

Left Behind... in search of someone to be kind to...

A Canadian adventurer returns to his “Roots” in Ukrainian Volhynia-September 2010.

A personal view with a global perspective

By Jim Michals



“Jim”.... my uncle emailed me....”some things are best left in the past.”

It was a thought provoking and perplexing response to an email I had sent him in May of 2010, confirming that I was going on a “Roots Tour adventure” with author and German’s from Russia expert Dr. Donald Miller, to the Ukraine Republic, in September, to walk the lands and investigate the life and times of my Stober family ancestors in the German territory which had once been known as Volyhnia.

Uncle had attempted the same trip about the time of the catastrophic 1986 Chernobyl Nuclear power plant disaster and got as far as Kiev, before being compelled to turn back. Our home village of Cholosna lay just outside the outer perimeter of the radiation fallout danger zone, approximately 75 kilometres south and west of the nuclear reactor disaster. He and his tour arrived in Kiev shortly after Gorbachov’s “glasnost” brought down the Communist States of the USSR and sent them scrambling on a wobbly and uncertain road to democracy, freedom and reinvention as independent and sovereign countries. He planned to visit the home places that his mother and sisters had spoke so affectionately of. Perhaps, some of the original Hof buildings and 60 acre field and orchard were still standing, productive and recognizable. Perhaps, ruins of their home Churches were still recognizable. Perhaps, the cemeteries of our ancestors bore mute and lonely witness to three family generations who had lived and died in the bittersweet and beloved homeland. Perhaps, and this was the biggest perhaps, there was someone left to be kind to..... one of our extended family. Perhaps, there was some one left to thank for aiding our flight to Canada. Perhaps, the family torch had fallen to me, to go home to complete the story of those who had left behind.

Uncle’s statement gave me pause.

Why does one seek to go back to a country and place that, little over one generation ago, was the centre stage for one of the worst genocides that humanity has ever known? A country which puts Western clothing on a third world skeleton, almost subsistence economy? A one-time bread basket of Russia and Europe? A young, sovereign, reborn republic of eighteen years after Glasnost broke its bonds to Communism and which asserted its adolescent independence in the Orange revolution of 2004? Is it

stuck in a buffer of influence between the Western democracies and Russia? Is it still a prized resource and security zone football in an economic and political battle gridiron flanked by Western Europe, Russia, the United States, and Canada?. Is it the same (communist) leadership elite, trying out a different ideology, in the shadow of, and under the thumb, of the Bear? Will the Bear come back, sooner, or later?

Why, indeed?

Words like closure, honouring family, vicarious experience, curiosity and other noble and not so noble reasons came to mind. Going on a trip like this is something akin to asking a mountaineer the reason for scaling a mountain. It is there, and well, if you have to ask, you will probably never know.

Perhaps, that is a little too glib.

The truth is a complete and sufficient incentive to search out family roots. So what, if you find a few weeds? Who were my people, where and how did they live? Perhaps I can learn something about who I am. Perhaps I can better understand inherited family values and take the measure of my genetic DNA, from walking where they walked, seeing what they saw, and experiencing life in that place, with the people they knew, in that land they cherished for almost 70 years and three generations. There is an undeniable connectedness to a homeland that invites exploration, discovery and reflection.

I resolved to find out, for myself, with the help of [Don Miller](#), founder of Samaritan's Ministry of the Ukraine. Don has led "Roots" Discovery Tours to the Volhynian province of Ukraine for nearly 20 years; In September of 2010, representatives of three Alberta-based families, the Guhl's, Proppe's and my mother's family, the Stober's, set aside 9 days to explore the lands of their forefathers. I was fortunate in being able to guide my adventure with a well prepared, 194 page family history completed by an aunt, in 1994.

The Stober Story – a brief summary¹

My great grandfather, Wilhelm Stober, was born in 1846 and migrated from what was East Prussia (now Poland) with his family to relocate, in 1860, to the Korosten area to found the village with other German Baptist families, about this time. The Wagon- cart train of 15-20 families could travel could travel 25-30 kilometres a day and would have taken 5 weeks to make the 600 kilometre journey. Armed Guards were posted nightly to protect from bears, wolves, roving gangs of thieves or recently released serfs. The conditions paralleled the conditions and challenges experienced in the Western migration to Western Canada and the Western United States, at the same time. A Russian writer noted that Germans turned swamps, sandy areas and forests into very productive farmland with grain and oil mills, mixed grain, cattle, hog and dairy operations, using leading edge technology and model ingenuity, for the time.

¹ Strohschein, Bernice, The Stober Story, unpublished family history, 1994

Wilhelm suffered with diabetes and died in 1915, just before the Czarist authorities issued the 1916 “ferschikung” evacuation order for all 200,000 Ethnic Germans living in the Ukraine at the time. The Germans were given 2 week’s notice to evacuate to locations in Siberia and further East and North. The Czarist authorities felt the threat of German collaboration with wartime Germany was great and would be minimized by sending the Germans to points far removed from the battlefields of Western and Eastern Europe. Reports of the time indicated that the Germans rose to the challenge- those that could packed their wagon carts, again, and clogged the roads going east, and north, for hundreds of kilometres. Some arrangements were made to travel by train, in unheated boxcars, and our family was given priority for train passage, as my grandfather, Emil Stober, actively served as a paramedic in the Russian Army, on the eastern front.

Grandfather Emil Stober’s family, like all of the Volhynia German families, suffered greatly during the years of the First World War and the decade that followed. They endured the loss of one new born child, Frieda, who had frozen to death in an unheated boxcar destined for Siberia, during the 1916 evacuation. Slowly, with an accelerated crescendo, they watched their Volhynia crumble and disappear under the oppression of the new Soviet Communist regime.

My family witnessed the reforms of the Bolsheviks who seized power and made Lenin their leader. The 10 years after the war were reported as relatively prosperous, by Volhynian historical standards. During the trip, I was able to find many monuments to Lenin in the small village centres and larger urban centres. With the emergence of Stalin, who became general secretary of the Communist Party in 1922, marked the beginning of the end for the 200,000 people of German Volhynia. The cruelties under Stalin’s Communism far surpassed the injustices served during the reign of the Czar. The persecution escalated. The Stober Hof became a favoured stop of warring partisans, communist functionaries, terrorist gangs and others in search of a meal or a warm place to sleep. Food was hid in the well when strangers would enter the Hof, mostly at night. It was our women who would quickly prepare food for the soldiers, the partisans and the Cossacks. Some would leave Bibles in gratitude. Others would enquire after younger females. If the food would not work, the prayers and pleas of the young children kept the men safe. Conflict resolution became an acquired family skill. Some family members felt this was a passing stage and a stable and prosperous peace would soon return, a view shared by Uncle Carl Frederick Wedel and two brothers of my Grandfather Emil.

The years between 1924 and 1928 had been relatively good and prosperous. Some family members tired of the growing danger and left for North America.

Grandfather Emil, by all accounts, was a peace loving and peacemaking man, who had purposed not to be rich or powerful, but to live a simple, God-honouring life. These golden years of Volhynia were to be short lived. Grandmother pressed to leave and a life changing July warning from Ukrainian War comrade Pavlow Gitowski was to set in motion the beginning of a small Exodus. Gitowski shared the chilling message of the Reeve or “Prazedatel” of Korasten.... “Stalin’s five year Plan would be set into motion in November....the Germans kulaks were not part of it..... they would be exiled and persecuted, their land confiscated, and would be swept off the face of the earth through any and all means....Emil, take your family and go.....you will not survive.”

Grandfather did not need to be told twice. Pavlow had risked his life to give him the warning. The debates with close relatives ended and secret, fevered planning began; to make good an escape, with 1,500 former Volhynia based German refugees, in 1928.

Grandfather sent word to his oldest married daughter Trudy and husband, Ewald, in nearby Wajazowez, that they should prepare to go with them, per a previously agreed pact. They did not hesitate, and all possessions and holdings were shrewdly and quietly liquidated to generate the equivalent of \$3,000 Canadian dollars. Carl Frederick Wedel sent his armed sons to maintain security at the Stober Hof while assets, inventory and anything was not needed for the trip was converted to cash. Experts, mostly skilled Jewish merchants, were contracted to develop the needed travelling documents. To provide further cover, Grandfather officially surrendered his land to the Visolinski village land co-op in a document legally authorized September 20; 1928. Our family has the record of transfer in their possession. This was an action that was demanded by local authorities. Those that did not comply, like great Uncle Carl Frederick, were to be persecuted, shot or exiled to Soviet Work camps to die. I would read in the NKVD (Ukraine KGB) archives of the fate of my Great Uncle and his family. If Grandfather had waited a few weeks longer, our family would have faced the same fate as these precious family members.

At age 63, my great Grandmother, Rosalie Schmidt elected, heroically, to stay behind, until there were funds to secure her safe transport to where-ever they would re-settle. She understood that resources were limited and that the chance raising suspicion and making good the escape of the whole family would be jeopardized if she insisted on coming along. Our family members, to this day, express profound regret at this courageous act of self- sacrifice. She understood the price she would have to pay and the cost that would come with it. We owe her a great and precious debt. The Bible says that 'greater love hath no one than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" Rosalie Schmidt (nee Wedel) understood this.

Final preparations were made, secret farewells to family concluded and on a warm, dark, late August morning in 1928, Carl Frederick Wedel loaded his 2 wagons with the 9 members of Emil Stober and Ewald Otto families, and their luggage, and travelled the 15 kilometres to the Korosten train station. Fearless, strong and stalwart son-in- law, Ewald, stood guard. On the train platform, they waited in quiet silence, until the train rolled into the station. Some gasped sobs, lingering embraces and words of encouragement were exchanged. Rosalie Schmidt, wept and waved, in the warm and growing twilight of sunrise, as the family she would never see again, pulled away from the Korosten train station. Grandson Paul Stober would never forget that haunting, lonely image, his last memory of a Grandmother who was closer than a mother.

Next stop, Riga, Latvia, enroute to Rotterdam, Holland. No words were spoken until the Russian border was cleared before crossing the bridge to freedom in Riga. An intoxicated border guard cursed them for waking him up, took a quick look at the family papers, and with a dismissive wave of the hand, let them pass, without further questioning. After passing over the bridge into Latvia, my Grandpa Emil Stober smiled and told his children..."you can speak and laugh now, for you will never see your homeland again."

In November 1928, Stalin sealed the borders to present day Ukraine and commenced the ruthless five year Collectivization and Modernization program which was to catapult the Soviet Bloc from a feudal, agrarian state to a modern Superpower. It succeeded, but at an unspeakable cost in human life and destruction. With only eight weeks to spare, the Stober and Otto families were one of the last to make good an exit, from the despotic homeland.



1928 Passport - Olga Stober and family

The family eventually located to Overtone, Manitoba, Canada, in November, 1928 to begin a new life in Canada, at the doorstep of the worldwide depression of 1929. At the start of their Canadian adventure, it was felt that one form of oppression and suffering had been exchanged for another, somewhat friendlier one, and that Brazil or Argentina would have been a better relocation choice. The adjustment to and romance with a new homeland would be gradual, with a new set of challenges.

Correspondence to, and from, Rosalie Schmidt, and other Ukraine based relatives continued until 1933. In 1932 -1933 the Stalin-led Communist government initiated "the Holodomor", or "death by starvation", which took the lives of an estimated 6 to 10 million residents of the Ukraine. The vast majority of these were ethnic Ukrainians. Eyewitness accounts of cannibalism were recorded. Scores of documented stories of persecution, suffering and hardship are told in Donald Miller's 2005 book "Under Arrest." In December 2010, Ukrainians in Canada demanded that the planned Ottawa- based Museum of Man recognize this monumental human suffering with a "Holodomor Hall," in addition to the planned Commemorative Halls for the Jews of the Holocaust and the oppressed Aborigines of Canada.

During the Holodomor, theft of one potato would result in immediate deportation to Siberia. Crops were stored and spoiled for want of transport. Men were sent to forced work camps, to be worked to death, or die of disease. Women and children were left to starve. Access to, and travel in the Ukraine was tightly controlled. A Pulitzer winning New York Times writer was enlisted to prepare and distribute understated media accounts regarding the suffering and persecution experienced during this time. Stalin, like Hitler, understood the power of propaganda.

No doubt, Rosalie Schmidt was left to starve to death, and her family buried her in the Cholosna family cemetery, which is a picturesque 2 kilometre walk from the Stober Hof. I am standing in what remains of that cemetery, in the picture at the beginning of this account.

In September of 2010, I became the first of my extended family to return to these homelands and discover the places spoken of in our family history. It would be an unforgettable personal and emotional experience that would give new meaning to the price my people paid for their freedom in the new promised lands of North America. It would bring a severe joy, solace, and closure. After Glasnost, the human and physical evidence of my people's impact on this land is rapidly disappearing.

I was to be surprised in ways I could never anticipate.

Zhitomir Archives and NKVD (Ukrainian KGB) Research findings

Sometime in 1934, Ernest S. Fritz, pastor of the Baptist Community in Cholosna, was arrested, along with 6 others, including Carl Frederick Wedel and others who were arrested, rearrested and released several times between 1934 and 1937. Carl Frederick Stober, brother to my grandfather Emil Stober, a farmer and blacksmith, was initially arrested in 1934 and exiled to the north. He escaped, in 1935, and returned to the Collective farm developed on the site of Emil Stober's 60 acre Hof. No evidence remains of the Stober Hof or Collective Farm which took its place, only untilled, wild fields of rich and fertile land infested with wild oats, hay, bushes and weeds. An 85 year old German Cholosna resident named Langer had personal memory of the Stober Hof and subsequent Collective farm, and led us to the former Stober lands. All that physically remains, which is physically identifiable, is the orchard.

From KGB records I personally reviewed with my translator, I was able to confirm that Carl Frederick Wedel, brother of Rosalie Schmidt, was executed, in 1937, along with his brother, and buried in a mass grave in Zhitomir. I visited the NKVD Interrogation HQ, in Zhitomir, where they were executed (still in use), and travelled the short road to the park-like ravine where their bodies were dumped into a mass grave. Twelve thousand others shared this fate over the 1934-37 period. These included Poles, Ukrainians, Jews, Hungarians and members of religious sects. According to eyewitness accounts, the road to the mass grave was daily covered with fresh blood, from the loaded corpse-filled truck. These "wealthy peasants" only "crime" was conspiring with a Pastor Fritz and seven others to petition a small amount of welfare money from the German Government, clearly, to prevent their families from starving. Their NKVD records were reviewed in the early 90s and "rehabilitated" under the Gorbachov equivalent of a "Truth Commission". The "Truth Commission" was commissioned after the breakup of Communism in 1989 – 90 under the direction of the last Communist leader, Mikhail Gorbachov.

I spoke to the head of the Zhitomir Rehabilitation Commission during my trip to the Zhitomir State and NKVD Archives. He explained that in the post Communist era, opportunity was given to surviving relatives to enquire and discover the fate of lost relatives during the Holodomor. As there was potential to gain closure on the fate of family members and claim state welfare for surviving family members, thousands of enquiries were made to review the NKVD records and state archives. In large part, these requests were ignored or patronized with stalling tactics and misinformation. The job of the rehabilitation commission is to achieve justice and closure for survivors. Its mandate is to conclude in 2011 with a comprehensive report, with findings and recommendations.

Arrangements had been made for me to review, with my interpreter, the NKVD and State Archive records of my Great Uncle Carl Frederick and his brother, Wilhelm, along with the records of Vladimir Alfred Stober. The documents confirmed that all three were executed, in summer and fall of 1937, for "counter- revolutionary activity". The file made the case that the blacksmith supplies found in their pockets were evidence of terrorist intent and that their welfare application, to the German embassy, was evidence of their loyalty to the enemy capitalist state of Germany.

An interrogation record in Carl Frederick's file held my interest. In it, was recorded Carl's bold testimony and prophetic prediction that "the Germans will invade (Ukraine), like in 1918 and, (Communist) Spain would be liberated, soon, by (Germany)." Carl Frederick stated..."there was nothing worse to live as a peasant in Communist Russia, not like Germany, where people have good houses, automobiles and motorcycles.... the Ukraine people are being deceived by Communist Soviet authorities." The NKVD declared the accused of "counter-revolutionism" and sentenced him to death.

No doubt, these bold words, expedited his execution. Recent rehabilitation documents, dated 1989, acknowledged that there had been insufficient evidence to justify capital punishment.

The paper record had indeed been "rehabilitated" with an emotional investment equivalent to correcting a spelling mistake. There had been no state ownership, no reconciliation, no apology and above all, no grace extended to the grieving widow, who had sought, on three separate occasions, all recorded, for an accounting of her husband's final end. These enquiries were simply, ignored. Due process had been served, but forgiveness, transparency and justice were left wanting. I am told that many inquiring family members were dealt with in a similar manner. Some speculate that government authorities patronize inquirers to evade compensation for liability by waiting for aging family inquirers to pass on. Speaking personally, the modern Ukrainian authorities are to be commended for their efforts to bring some justice, if not closure, to a painful chapter in their history.

My great uncle's prosecutor was later charged and executed for his demonic zeal in sending thousands to a similar end. It was cold comfort and further evidence of the escalating cycle of correction and overcorrection which the Communists practiced until the Communism regime imploded.



Left Behind- a distant cousin?

From these records, Carl Fredrick's family was identified and named. The only potentially remaining relative was daughter Tamara, picture above, whom I visited in Cholosna. I was able to have a good half hour visit with her through our interpreter. I informed her of what I had found in the KGB/NKVD records, and she verified that her mother had made the rehabilitation enquiry in the late 1980 s and had never received closure, or compensation, for the wrongful death of her father.

She has remarried twice, speaks only Ukrainian, and was very grateful for the small gift of cash I gave to her, on behalf of our family. The smell of pungent animal urine and manure prevented me from getting too emotional at our meeting. She lives in a very poor, simple state and was very happy to meet me. We found an old German, Langer, in Cholosna, who had living memory of our grandparents and their farm. He escorted us to the actual site of the Emil and Olga Stober Hof, the nearby German Cemetery and the site of the Cholosna Church my grandparents and their family attended. I collected a small soil sample from the Stober farm and fragments from the broken granite family Cemetery and grass covered Cholosna Church foundation. I was overwhelmed when Langer dug out the corner of the foundation of the Church which was concealed by grass and weeds.

Our tour group enjoyed a stand up lunch at the Stober Hof land. The farm and the Collective farm which took its place have disappeared. The orchard is still there and the locations of the two Mills were verified by Langer. No doubt, the cemetery, church, 2 Mills (grain and oil), Stober Hof, and subsequent Collective farm were scavenged for building materials in what is beautiful, unused, yet potentially productive farmland that have returned to their natural state. If you can visualize the landscape of the Okanagan Valley of British Columbia set on flat, rolling hills, you would have a very accurate idea of the landscape. A narrow gauge railway line runs adjacent to the frontage road, and two orchards flank the south facing property, one to the east and one to the west.



Neudorf Church

The following Sunday, we went to Church. My expectation was very low. Not much remained of the houses, mills and cemeteries we had seen. We would probably go to a site that was in ruins. I was in for the surprise of a lifetime.

The nearly 110 year old mother church of the German Baptists had been completely rebuilt. My Great grandfather, Julius Schmidt had been a bandleader in this Church. We arrived by van, to behold a 2,000 seat, brick building that the Ukrainian Baptists of Pulin district had lovingly, and meticulously restored. They seated me with the choir, in honour of my great grandfather, and sang German songs in the Ukrainian tongue, which my great grandfather would have known and loved.

I could not stop quietly weeping during the two and half hour service. I thanked the congregation for restoring the Church and welcoming me home. After the service I picked up and played some of the brass instruments that would have been played by members of my great grandfather's band. It was good to touch something that had been at the centre of his brief, 31 year old life. A typhus epidemic had taken him and three of their four children. Only my Grandmother Olga and Great Grandmother Rosalie survived.

This was the true spiritual highlight of my "Roots tour". The sense of connection with my ancestors was indeed real and tangible.

The Ukraine of 2010 - some passing impressions

There is much more to tell about our ancestral homeland. It is the Garden of Eden that Grandma Olga spoke of in the Stober family history. The lifestyle is still simple and agriculture based. Horse drawn buggies are a common site. Wild dogs run free. Laid brick roads, constructed by Gulag prisoner crews, number in the hundreds in Volhynia, and are still in active use to connect remote farm villages.

The Ukraine distances itself from Russia. Visual references to Stalin are completely gone. World War two memorials to Russian victory and sacrifice are ubiquitous. Most villages have retained tribute statues to Lenin and memorials to those lost in the “Great Patriotic War”.

Collective Farms are abandoned and reduced to ruins, which are salvaged, freely, for community building materials. Large Ceramics factories, quarries and coal mines are the major industries in Volhynia. Polish firms are invested in the region and Poland is considered a role model for development in modern Ukraine. Drainage locks and channels keep the land arable and phenomenally productive.

The people are serviced with basic hospitals which maintain a First Aid level of treatment. Large department stores and supermarkets are reserved for big cities like Zhitomir and Korosten. Villages are serviced by small confectionaries and weekly open air markets, offering cheap consumer goods, kitchen garden produce in season and cheap clothing and footwear from China and India.

No English is spoken, except in Kiev. Communication is in charades, with a lot of finger pointing and hand gestures. Sanitation is poor and bush stops, in true African tradition, are frequent, in our treks to the small villages. Public water is contaminated. Bottled water is mandatory for all visitors. Fish are not to be consumed under any circumstances. (Chernobyl's legacy)

The older generation do not challenge authority and hold no hope for the future. Some openly welcome a return of the full employment of Communism in exchange for economic security. The younger generation wants to leave, soon. While communism is gone, the legacy of authoritarianism, command, and control is still pervasive. Ukraine has yet to define a new course and abandon the baggage of distrust, suspicion and self preservation.

What do you do with Dirt?

I took a small sample of soil from the Stober Hof. On return home, I asked my mother for advice regarding who I should give it to.

“Forget that” she said. “How much did you get?”

“About a cupful”

“Put it in a small ceramic pot and grow a flower in it.”

“Yes”, I sighed, somewhat mortified. “That is the best use for dirt.

I think Grandfather would have been pleased.