

## **John Molter's Story**

As told to Glenn Schwartz and Ray Borschowa. Parts were originally written by Glenn Schwartz. Updates, additions, and edits were added by Ray Borschowa based on many conversations and emails over the years. There may be some minor inconsistencies, as John was recalling details many decades in the past.

John's parents, Josef and Anna Molter, landed in Quebec on June 5, 1928 and then went to Regina, Saskatchewan. Back home, in Zichydorf, a visiting relative had told them stories about Canada and that was enough to encourage them to explore the opportunities there. They had two children, Josef and Anton, but left them at home with the grandparents. During their stay in Regina Josef worked in various jobs and as a shoemaker, which was his trade at home. Anna worked as a homemaker and cleaning maid. Josef's brother, John, came in 1926. Another brother, Peter, was sickly and did not immigrate. Josef and John moved their families back to Zichydorf, known then as Mariolana, in 1933 because their father, who had four businesses in town, was in failing health from arthritis. Mariolana was in the former Kingdom of Yugoslavia, near the border with Romania, today it is known as Plandište, Serbia.

John was born in Regina on July 3, 1929, but grew up in Mariolana. As a young child, he played cowboys and Indians with his friends, just like North American boys. His relatives on his mother's (Feiling) side lived a few miles away in Romania (Stamora and Moravitz). The border was open. His family lived a comfortable life. He went away to boarding school in Werschetz in 1939. Although it was a small regional city of about 30,000 only 15 kilometres away, it felt like being in the big city.

Villages were quite independent with their own administration and schools in their own languages. The culture in the smaller centres was tribal. There was a common moral and ethical understanding. Everyone knew the rules. The village looked after its own problems unless there was a major crime. Kids were looked after by the tribe. The whole village knew your business, looked out for you, and enforced discipline. For example, if a youngster stole an apple, anyone who saw it would take action. There was only one policeman. This all resulted in a safe environment in which kids had freedom to play outside, close to nature, with no supervision.

Mariolana was a major independent town with its own school and other facilities in a cluster of a few smaller ethnic villages, including the Romanian village of Margita, the mixed German, Romanian, and Hungarian village of Gross Gaj, and the Hungarian village of Urmenyhaza. Villagers of different origins all dressed differently. Many people spoke four or five languages. John's mother was ethnically German but spoke and wrote Hungarian. The different ethnic groups got along fine, but were not integrated, except for business. Their houses were also built differently. Margita was like a different country.

In the late 1930s the Yugoslavian (Serbian) government began to exert more influence. It was not suppression of other cultures, but an effort at integration and assimilation. A

couple of generations earlier, when the area was part of Hungary, they had undergone a similar movement by the Hungarian government. You had to speak Hungarian and have a Hungarian name to get anywhere. In fact, it was much like Saskatchewan in the early 1900s when you had to speak English and have an English name.

The villages saw their independence threatened by the actions of the government. Unlike North America, where almost everyone was an immigrant at some time and many different cultures come together to form a new culture in a new country, Europeans can't get over their ethnicity. They can't forget where they came from and dedicate themselves exclusively to the country in which they live.

Meanwhile, in Germany, after being humiliated and impoverished in the aftermath of World War I, the country was full of excitement and optimism at its growing industrial and military strength. There was a feeling of victimization by the punishing post-war conditions, but there also was a great pride that the German people had overcome tremendous hardship and a determination that they would not allow such hardship to be forced upon them again. One of the offshoots of these feelings was the movement to unite all the German people of Europe into a major world power. Some of the young ethnically German people in Yugoslavia had gone to school in Germany and returned all excited by the German nationalism there.

In the late 1930s, exchange students from Germany began to organize German cultural groups that had direct contact with Germany. They organized underground meetings for a political movement that was orchestrated by Germany. By about 1940, the Serbs noticed this underground movement. Two Serbian policemen were stationed in Mariolana to keep an eye on developments. There was increasing tension in school and throughout the community. Some leaders of cultural groups were arrested. One of John's relatives in the German army landed in Crete and wrote a letter closing with "I will see you soon." John's brother was taken in and beaten while he was asked, "What does this mean?"

In late 1940, The German Army occupied Hungary and Romania. In April of 1941 there had been rumours for weeks and reports of locals who had seen the German army buildup on the border with Yugoslavia. The townspeople were in church the day the Germans came; it was Good Friday. Right after the sermon someone walked up to the priest and told him something. People could hear shooting in the distance. The priest said that the fighting had started and that they should quietly go home.

A group of eight or nine Yugoslavian soldiers on horseback rode through town toward the border. Already many people had put out swastika flags. John's brother, Josef, was hiding in the attic because the Serbs had been looking for him. John saw a huge column of German tanks. Young Serb soldiers were riding around waving sabers. A tank fired and horses and men went flying into the air. Eight or nine German soldiers entered town. People were celebrating. The German soldiers asked if there were any Yugoslavian soldiers around. The people said no, but a few were hidden in a brick factory and fired at the Germans. The street was full of people that the soldiers chased out of the way. They fired a few shots at the factory and the Yugoslavian soldiers surrendered.

Later, the remainder of the German soldiers marched into town singing. People gave them flowers and sausages and hams as if they were being liberated. A few Jewish and Serbian families in the village watched the goings on from in hiding. One Serb civilian was shot and killed, but John didn't know if it was by soldiers or someone else with a grudge. Curious children ran around looking at wounded and dead Serb soldiers.

John was troubled at the time and would sit for a long time pondering the situation. Why was this killing necessary? What is to be gained?

After the Germans came, uniforms, singing of patriotic songs, and political meetings became common. Activity picked up among the Zichydorf youth groups. There was a well orchestrated movement to militarize the young boys. Eighteen-year-olds were considered to be generals. Soldiers were twelve years old and up. There was marching and war games against different towns and schools. Sometimes they went on for a couple of days. To them it was just a game. But to those in authority, it was preparation for their future.

John's brother was among the first taken into the German army. He was wounded in Russia and sent home to train recruits for the Prince Eugen Division. This was a division of ethnic Germans from Yugoslavia whose main mission was to fight the Yugoslavian resistance, known as Partisans. In effect, the Prinz Eugen soldiers were sometimes fighting against their neighbours. The Partisans blew up bridges, mined roads, and ambushed patrols. The German Army responded with brutal retribution, sometimes against civilians, and the men of the Prinz Eugen Division were often the ones carrying out the orders. These circumstances combined to foster a hatred for the Prinz Eugen soldiers by the Serbian population. At the same time, the Partisans were also brutal toward the Prinz Eugen soldiers.

Many Serbs were forced to labour as agricultural workers. Young German boys too young for the army were also pressed into service. For a while John was assigned to a vineyard near Weisskirchen. Nearby was an execution area where groups of people were eliminated. The authorities would post lists of names of people to be executed. John saw and heard many.

The majority of the population felt that they were now German. Some of the local population felt vindictive toward the Serbs. Germans had been higher taxed and felt officially discriminated against in other ways. Some Germans in underground political movements had been beaten up by Serbs before the war. Now, they sought revenge. A Serb priest was led around with a rope around his neck. People threw stones at him, dragged him, and kicked him when he fell down. Many townspeople had no animosity, but felt powerless to intervene. You have to do what you have to do to survive.

Soon, the turmoil settled down and times became pretty peaceful in the Zichydorf area under German control. John was in school in Werschetz and remembers hearing the drone of bombers overhead and seeing their contrails. At these times, the students would

all go to the wine cellar. The older boys figured out how to get into the wine and would go back to school with red noses.

However, as the war dragged on in 1942 and 1943 more and more livestock was demanded for the military and a shortage of food, especially in the cities, was evident. Teachers at school approached students for food. The horrors of war became more imminent. The news of fallen family members became more frequent.

As the Russians came closer, Partisan activity increased; crops were burned and property destroyed. By the spring of 1944 it became obvious and real that the end was approaching, and that motivated some people to get serious about leaving home and moving toward Austria. Germans from Romania passed through, evacuating on wagons. German soldiers were trying to organize a Zichydorf evacuation. A train was arranged for the students at Werschetz who wanted to evacuate to Germany. John decided to go home rather than evacuate. His father was a border guard at Setschanfeld where his job was to catch smugglers. John went there to stay with him for awhile, and then went home. The Russians came to Zichydorf on a wet misty day in early October (about October 2, 1944). On October 8, 1944 John's father was killed in Setschanfeld.

People could see the end coming for weeks. They could hear artillery in the distance already in August. Romanian civilians were leaving. At a town meeting, German officers warned of retribution and encouraged people to leave. John's mother began preparing for the trip; cooked chicken, geese and sausage was put in big containers of lard, and the horse and wagon was readied, but rumours that others who had left and had been cut off and killed by Russians or Partisans discouraged people from leaving. Old timers recalled that there were no dire consequences after World War I. The general feeling was, "Where am I going to go? I have done nothing wrong and should have nothing to fear". There was a fear of the unknown and there was little authority because the heads of households were in the army and only the elderly, women, and children remained. However, about twelve families, including that of one of John's cousins, left and got to Germany. He later wrote a book about the shame he felt for leaving.

Finally, the German soldiers left. A couple of days later a few Partisans came and said that everything would be fine. The next day, the Russians came, moving through all day and night for a week and tearing up the roads with the volume and weight of the traffic. This was the first time John had seen women soldiers. Still, there was no trouble. A few Partisans were left behind to keep an eye on things. All was quiet for several weeks, until early November. Then late one afternoon, Partisans took up positions around the town and at intersections. Around dark, they started searching the houses for men. John hid in the garden at a friend's place. The Partisans told them to come out of hiding or they would shoot. The few remaining men and older boys were taken to a warehouse at the train station and from there most of them were sent to Werschetz and never returned. But John did not have to go to Werschetz because of his mother's connections with the Serb baker who leased space in their family compound. The Serb took John home to work in his bakery. John's friend, Chris Noll, was sent to Werschetz but came home a couple of weeks later.

Fifteen year old John and two friends tried to escape to Romania. They stopped in Gross Gaj at the home of one of the boys' grandparents where they learned that the Serbs were holding their mothers and would shoot them if the boys did not return. They were put in jail for a week and their mothers were released. While they were in jail, many of the adults of working age were rounded up and taken to forced labour camps in Russia. Shortly after this, several hundred people from Werschetz were brought to Zichydorf. Eight or nine of them were billeted in John's home. On February 21, 1945 John's Grandma, Anna Borschowa Molter, died. Her funeral was the last German burial ceremony in the town of Zichydorf.

On the morning of April 28, 1945, John awoke to find soldiers in the streets and positioned strategically around the town. The people were told to assemble at various assembly points, leaving everything behind. John's family gathered in a pasture. It was drizzling, misty, and cold. They were kept there overnight. Next morning the soldiers took some people to feed the livestock. Later, they herded all the people into one street guarded by soldiers. Serbs started moving into abandoned homes while their previous owners were organized into groups to work fields and tend livestock. Around the end of May they started taking people out to Pustas (large farms) as labourers. John and his friend, Chris Noll, were taken to Werschetz where they were assigned to work groups. After eight days there, on June 27, 1945, John was sent to Mali Zam (Kleinscham), about eight kilometres north of Werschetz near the Romanian border. Chris was sent to a lumber camp and then later joined John in Mali Zam.

In Mali Zam John was a carriage driver for a Partisan officer who was the Serbian farm manager there. He drove six Arabian horses. One day they met a column of workers. In the column were girls that John knew from school in Werschetz. They told him that they were being raped in their camp. He told the manager and asked if there was anything he could do for them. The manager said that he was sorry, but he could not have people missing – the numbers must add up. However, he was soon able to trade eight old women and two horses for nine young girls. The girls were good singers whose vocal efforts would bring tears to his eyes. John told the farm manager that his friend, Chris Noll, could play accordion. The manager asked where it was and they told him that it was buried in the garden at home. He said, "Go dig it up tomorrow night", which they did. With their new musical capabilities they would sing and dance in their spare time. However, someone found out that the forced labourers were having too much fun and they were assigned a new female Partisan camp commander. She was extremely bitter and vicious. Before long, John decided to escape.

Previously the girls had found some guns and ammunition in a slough. They had told the first farm manager, who had collected the ordinance. John assured him that they had turned it all in, but he kept back a revolver and some ammunition. Unfortunately, the ammunition was for a different gun. John tried to file the bullets so they would fit, but never knew for sure if they would work. The manager always worried that he had kept back a gun. When the woman took over, John told the first manager that he was going to leave. The manager said that, if John tried to leave, the manager would have to kill him.

While weeding a corn field with a hoe, John observed that the border was at the end of the row. It was patrolled by a young guard with a rifle and bayonet and occasionally accompanied by a guard dog. One day, while working in the fields, John and the guard were resting together and the guard fell asleep, so John grabbed the rifle and pointed it at the guard. He put the bayonet onto the guard's chest while the guard was crying and begging John not to shoot. Then he threw the rifle as far as he could, the guard went to find it and that was the end of the incident. However, because John did not shoot, the guard felt that he owed John a favour, which John thinks was paid when it came time to escape to Romania. John says that he was 16 at the time of the rifle incident so it must have been during the summer of 1945.

On December 4, 1945 John told the girls he was leaving. Chris insisted that he was coming too. They snuck out a window and into the cornfield. There was no dog and no guard. Did the guard know and let them go on purpose? John had his pistol. They traveled about 300 feet through rain and snow across the border and huddled together under a blanket. They could hear the Serbian and Romanian guards talking.

When they got up in the morning, it was cloudy and misty and they lost their bearings. They went in the direction of a barking dog and a rooster. Then, they heard a church bell in the opposite direction. They realized they were walking back to their camp and turned and ran toward the bell.

They traveled via Moravitz to Stamora and went to the home of John's relatives, but since they were escapees they could not stay there so John was sent to work for a wicked Hungarian woman who took his shoes. In place of shoes he tore up a shirt and wrapped his feet in rags.

Eventually he made his way to Detta, which is about 10 kilometres north of Stamora. The mayor of Detta knew that someone had reported John to the Romanian police so he hid John and then connected him to a Hungarian Jew who gave him shoes and loaded him on a truck that was hauling pigs to Temeswar; about another 30 kilometres to the north.

In Temeswar John was taken to the home of the Jew's father, John Heller (spelling?), a horse trader. Mr. Heller was about 50 years old and had a very young German wife (his second wife). Heller hid John at a remote farm owned by Stusser (spelling?), a communist. Then for the next several months John worked for Heller training horses and in return he treated John like a son. While at the Stusser farm the daughter of Heller brought John food and books, including the diary book that he wrote in for the rest of his time on the run. The diary book was a Christmas gift. Also during this time, the wife of Heller took John to the Canadian Consulate to get the necessary documents to prove that he was born in Canada. After that was accomplished he was ready to continue his journey to Hungary. Heller gave him money and he was on his way.

He made it to Szeged, Hungary and was caught by the authorities, but luck was on his side. The local official knew the Molter family in Zichydorf and he took a liking to John.

As a result, John stayed with the official and his wife for the next four days while they obtained forged documents for him to get out of the country. While there he worked in the official's garden and the official's wife showed him around the area. With his forged papers he made it to Budapest where he was caught again, and this time put in prison for a miserable three months.

The prison had about 100 people per room, it was extremely overcrowded with no hygiene and hordes of bedbugs, lice, and fleas. The lower walls were discoloured from inmates smashing bedbugs. The beds were springs only, no blankets. The daily food ration was a bowl of soup and slice of bread.

John thought that he could get out of this mess by showing his Canadian papers to the commandant, but it was to no avail. The commandant was an avid communist, seeing Canadian papers only made him angry and he accused John of being a spy.

While in prison he met Nikolaus (Klaus) Kushil (spelling?) who would accompany him to Austria. Upon release from prison they went to the train station and bought tickets to Austria. John gave the ticket agent all the Hungarian money that he had. He says that he slapped the money down and grabbed the tickets before the agent could say anything. They boarded the train and were on their way when misfortune struck again.

This time they were confronted by soldiers who promptly beat them up and put them under guard, forcing them to stand in the train all bloody and dirty with people staring. John felt very uneasy, he asked the guard if they could go to the platform at the end of the car to clean themselves up, and the guard said "Yes". Fortunately for them, it was nighttime and the train was moving slow – an opportunity for escape. Klaus was hesitant so John pushed him off the train and jumped behind him. From there they walked to Austria and came to a bridge that separated the American and Russian zones. It was during the night, they were hungry and cold and did not care, no guards were in sight, they dashed across the bridge hoping that no one would shoot, and they did not.

They finally made it to safety. While on the run he stayed at about 25 different places. He left Yugoslavia at the end of 1945 and it was September 1, 1949 by the time he arrived in Germany. Most of the time was spent in Austria where he was reunited with his friend, Chris Noll. All of John's brothers survived the war and the turmoil in the succeeding years of 1946 to 1948, however, his mother did not; she died in 1946 in the Rudolfsgnad concentration camp.

After he learned that his older brother, Josef, was in Germany he went there and liked it better. But he had an accident, a truck hit him on his bicycle and broke his arm. He went to the medical centre and while filling out the paperwork he told the authorities that he was born in Canada. They immediately encourage him to return to Canada; there was more food and opportunity in Canada. At that time Germany was rationing food. John says that he was somewhat confused about his rights to return to Canada. In Germany he was listed as a refugee and could have become a German citizen, which is what he wanted to do, but once his brother found out about the option of returning to Canada he

said you must go to Canada. They argued back and forth, yelling, but his brother roared and won. Within three weeks he was on his way to Canada. He left Germany on June 9, 1951 and arrived at his destination, Reward, Saskatchewan, on June 24, 1951. Josef went to the USA because his wife had relatives there.

Canada was looking for workers – there was a job waiting for John. The Canadian government connected him to a job working for a Volga German farmer who spoke a German dialect that was difficult to understand. He had a one year contract, but he liked the farmer and stayed two years. During this time he learned English. Also during this time the farmer's family became his new family, and even after moving to Edmonton he returned to Reward for Christmas. In Edmonton he worked in construction and did an apprenticeship in welding.

In 1960 he moved back to Regina to work as a supervisor for a steel fabricator (Stelco). In Regina he was reunited with his old friend, Chris Noll, who lived there for the rest of his life. In 1978 John and a friend opened their own steel fabricating business in Regina and operated it until selling out in 1988, the same year he married Margaret Baker. Today John is retired in Penticton, British Columbia.

[Ray's notes: During my discussions with John, which began in 1999, I asked him about his Molter grandparents. He lived with them in the Molter compound in Zichydorf. His grandmother, Anna Borschowa, is my great grandfather's first cousin, she married Josef Molter on May 12, 1891:

**Anna Borschowa Molter (May 7, 1872 – February 21, 1945)** John says that his grandmother was very friendly and very caring, but could be strict and firm when needed. Her life was her big garden, full of vegetables and flowers of all colours, which she meticulously maintained. For children, a sure way to get into trouble with his grandmother was to mess with her garden. She did a lot of reading, and as a result, John says that she was much smarter than her husband, who was a successful businessman. In the family compound she had a weaving room where she made large rugs, the Persian type. She was always busy. She still spoke some French, which I found interesting, considering that she is in the third generation of the family since they emigrated from Lorraine in 1770. The Hasenfratz family told me that her sister, Katharina, also spoke some French.

**Josef Molter (April 16, 1868 – February 14, 1938)** John says that his grandfather was strict and aggressive, in business and life in general. He was obsessed with making money (I believe that is a Danube Swabian cultural trait, I have heard the same thing from other Swabian families). Through savings, hard work and shrewd business practices he became quite wealthy. His primary trade was as a grain dealer, he bought grain and corn from farmers, then stored and dried it and resold it. It was a very good business, but he did not give deals to buyers or sellers. John helped in the business by shoveling and moving grain. Michael Borschowa (1897-1944) was the chief agent and purchaser who went to the surrounding villages to buy grain and corn. The grain business was in the Molter compound in Zichydorf. John's grandfather built the compound by combining



three houses and a former dance hall, all connected together under one roof. John says that he could run through the entire length of the compound without going outside. (When I was in Plandište in 2014 the compound was still standing.) In later years his grandfather had such extreme arthritis that he walked with two canes and could never straighten his fingers, he was always in extreme pain, and as a result, had no patience. Ray Borschowa June 6, 2020]