

# Nathalia

Our family knew little about my grandmother's earlier life until we started researching the family tree, some twenty years after her death. This is her story. She was born Nathalia Koenig on 24 Nov 1898, in the North Caucasus town of Rostov in South Russia<sup>1</sup> daughter of Gottlieb Koenig and Justina Wonnenberg Koenig. The Koenig ancestors were farmers and there is some evidence they have come to his area of Russia directly from Germany. Her Wonnenberg ancestors were part of a group of Germans invited by the Czar of Russia to start German settlements in Bessarabia in the early 1800's. The objective was to populate, colonize and farm this newly acquired virgin land. As the settlements grew, established farms were handed down to the youngest son. This meant that other sons had to find a trade in the village, marry a widow with a farm or move to a new area. . We know that Nathalia's grandfather Ludwig Wonnenberg, moved to the North Caucasus in 1874 and it was there where her parents married and had two children prior to emigrating in 1899<sup>3,4</sup>.

## New Land, New Life

Gottlieb, and Justina, their two children Daniel and Nathalia along with Justina's parents and several siblings, left the North Caucasus in the spring of 1899 and most likely boarded a train in Woronzovka (presently Salsk) Russia and traveled to Odessa and on through Warsaw Poland and Berlin Germany to Bremen Germany<sup>2</sup>. We know they boarded the ship *Kaiser Wilhelm de Gross* in Bremen on 13 May 1899 and arrived at Ellis Island on 31 May 1899<sup>3</sup>. The ship's manifest obtained through Ellis Island shows Gottlieb 28, Justina 21, Daniel 3 and Nathalia 18 months. Justina's parents were Ludwig Wonnenberg<sup>4</sup> 54 and Wilhelmina (Bauch) 50. Several other members of Justina's family also traveled at the same time including her older brother Daniel 28 and his wife Maria (Hoffman) 20 along with their two children Karoline 2 and Gustav 1. The last of the traveling family were Justina's younger brothers Martin 16, Johann 14 and Ludwig 12.

## Tragedy Strikes

These three families journeyed to Oklahoma where they each took out Homesteads in Woods and Woodward Counties. Daniel soon moved his family to Colorado, Ludwig sr. died of dropsy or edema (an accumulation of fluid under the skin) and Gottlieb Koenig was advised by his doctor to move to a dryer climate because of a chest condition. Gottlieb, Justina, and their children Daniel, Nathalia, Dorothy, Lydia, Willie and Christopher moved to Granada Colorado in 1907 and rented a sugar beet farm. Before the first crop of beets was harvested, Gottlieb died suddenly of TB and Justina's brother Martin came to help with the harvest and selling the crop. While Justina was away from the farm arranging their affairs, Nathalia, age 9 and her young sisters were left at home with Willie who was about 2 years old. During the afternoon the youngster wandered off and a search party was formed with tragic results as the neighbor found him in an irrigation ditch between the house and barn, where he tried to cross on a wooden plank. The family had one more funeral before leaving Granada and the USA forever.

## The Move to Canada

Nathalia was on the move again, this time to Canada in October 1908 with her mother Justina, 4 siblings and her widowed grandmother Wilhelmina Wonnenberg. This group was part of a

larger family contingent of three other families who homesteaded in the Hanna area in the Province of Alberta. Justina settled in Calgary, Alberta where she took in laundry and did housework for various people in town. Nathalia was 10 and helped out by babysitting after school. I remember her recalling a time when she was given money to take the child in her care to the cinema and how it was such an exciting event as she had never been to a cinema before.

### More Tragedy

Nathalia moved again in 1910 when her mother, Justina, married farmer Phillip Keim of Acme, Alberta, just 60 miles north of Calgary. Phillip was a strong Seven Day Adventist, who had just lost his wife leaving him with six children. The new combined family of 11 children was lively and fun as told by Nathalia, and what stood out in her mind 'there was lots to eat'. What started out as a new beginning of a new life on a farm near Acme, Alberta for this little family soon turned to tragedy again when less than one year after the union Justina died, leaving Philip Keim with eleven children and no wife. He could not maintain this newly acquired family, Daniel 16, Nathalia 14, Dorothy 13, Lydia 10 and Chris 6, but he agreed to keep Daniel who was old enough to work as a farm hand. Nathalia was 'given' to Philip's brother John Keim, who had a farm and family in the area and the three youngest siblings were taken by grandmother Wilhelmina Wonenberg, who had stayed with the family and tended Justina during her very sick days.

Wilhelmina distributed each of the three remaining children to one of the 3 family members who has come from Colorado in 1908 and were homesteading near Hanna, Alberta. The John Quast family (Justina's sister Dorothea) took and raised Lydia; the Ludwig Jr. Wonenberg family (Justina's brother Ludwig) took and raised Dorothy; and the Samuel Littau family (Justina's sister Louisa) took and raised Christopher (Chris). In each case the 'adopted' child was treated like one of the family members and was expected to carry their share of the farm work whether inside or outside. During this time it was normal for children to work long hours on the farm and schooling was considered secondary especially during harvest time. All three 'adopted' girls worked on the farm and lived with their family in the Hanna and Acme area until they married at age 18. Christopher never married and worked as a farm hand throughout the country and eventually with heavy machinery in many backcountry areas. His life must have been lonely as it ended in tragedy in Calgary, Alberta, Canada at the age of 55. After the allotment of the children Grandma Wilhelmina went back and stayed with her son, Martin, who by this time had a farm in Briggsdale Colorado. She died in 1931 and is buried in Briggsdale.

It must have been traumatic for this little family to lose a father, a little brother, a mother and then be split apart during a time when travel was not easy. Yet, amazingly, Dan and each of the three girls lived to marry and raise families of their own with no apparent sign of the hurt that must have been inside. John Keim was Nathalia's surrogate father, who had a large farm near Acme, Alberta of which Nathalia said "there was a lot of work but also lots to eat". At age 14, she was expected to do a full day's work included milking cows, feeding calves, helping in the fields and with the harvest as well as cooking and cleaning inside. This hard work prepared her well for her future life. Her brother Dan worked and was raised with the other Keim children on the Phillip Keim farm and married in 1916 and moved to a farm in southern Alberta where they raised their two children.

### Nathalia Marries

Nathalia married Henry Ohlhausen in 1917. Henry was born on June 29 1894 in Upper-Albota, Bessarabia, Russia and immigrated to Canada in 1902 with his parents and siblings and the family homesteaded in the Medicine Hat area south of Irvine, Alberta. We are not sure how Henry in Irvine knew about Nathalia in Acme over 250 miles away, but it must have been an arrangement by a common acquaintance or more likely through the church. As the story goes, Henry went to Acme, Alberta and had a conversation with John at the Keim farm in which Henry said, "I hear you have a daughter of marrying age". My mother Elma, who was Nathalia's daughter, told me the story many times, how her mother was in the house peeking through the three little holes that were part of storm windows in those days, just so that she could get a first look at her future husband. Apparently, the two men shook hands and the deal was done. Henry Ohlhausen and Nathalia Koenig were married in Crossfield, Alberta on 5<sup>th</sup> of March 1917<sup>4</sup>.

Nathalia moved with her new husband to Henry's parents' homestead farm of 160 acres south of Irvine, Alberta. Henry's parents, Wilhelm Ohlhausen and Louisa (Tetzlaff) retired to Medicine Hat, Alberta about that time. During the next eight years on this farm the family grew with the birth of 3 girls, Irene b. 1918, Elma b. 1919 and Francis b. 1923; all born on the farm with a midwife present. Life was tough in the early years as there was little rain so they gathered Russian thistle from the ditches for feed and still lost 2 cows, but saved 4 cows and seven horses. From 1922 to 1924 there was more rain and the farm produced good crops. Every two weeks they drove a horse drawn wagon 25 miles to Medicine Hat to sell butter and eggs and to buy groceries.

In 1925 the family made a big move north to the Acme district and bought 320 acres of better farm land from Nathalia's surrogate father John Keim, who may have helped by giving part of it to Nathalia as she was still considered part of the family. Their son Edwin was born the 26<sup>th</sup> of December 1927 in an upstairs bedroom of the two-story house on this farm. In 1928 they moved to a new farm, 15 miles east of Carstairs, where Henry found a section of land (640 acres) in one square block. He told me that it was important to have land in one block as they worked it with 15 horses that could easily reach to the edges for seeding and harvesting. They used up to nine horses on a three-bottomed plow to turn the sod. In the beginning, Nathalia worked along side of the men in the fields, but as time went on and they had hired men to do the heavy work and she spent more time in the kitchen. At harvest time she baked 10 loaves of bread every other day and served it with home made sausages and other homegrown goodies.

Francis died at the age of 13, on the 25<sup>th</sup> of June 1933. Her health had been poor as she had a leakage of the heart and finally died of kidney failure. In 1941, lightning struck the metal cloths line connected to the house just on the outside wall from where Nathalia was cutting bread on kitchen counter. The lightning splintered a cupboard in the kitchen and went through the knife and burned a path along her arm, her hip and down one leg creating a hole in one shoe and then jumping from nail to nail across the floor before exiting down into the basement. Everything in the cupboard was sprayed around the room including the bottles of food coloring which sprayed red all over Nathalia who was knocked to the floor unable to move and a small fire started around her as there were kerosene lamps on the cupboard. Luckily the hired man was in the house and pulled her to safety and put out the fire. Their son Edwin was on his way to the house carrying his cap full of freshly gathered eggs and when he saw his mother lying in the entrance unable to move and covered with red food coloring, he

thought the worst and dropped the cap with the expected omelet result. Although shaken, this event was taken in stride for this tough German immigrant family as there was too much work to do, so life quickly returned to 'normal'.

### Life on the Farm

The family milked 10 to 15 cows by hand, and the kids were on milking duty after the age of ten. As the family grew and there was a little more money, Nathalia would order things for the house from the Eaton's catalogue including material she needed to make the children's clothing. It is possible that Henry's mother was Seven Day Adventist and we know that Nathalia was influenced by the Seven Day Adventist faith from her grandmother Wonnenberg and during her time with the John Keim family. There was no work done on the Ohlhausen farm on Saturdays as that was the day of rest and strictly observed. During this very busy time of her life with farm duties and raising three children, Nathalia taught herself to read and write English. My mother, Elma, told me how she would practice every chance she could by reading the bible, Eaton's catalogue and especially the children's books from school. Nathalia was a hard worker and I remember she kept her home meticulously clean and taught her girls to do the same. The farm was a well run 'German organized' operation. I remember my father telling the story that he arrived early on the morning on 2 June 1940 to be married at the Ohlhausen farm and found my mother Elma, out in the barn as she had to finish her milking chores before getting on with the day. Dad said that he took off his jacket and finished the milking duties while Mom got ready for the wedding.

In July 1950, when their son Edwin, married and took over the farm, Nathalia and Henry moved to a small acreage in Hubalta, a community close to Calgary, Alberta where they raised chickens, sold eggs and had a cow that supplied their needs as well as that of some local residence. After a few years they retired to Calgary and for the first time in their life there were no farm chores to do. The family was always welcome when they came to the city and all of their 5 grandchildren stayed with them at different times while getting post-secondary education, including me on two occasions. The whole family was brought up on German cooking, but Nathalia's was the best. I still remember her 'Flaume Kuchen' (plum cake) was to die for. In 1974 the couple moved back into their old farming district and to a house in Didsbury, Alberta. In 1975, after Henry passed away at the age of 80, Nathalia moved for the last time to Dr. Crystal Manor in Carstairs, where she had a small kitchen and could do her own cooking some of the time.

### "Dolly"

Nathalia, known affectionately as "Dolly" by family and friends, and of course as Mom and Grandma to us grandchildren. Grandad used to call her Grossmutter (Grandma) as they spoke German at home. She died 17 November 1982 and was buried alongside husband, Henry Ohlhausen in the Didsbury cemetery. Her passing left a hole in the family that will only disappear when all of us who knew her so well are gone. As I finish my research of the family tree, I look back on her 83 years in wonderment at all she endured with the sad times and glad times as a child and in a marriage, which was certainly part of the good times. In the 'Acme Memories' local history book, which was published in 1979, Nathalia wrote "When we got [electric] power on the farm in 1947 we thought we were high living people."

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Notes:

1. This was from a hand written note on one of the small pieces of paper where she wrote certain facts in a journal style. In fact she kept a daily journal of family activities later in her life. This journal has been very useful in rebuilding the family history.
2. From an article "Travel Routes for Germans leaving Russia to North America", written by Arthur Flegel, Menlo Park California (updated 1-21-2004).
3. The Ellis Island website revealed the passenger list with each member of the three families.
4. Ludwig's father was Friedrich Heinrich b. 1817 in Politz, Poland and grew up in the town of Tarutino, Bessarabia; his mother was Anna Louisa Markus. From information found through Germans from Russia Historical Society, Bismarck, North Dakota, USA
5. Much of the last part of Nathalia's life was taken from hand written notes that she left and small write-ups in local history books. Discussion with her brother and sister's families, have filled in certain facts.
6. Looking at her in this picture taken 5 March 1917 on her wedding day, tells you that this feisty 18 year old is ready for the next challenge.

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