

"WE LIVED EACH PARTICULAR MOMENT THE WAY IT CAME."



BY JAY SANDELIN

During World War II Mr. and Mrs. Heinz Schirr went through many unforgettable times and many emotional tragedies. Their struggle in war times tells a story that most Americans have only heard about, not experienced. This is their heartwarming story of how the Schirrs managed to survive in an old country and to adapt in a new country that had a different way of life.

Mrs. Schirr started by telling us about her background, "I was born in Schneidemuhl. It is now part of Poland, but it was at that time, Germany. War broke out in 1939, in Germany. There was no East Germany or West. It was just Germany, and our part, where we were born, was a place just south of Danzig, what they now call Gdanza, I think. This area was right in the middle of the war from 1939 to 1945.

"Schneidemuhl was a city of 45 thousand, and it had a large railroad station, with a center station between Konigsberg and Berlin. The farms there were not too large, like 40 acres to 60 acres. Each was very, very neatly kept. People made their living on those small farms. We were in a town where everybody cared for each other and were friends with each other.

"School was completely different there. We went eight years to grade school and then specialized. If we knew ahead of time that we wanted to go into, the medical field, or a certain occupation, then we specialized. If we didn't specialize we just attended eight years of school. During Hitler's time I had my technician license. Before we could take a job, we had to work one year for someone who needed help. In my case, I worked for a professor who had a large household. Some people worked for families with large numbers of children. Almost everyone at the time was working. There was also a force for young people to serve for nine months. We put in a certain amount of time with someone that needed it like an apprentice before we could take a job.

"As children we did pretty much what the average child here does. I had a bicycle, and we always went swimming. I loved to go skating while Heinie liked skiing. I think it was the same there, only we didn't have money and nothing was as fancy as it is now. The young men there were different to the girls. We were not as free as you children. There were cars around, but not like what you have now. I didn't get my license until after being here 15 years.



"THE BIKE BUSINESS WAS JUST A HOBBY."

"Then we would go to college or what college is considered to be here. It was the same for girls and boys. It was called gymnasium. That was eight years of very intensive studies for a certain field previously selected. I went to grade school eight years, then to business school, as it was called there, because I wanted to be a teacher. Then I had another four years before I became a technician. I did strictly laboratory work, agriculture research. We basically spent the same years that you do here, except I think we had more specialized instruction as young people.

"In Heinz's case he wanted to become a mechanic. That meant he would go to school eight years, then work under a master in that particular field. Heinz specialized in bicycle, typewriter, and sewing machine work. He was called a fine mechanic. He worked under a master for six years before he could go out on his own.

"Actually Heinz and I met in Schneidemuhl. We grew up in the same city, and while I was a technician in agricultural research, his younger sister was the head bookkeeper of the firm where I worked. He came there, when he was drafted, and that's how I met him.

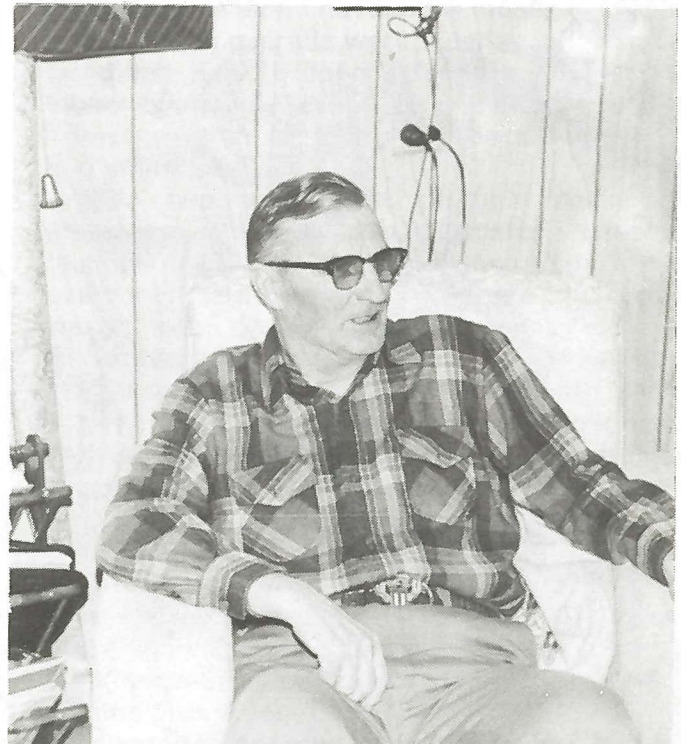
"We had a big wedding, but, of course, I lost everything during the war, so we have only one wedding picture. Heinz's sister was able to bring a very small size picture over here and we had it enlarged, so that's the only picture I have. We were married in a church, and it was a large

wedding. Weddings in Germany are not much different than the weddings here.

"While in Austria I had two little girls. One daughter we lost because of the war. She passed away of a nervous condition. It was the result of the war. Little Hager could have been saved, but at the time all the beds were taken by injured German soldiers. There was no bed for a small child. What could have been an easy operation now, was not done then. I had Evelin earlier. She lives here in Steamboat. We became very proud American citizens and had two lovely sons after we came to Steamboat. They are Rudi and Donald. They both attended grade school and high school here, and Donald served in the Navy. In 1980, our very first grandson (Davin) was 18, and Rudi made us grandma and grandpa again about a year ago."

I asked Heinz and Ruth if they had any stories to tell about the war and how they managed to survive. Heinz told us, "The one thing I can't forget is the bombs, and the feeling I had when they bombed the airfields. We had trenches where we could go in the ground. Usually there was something like an air raid drill where we could practice getting to a fallout shelter in case there was a real air raid. Anyway, I heard the warning sirens, but I was too lazy to go. It was such a nice spring day that I decided to stay on the airfield. Then all of a sudden I saw the planes coming forward and the bombs falling, coming closer and closer. That was a real scary feeling.

Mrs. Schirr said, "That was something I will never forget, because I had little Evelin with me.



"WE NEVER FELT HAPPY ABOUT SOMEONE TAKING OVER OUR COUNTRY."

Heinz had built an underground shelter in our backyard. The bombs were falling miles away but the hit could be felt underground. I had two elderly ladies with me and Evelin laying on my knees. The shelter was just low enough to sit in. When it was all over, many young women took their children out on to the airfield three miles away. I tell you, you will never know how many people were lying around without arms and legs. There were people with just the upper body, and I remember one in particular with only pants. The legs and lower body was laying on the ground, and I was just positive that it was Heinz lying there. Everyone looked just alike. It took hours until I found out Heinie was seen alive after the attack. He couldn't come home because he had to help get everything back together, like bringing people to the hospitals and things like that.

"I think during the war we were really under pressure. We lived each particular moment the way it came. Once we were on a train, and it was so cold that my coat froze to the window. Then we were attacked by airplanes, with machine guns. From that particular train we were to go to a bomb shelter. I just couldn't move as fast because of little Evelin and my sister. We had lost everything; our parents had been bombed, and my sister was just 13. I told Evelin and my sister to lay down in the train. The people in the bomb shelter were destroyed by bombs, nearly 580 people lost their lives but we were okay. These memories one really never forgets, yet everything looks different looking back 35 years or more."



WE WERE DISPLACED PEOPLE.



"BICYCLING WAS A HOBBY FOR MY HUSBAND FOR 60 YEARS. IT WILL BE OUR MAIN BUSINESS IN A FEW YEARS."

Heinz told, "I was in navigation. I fixed compasses, speedometers, and the radar equipment on airplanes. I had to fly, and I started to teach navigation in a simulated situation. I was called a link trainer. I taught steering, landing, and everything you need to know about flying an airplane. There was a big glass table to show all the mistakes. I never had to fire a shot while I was flying, so I was really lucky.

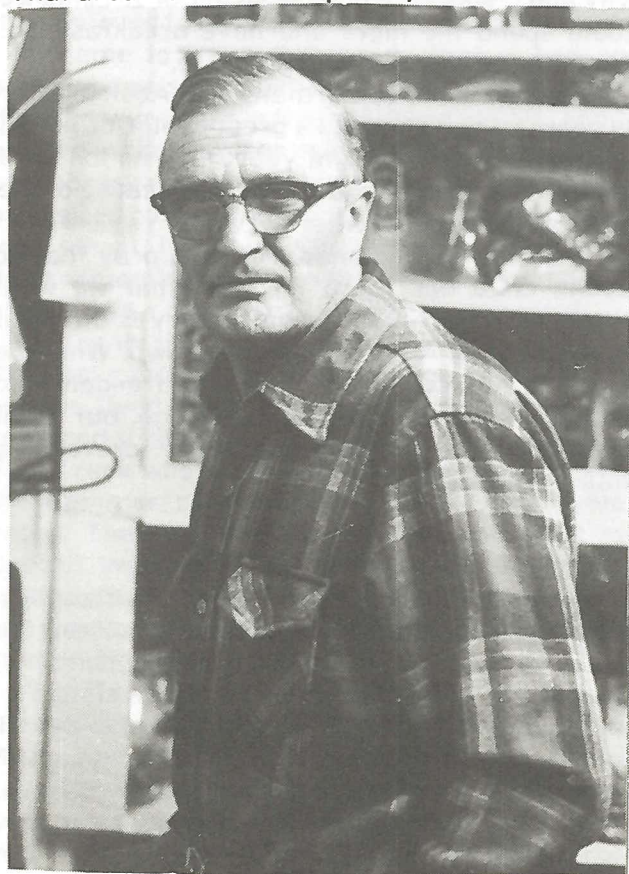
"A funny thing happened to me. This new guy told me that they were making an airplane that didn't have a propeller. I told him, 'Heck, you crazy. How can it fly?' He explained it a little bit. Then one day I heard this noise. I looked over and saw an airplane that was a Messerschmidt 262. It came down and landed and I could see it closer. I was surprised. I couldn't imagine how it could fly without a propeller. It was really, really, really interesting."

Heinz and Ruth recalled some hard times after Germany lost the war. "Everything was rationed, and if we had money, it was barely enough for food. Oatmeal, sugar and eggs was our main meal. Later, in 1946, we ate beets, and I can recall very seldom we had potatoes. I would wash them really good and peel them to make

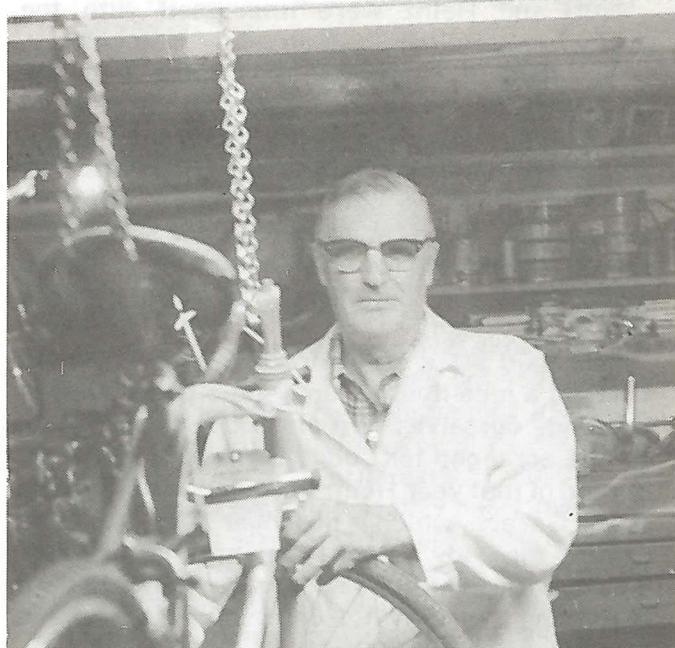
flour. After we dried the peelings we made the flour and baked cookies. At that time it tasted just great. I think every person readjusted to what was required of us."

As the war drew to a close Ruth and Heinz were separated. Ruth told us, "I was near Salzburg. I didn't know where Heinie was. I had two small children and the youngest was only four days old."

Then Heinz finished the story. "I was in Austria. See what happened, the Russians saw our airport 30 km from Vienna and came to close. They loaded everything up and sent us to different places. My orders were to go to North Germany, but before we got up there the English came from the Northwest and sent us to Berlin. Three days before the Russians closed in on Berlin, I got out. I met my brother in Berlin. He had been wounded on the Russian front. I saw him for the first time in five years. Then he stayed in Berlin, and I got sent out. Everything got a little confused, and we went straight south to Austria, and there we stayed. Then the Americans came in, and everybody said goodbye and tried to make it home. I couldn't really go home because our hometown was taken over by the Russians. I didn't know if my wife and kids were there, so I worked on the farm for almost three months just for something to eat. That area was then occupied by the Americans.



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"We were displaced people, and that was normal procedure there. We never felt happy about someone taking over our country, even the Americans. We weren't treated badly though, and we didn't have any complaints. We got food and went to work and tried to make a living. After so many years we forget how sad it was."

Ruth then told us of her reunion with Heinz after nine months. "I was situated outside of Salzburg, and our little girl had passed away. I put announcements in the newspapers and on the radio, but I didn't find Heinie. He was released from the American army camp by then and had been assigned a small job on a farm. He also put announcements out, and I found his in the paper. But at the time we were not allowed to travel. So I asked an American soldier to get a ticket for Evelin and myself. We went to the farm where my husband was. Heinz would have left again looking for us, but he found out that we had been through Salzburg, so he knew we were in the surrounding area. He was looking for us, and we were looking for him, and that's how we found each other. We were happy and couldn't believe it! It is hard to say how we really felt, a happiness we couldn't explain."

Heinz and Ruth then told us about their experiences of coming to the United States. "It took us two years to get the papers and comply with all the rules and regulations. We were issued a passport and had our shots. When we were free we were assigned to go to Italy, from Italy to here by boat. It took us three weeks through a lot of storms, and that was an experience in itself. I left my sister Eva over there because we could not take her with us, but two years later I was able to make arrangements with friends to sponsor her."

Ruth and Heinz were impressed with the Rocky Mountains. "Steamboat was lovely, lovely, lovely! It has changed to an extent, but not much. We lived on a farm the first eight months, then moved to a little green shed that is now where B&K distributing is. Skiing wasn't as elaborate as it is now. Everybody skied on wooden skis. I can recall we took our shovel and broom to clean the ice to go skating. We enjoyed it tremendously, but there was nothing fancy here 30 years ago.

"We paid \$15 a month rent. We had a small kitchen, a nice living room, and a bedroom that we made ourselves. We did not speak English, yet we arranged for Judge Stelle to help us. By the end of that year Heinz had a job with Luckens Motor Garage, which is no longer here, and I had worked for Cody Shinn. I took care of his grandmother during the week. Mrs. Critton took care of Evelin. Then in 1951, Evelin started school and Mrs. Bogue was her teacher.

By 1955 we became very proud American citizens. We had lovely people here who were friends. Edith Klumper, Judge Gooding, and Judge Steele were a big help to us with their encouragement.

The Schirrs talked about establishing a business in Steamboat. Ruth said, "Bicycling was a hobby of my husband's for 60 years. In 1968 we bought a hundred dollars worth of parts and opened up our business. The boys were helping a little at that time. I was working, and the bike business was really just a hobby. It should never have become what it is now, but here it is. It will be our main business this year, bicycle proprietors.



WE LIVED EACH PARTICULAR MOMENT THE WAY IT CAME.

"In Europe, I never had a driver's license. Our vacation time there was spent going some place by train. If we went to Italy or France we took the train, but to go to the Baltic Sea, we took our bikes. We could spend two or three weeks that way and it was very inexpensive. For 25 cents we could spend the night and have breakfast too. Bicycling is still very popular there.

"We went back to Germany and Austria after 28 years. It had changed a great deal. Our home, where we lived for eight years was no longer a small town. And all was changed because of the division of countries after the war.

"Now I think back and hope and pray that no young child has to go through what we went through. A war in your own country is different than anything Americans have known. When we came to this country I thought of freedom and peace. I know that was 31 years ago, but I still pray it will be freedom and peace forever, for this great country."

I would like to thank Kerry Keena. Without his help this story would not have been possible.

