of hunger,

war, and displacement, and "how dare they?" Suse will say years later.

At church, Suse and Waldemar are asked to wait outside while the congregation takes Communion. Because they were baptized by a General Conference Mennonite church minister, by sprinkling, not immersion, they are disqualified from drinking the juice and eating the bread. It is raining outside, and Suse licks salt off her lips. This displacement cuts into the soul's marrow. She will not speak of it until the interviews in 1996. The pain is as if fresh.

Recently she expressed – with certainty and anger – that "I'm glad there will be separate rooms in heaven for General Conference and MBs."

So many variations of place and displacement in one life. In my mother's life.

Death is a displacement. Fresh grief is a magnet that attracts the nail-heads of previous losses. There are many.

When she is 51, her eldest brother Heinrich hangs himself from a tree. Suse had taken her mother to visit him in Germany only months earlier. The trauma of the reunion of seeing her broken son, now in his late 50s, plummets Mother Susanna into a depression that lasts for the remainder of her life. She dies when Suse is 56.

When she is 61, Suse's 32 year-old son dies in an accident; his car is hit by a drunk driver and explodes. "*Klammer dich an Jesus*," Suse advises others when asked how she survives. Latch onto Jesus. This, after various people express sympathy that her son was not a Christian.

When she is 67, Suse's son-in-law completes suicide with a gun. His eldest daughter is 12, the same age as Suse was when her father was arrested. In same month of year. February.

"*Ein Mensch wird muede, und beginnt zu zweifeln*," she says during the interviews. A person wearies and begins to doubt.

Suse is 71 when she's awoken early one morning by her husband's cries, "Sus! Sus!" His last words. He dies of a massive stroke 22 hours later, on April 14, the same date Soviet documents say her father was executed.

With slips of plants from the garden, Suse moves to a new place, keeps busy with family and church. Finds joy again.

As her eightieth birthday approaches, she elects to move into Menno Terraces East. Her apartment overlooks the forest in which she and her husband first lived in a converted chicken coop. The irony isn't lost on her.

When she is 87, her youngest brother Peter straps concrete blocks onto his feet, and jumps into the swimming pool in his back

yard. Like his oldest brother, he suffered from rapid-cycling bipolar disorder. "*Er ist erloest*," Suse says. He has been released.

Until 88, Suse still knows and holds her place. She is independent, drives car, and, a life-long do-er, is impossible to stop. She cans, cooks, and bakes in her daughters' kitchens. She pulls weeds in the garden beds the paid gardener misses, plants red geraniums and orange marigolds in blank spaces, and in pots on her small deck. Waters neglected indoor plants in public spaces. Organizes monthly German evenings, and takes responsibility for fresh flower arrangements on dining room tables. She remembers her children's, grandchildren's, and great-grandchildren's birthdays. She greets newcomers to the care facility, and assures them "you'll get used to living here." The chaplain tells her family, "if she'd have been born in another time, she'd have been a chaplain. She's my assistant."

Then, a small stroke. A year later, another. Like her mother before her, she slides into an abyss. "I have lost all my powers," she tells the doctor. She admits to "bad thoughts" that she can't pray away. "You will get better," the doctors promise. "You will have faith again."

She turns 90. She is not better, she is worse.

She turns 91. She is not better. She cannot stop shaking. She does not have dementia, nor Alzheimer's, nor Parkinson's. She has *Lebensmuede*. She is tired, tired. "Is God punishing me?" she asks. Many conversations and phone calls end with "*Bete fuer deine Mutter. Dass sie bald sterben konnte*." Pray for your mother, that she might soon die.

Bearing witness with love to her state of utter displacement is a challenge.

"What do you look forward to, Mom? Anything?"

"Going to bed. Going to sleep."

"Maybe death will be a long sleep."

"*Nein*!" she says, with certainty.

"No? What do you think it will be?"

"Choirs. *Viele Lieder. Ich werde da singen.*" Songs. I will sing there.

May it be so. May it be soon. May it be an eternal place of rest.

Praise God from whom all blessings flow
Praise God all creatures here below
Praise God above, ye heavenly hosts
Creator, Christ and Holy Ghost.
Amen.