

MR. TREE

“A tree gives glory to God by being a tree.”—*Thomas Merton*

By JEREMY KLASZUS



W

WE SPEND A LOT OF TIME TOGETHER LATELY, Opapa and me, mostly on his treed acreage southeast of Edmonton where he lives with my Omi. Cloistered by the aspens and poplars surrounding the blue two-storey house, we visit another distant forest together, looking down from outer space on a sandy patch of land 40 kilometres east of the icy Baltic Sea. “These were mostly Scots pine and spruce,” Opapa says, reaching into memory while rolling the rubber wheel on his wireless mouse. The trees enlarge in the Google Earth window, creating a dark green cauliflower-like carpet on his computer screen. Outside, evening grosbeaks and black-capped chickadees flit from branch to branch. “And here is where I planted my first tree, a two-foot Scots pine seedling. That was before the war.”

To many, Opapa is known simply as Mr. Tree. He earned his arboreal nickname partly because of his famed love for and

Opapa has spoken often of “the war” throughout my life, but I never really knew what that meant.

knowledge of trees—he’s volunteered with Alberta’s Junior Forest Wardens, a forestry youth group, for as long as I can remember—and probably because he also looks a little treeish himself. Beneath his snowy beard and bushy white eyebrows, aged skin hangs off gnarled limbs. Long grey and white hairs cover his knobby hands like mossy bark. He even acts treeish at times, like one of Tolkien’s ents, giant tree-shepherds that never bother to say anything in their own tree-language unless it’s worth taking a long time to say.

Opapa similarly takes forever to tell a story. Often it’s too much for Omi.

“Ach, Ernst, get on with it.” Omi, going on eighty, rolls her eyes and reaches for her iPod.

“I speak in paragraphs, Laila,” Opapa replies coolly, returning to his Google Earth travels.

Opapa has spoken often of “the war” throughout my life, but I never really knew what that meant. I knew he was on the German side and joined the Hitler Youth. I knew he fled his home, travelling from house to house across Germany with his mother and sisters, all of them starving, but I never understood why. As a boy I listened politely to his stories and went back to playing King’s Quest or some other computer game.

What I did know, or thought I knew, was that the war had somehow made Opapa a very stern and serious person. How else to explain his countless lectures? Opapa was always scolding us grandchildren about something, whether it was our

“horseplay” or our feeble knowledge of chemistry. “You don’t know the chemical elements? That is very basic knowledge...”

“I tolerate absolutely no horseplay in my home, especially on Sundays...”

“Absolutely no wearing of hats indoors. There are rules...”

I found Opapa’s severity both terrifying and amusing. We all usually escaped his judgment, having endured only the tedium of his lectures, though I also remember getting whapped once or twice for the crime of “horseplay.”

These memories are eclipsed, however, by happier ones. On Easter Sundays, we hunted for chocolate eggs in the raspberry bushes behind my grandparents’ brick-and-brown bungalow in the Edmonton suburb of St. Albert. On Christmas Eve we’d gather around Opapa in the living room after church, our young faces lit by the white lights on the tree, as Opapa read the Christmas story from the Gospel of Luke in his hybrid German-Wisconsin inflection that makes words like “not” sound a bit like “nat.”

“And it came to pass in those days that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed...”

When I was about 12, my grandparents moved to their acreage, where Opapa is completely surrounded by his beloved trees and birds. Nostalgic sounds and smells are everywhere: the chorus of a Handel oratorio on the radio—locked always on the CBC—and the inviting aroma of Opapa’s red cabbage simmering on the stove.

And then there are Opapa’s stories. The older he gets, the more he talks about Nazi Germany, often in sharp and harrowing detail. In the twilight of his life—he’s now 78—he seems to find more and more comfort in his childhood narrative, even though much of it is bleak.

I’ve spent most of my life vaguely embarrassed by my German heritage, acutely aware that the Nazis perpetrated some of the most heinous crimes of the 20th century. In school, history lessons were accompanied by those flickery black-and-white films of Hitler’s frenzied speeches at rallies. Opapa is my direct link to that history. As a writer, I pride myself on telling untold stories, but I had never learned this part of my own story. Now I was being given a second chance in my mid-20s, an age by which many people have already lost their grandparents, and with them, all their grandparents’ stories. I still had access to everything.

“I want to tell you about my home city of Tilsit...”

Opapa takes me with his words to East Prussia, Nazi Germany’s easternmost province. Like carpet that changes shade with each pass of a vacuum cleaner, Opapa’s homeland changes colour on the map each time the machine of war rolls overtop. The Russians kept much of East Prussia after the Second World War and wasted no time in purging the land of German names, German culture and, in one of history’s lesser-known ethnic cleansings, Germans themselves. Hence Tilsit, which sits on the southern bank of the gentle Neman River across from Lithuania, is now called Sovetsk. The city is part of Kaliningrad, a small Russian exclave sandwiched

between Poland and Lithuania. “A forgotten part of the world,” Opapa says.

I pull from my pocket the digital recorder I use in my work as a reporter and set it on the arm of his black leather chair. Then I listen as Opapa’s deep, gentle cadence—“the Morgan Freeman of German men,” says my wife, Colleen—takes me over spire and shingle, into another time and place, some 65 years ago...

T

TILSIT-BENDIGSFELDE, EAST PRUSSIA, 1944. Dusk after a warm summer day. A German boy of 14 bounded out the front door of his brick house. A lock of blond hair across the boy’s bony forehead danced with each step. Ernst, the youngest of five children, ran past the fruit-laden apple and cherry trees in the yard toward the dirt road where a steady stream of people—Germans, Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians—already moved west toward the forest. He fell into the column, his mother and two sisters close behind.

This exodus of neighbours and refugees felt both familiar and tense. It had become routine, like eating breakfast or brushing teeth.

The coniferous forest took them in one by one. Within minutes, the entire troop had funnelled itself into the sandy paths between the trees, the same paths where Ernst’s biology teacher regularly took his class, telling stories about each plant while smoking his flint-and-steel-lit pipe.

Running into the forest, even now, was oddly reassuring for Ernst. He enjoyed being among the needle-filled boughs in the dark. He certainly preferred it to huddling in the basement, the shelter his family used if they didn’t have time to clear the half-kilometre between the house and the forest.

Ernst and the others pressed deeper into the trees. Silence.

This waiting period always stretched and shrank in later conversations; one person recalled it as half a minute, another remembered it as 10 minutes. Ernst used the time to think of his father, who was shovelling coal on a train north of Tilsit. The enemy often targeted trains and Ernst felt pangs of worry whenever his father was away.

“Papa is very brave,” Ernst thought to himself. Friedrich, his Papa, always risked trouble. Before the war, when he manned rail crossings at night, Friedrich would sing hymns into the hand-crank phone in the stone booth by the crossing. He sent his baritone all the way to Insterburg, 50 kilometres down the line, entertaining other sleepy railway workers with his songs. The voice was forever a mystery to the other workers.

Then came the war. Friedrich was drafted into the Bahnschutz, the German paramilitary railway police, and sent into occupied Poland to oversee a stretch of track. Ernst later overheard his parents talking heatedly about the experience in



their adults-only tongue of Lithuanian. He made out bits of the conversation and his older sister Gustel translated the rest.

His father had been standing on the station platform in Poland one afternoon when he heard voices coming from inside a locked boxcar. Confused, Friedrich realized there were people inside. The voices weakly asked him if he could open the door so they could unload dead bodies.

Stunned, Friedrich offered to check with his superiors. He

strode into the station, picked up the phone and made his request, but the officer hung up on him and the train chugged away, doors still shut. Within hours, the officer he'd spoken with drove to the station and literally stripped Friedrich of his rank, angrily tearing the epaulettes from his shoulder.

Shortly afterward, Friedrich was dismissed as "politically unreliable." It was an accurate label, given his quiet opposition to Hitler. Friedrich went back to shovelling coal on locomotives, stunted in his career because of his refusal to join the National Socialist party. The mayor of Bendigsfelde, a Nazi, always regarded Friedrich suspiciously, and Ernst worried that his Papa might one day get sent away.

A high-pitched wail jerked Ernst from his thoughts. The warning siren. A minute later, white flares illuminated the city, drifting from the sky slowly as fuzzy aspen seeds. The siren stopped its screeching but the anti-aircraft flak guns barked out their challenge to the enemy planes above, creating a deadly hail of shrapnel in the forest. Ernst threw his arms around a pine for protection.

"Look out!"

A chunk of metal ricocheted off a limb above, shaking Ernst's tree like a badly hit baseball vibrates a bat. The young tree-hugger clutched the trunk even tighter, his pockets bulging with bits of golden amber he'd collected along the beach in Danzig.

About 10 minutes later, the bombers left. Fires burned inside the city but the people in the forest were unharmed. Ernst returned home with his mother and sisters, the pattern of pine bark imprinted on the inside of his arms.

He thought again of his tall, bald father, and hoped he was okay.

D

DRESSED IN A PLAID SHIRT, A BROWN WOOL sweater ("cotton is cool, wool is warm," Opapa always says) and a bolo tie made from a knobcone pine cone, Opapa looks professorial against the backdrop of books covering the living room walls. Many are theological tomes he accumulated as a Lutheran pastor in the '50s and '60s.

Once in a while, I interrupt Opapa's storytelling to clarify dates and locations. But one question gnaws at my mind as he describes his happy childhood in Tilsit: how much did you know?

Did you know of Kristallnacht, when the synagogues in Germany were burned to the ground? What about the concentration camps? Or Hitler's fierce anti-Semitism as revealed in *Mein Kampf*? Did you know of these things when at age 10 you joined the Jungvolk, the Hitler Youth's junior branch, compelled by law? How much did you know when you swore an oath to "devote all my energies and my strength to the

saviour of our country, Adolf Hitler," and declared you were willing to give up your life for him?

How much of the Nazis' anti-Semitism did you swallow? And did you feel any sense of guilt or shame when you learned of the Holocaust after the war?

In my family, questions are seldom asked directly and these questions are particularly difficult to ask, partly because they are loaded with accusation against a kid who was only four years old when the Nazis took power. I look back at Nazi Germany through the lens of the Holocaust. As a boy, Opapa lacked that advantage. I restrain my judgments and move crabwise, taking days and months to get to the questions I really want to ask.

And it's Colleen, not me, who actually utters the big question: "How much did you know?"

One question gnaws at my mind as he describes his childhood: how much did you know?

Opapa answers slowly. "We were aware that we were not given all the facts. Similar to today. When I look at the CNN news, in the back of my head I always say to myself, 'Okay, I really don't know what the true story is.' Are they winning in Iraq? Bush says they are winning. It doesn't quite look that way when I compare that with the German news and the BBC. But the same thing is happening anywhere there is war. The people are fed propaganda."

To get some of the missing facts, Opapa cobbled together a shortwave radio so he could listen illegally to Swiss radio and the BBC at night. The reports he heard through his crackling earphone cast doubt on the always-upbeat German version of events.

People in Germany liked to say that lies have short legs, and Opapa and the other Jungvolk would repeat the joke that if lies indeed had short legs, Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels would be walking around on his ass. When German radio reported that a British plane was shot down near Tilsit, Opapa and his friends elbowed their way through the bush looking for it. But they never found debris or wreckage. Nothing.

Opapa was aware that Jews disappeared from Tilsit after 1938—"there was no hiding that," he says—though he didn't know where they went. People spoke in hushed tones of concentration camps but it was all considered hearsay. "The Americans knew more than ordinary Germans," Opapa says.

That night, I make spätzle noodles for dinner and Opapa, ever the chef of the house, joins me in the kitchen. He hasn't been feeling well lately and he's too weak to prepare meals. But he can't help himself. I'm doing everything wrong. He instructs me on the correct way to slice cucumbers for salad.

"Hold it like this, not like that. It's the only way to do it."

On the way home to Calgary, I complain to Colleen that Opapa drives me nuts in the kitchen. He doesn't trust me with

BIOGRAPHY

even the simple task of salad making. But when Colleen slowly passes a semi on the four-lane highway, I find myself barking similar instructions.

“Either pass or don’t pass. Make up your mind.”
She’s not impressed. “Thanks, Opapa.”

IT WAS JUNE OR JULY 1944 WHEN MY GREAT-grandfather returned to favour with his ideological enemies, the Nazis.

Friedrich had finished his shift at Tilsit’s railway roundhouse, a frequent target of Soviet air raids, when he heard a loud explosion behind him. Spinning around, he saw a plume of black smoke toward the end of a train destined for the Russian front. The train, loaded with ammunition, was blowing apart from the back, car by car, like a string of firecrackers.

Friedrich ran to the middle of the train and uncoupled a string of cars before returning to the locomotive and pulling it forward, dividing the train and successfully cutting off the explosions.

Friedrich’s co-workers later celebrated his ammo-saving heroics. A prominent Nazi even pinned an award on Friedrich’s uniform. Though he never wore it afterward, Friedrich felt a weight come off his chest when the award went on; he no longer worried about saying the wrong thing, about getting in trouble for his socialist—and decidedly non-National Socialist—political views.

Weeks later, on August 15, Ernst heard planes overhead, flying eastward from the Baltic Sea. He stepped outside and watched the planes wing their way across a cloudless sky, challenged only by warning sirens.

At the same time, Friedrich shovelled coal on a train headed across pastoral farmland from Tilsit to Ebenrode, a town 65 kilometres southeast as the crow flies. The Allied planes gained on the train and eventually overtook it, firing a spray of bullets into the locomotive. Friedrich was killed instantly.

He was 48. His son Ernst, 14.

As if to ensure Friedrich was dead, the Allies bombed Tilsit again during his funeral. Flak shrapnel fell as a line of helmet-clad mourners followed the horse-drawn hay cart that carried the coffin to the cemetery. The shrapnel made a singing sound like raindrops on the ocean, but with a louder buzz. One jagged piece landed directly atop Friedrich’s wooden coffin

with a startling thwack.

Within days of Friedrich’s burial, Ernst, his mother Auguste and his sister Lydia fled their home and struck westward, joining the stream of refugees fleeing the Baltic States. They could hear the explosions of the Russian artillery nearby and Ernst’s mother thought it prudent to leave before they got any louder. Two of Ernst’s older sisters, Gustel and Gretel, had already moved west to Erfurt, the capital of Thuringia, where they worked as secretaries in a police station. His sister Anna was also west, working as a nurse in Danzig.

Ernst left his homeland for good, the first of his many transplants. He would never see his beloved childhood forest again, except on his iMac, as an old man, some 60 years later.

M

MY CELL RINGS AT 7:49 A.M. FRIDAY MORNING.

Mom. She never calls this early. “Hello?”

“Opapa went into the hospital early this morning. He’s asked for Dad, Tante Judith and Tante Christel to come to his bedside. Dad’s on his way now.”

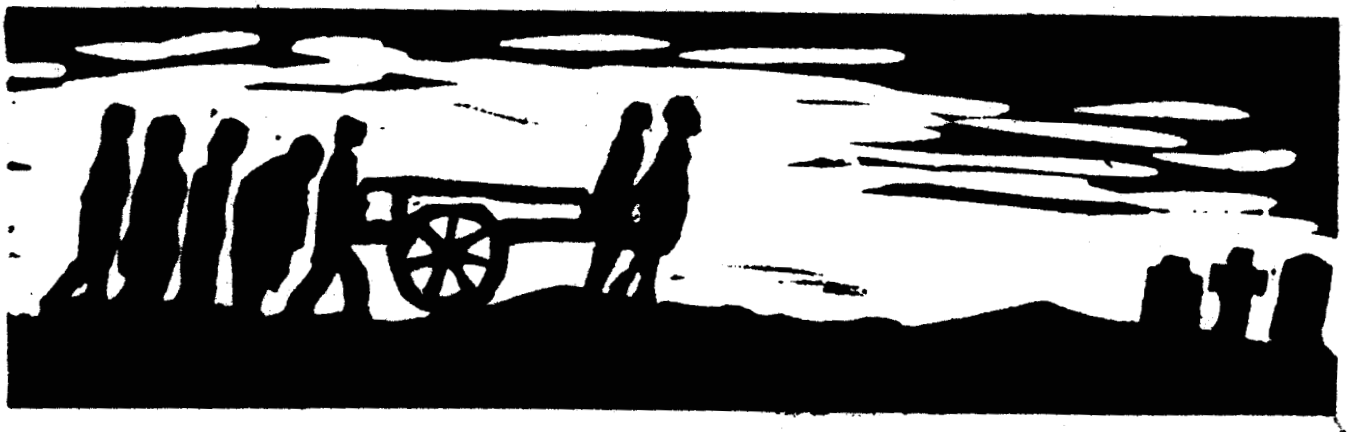
Soon Colleen and I are racing from Calgary toward Edmonton’s University of Alberta hospital. We speak very little. I’m worried Opapa will leave his story unfinished, a story I’ve only partly recorded. I don’t have enough yet to piece it together.

On the other hand, death is a straightforward literary conclusion...

I scold myself silently.

Learning that Opapa is in hospital is nothing new. He underwent a kidney transplant in 1983 and has since suffered from a long list of bodily ailments: glaucoma, prostate cancer, pancreatitis, skin cancer and high blood pressure, to name a few. He’s always recovered well from his hospitalizations. But this one seems different somehow.

When we arrive in the fluorescent-lit emergency room, Opapa is lying on a bed wearing a white hospital gown patterned with





A map of Germany before the Second World War. Ernst Klaszus grew up in Tilsit, East Prussia.

blue snowflakes. Mr. Tree looks brittle as a dry branch. His pale skin is stuck with small white patches. A barcoded bracelet hangs off his left wrist and a catheter tube issues from beneath the pink blanket covering his legs. Omi, looking haggard, stands beside Opapa's bed gently stroking his hairy hand. She's been here since two in the morning, worried that 53 years of marriage could suddenly end. Fear and exhaustion are etched onto her creased face.

Opapa looks up. His voice, usually deep and strong, is weak and breathy.

"You came. Thank you for coming."

We get a quick update on Opapa's condition. "Angina is when you get out of breath and the chest feels tight," Opapa explains. "At one point I thought I wasn't going to make it."

Opapa's brush with death has made him unusually emotional. He cries often as he speaks. Yet he can't stop talking. Even here in the emergency room, he looks back on his childhood, reflecting on his beginnings as he moves ever closer to his end.

"I worked my way up in the Jungvolk and got the rank of hauptjungzugführer. I was a leader. When we marched, I chose the songs. I always chose folk songs."

As his heart-rate monitor beeps and blips in the background, Opapa recalls the process of leaving Germany for an exchange at a Wisconsin seminary in 1952. An agent at the US consulate in Frankfurt took him aside when he applied for his student visa.

"He wanted to ask me a few questions. 'Born in 1929. Were you in the Jungvolk?'"

"Yes, I was."

"Well, he said, 'did you enjoy it?'"

"Yes, I did enjoy it. Very much.' He then stamped my passport. If I had lied and said 'no,' things might have turned out differently."

Our conversation is interrupted when a doctor enters the room to check on Opapa.

"May I ask where you are from?" Opapa asks the doctor.

"Saudi Arabia."

"Saudi Arabia! I go there on Google Earth and I'm always amazed to look at the desert and see those round green spots of irrigation. Beautiful spots of life in the desert."

"Yeah, perfectly round." The doctor grins at this curious patient. "Have you been there?"

"Only on Google Earth. No jet lag that way."

The doctor is the first of a steady stream of visitors: aunts, cardiologists, uncles, more doctors, cousins, nurses. We decide to leave for the day. Opapa's clearly in good hands. On our way out, Colleen kisses Opapa's lined forehead and says words I've never spoken to him. "I love you, Opapa."

Opapa responds, in tears, with words I've never before heard from his mouth. "I love you, too." ■

This is the first instalment in a three-part series; the second will be published in May. Jeremy Klaszus lives in Calgary.

MR. TREE

One question gnaws at me as my Opapa recalls his happy childhood in Nazi Germany: *How much did you know?*

By JEREMY KLASZUS

This is the second instalment of a special three-part feature on Ernst Klaszus, written by his grandson Jeremy. The first instalment was published in the April issue of Alberta Views and is now available on our website; the final instalment will be published next month.

A

AUGUSTE, ERNST'S MOTHER, WAS WISE to flee East Prussia when she did. Many who stayed starved to death or worse. One of Ernst's childhood friends endured six years of forced labour in a Soviet gulag for stealing a loaf of bread in Lithuania. Ernst similarly stole bread farther west but only had to worry about escaping the red-faced bakers who came after him swinging their rolling pins.

German women had it worst. The Red Army unleashed a ruthless sexual violence as it moved west into East Prussia seeking revenge for Nazi crimes in Russia. Ernst's family didn't escape this horror. Two of his sisters were brutally gang-raped by the Soviets in 1945. As the drunken soldiers took turns with the women, another soldier played the accordion. Others danced.

Many Germans who waited too late to flee the Red Army didn't survive. For some, the only escape was a treacherous walk across a frozen inlet on the Baltic Sea. Allied bombs tore deadly holes in the ice and dysentery was widespread. One refugee later described the trek as "an enormously long funeral procession."

German ships also ferried refugees west on the Baltic. In one of human history's worst—yet lesser-known—maritime disasters, a Soviet submarine torpedoed one of these refugee carriers, the *Wilhelm Gustloff*, killing some 9,000 Germans in January 1945—about six times the number of people who died when the Titanic sank. Many were East Prussian refugees.

Ernst wasn't one of them. After leaving Tilsit, he travelled by rail with his mother and sister Lydia to Iserlohn, a Westphalian city amid densely wooded hills, where he took pre-military

training and stepped up his activity in the Jungvolk, the junior branch of the Hitler Youth. He worked from morning until night at the railway station, where German refugees from the heavily bombed Ruhr passed through, many with slings on their arms and bloody wounds on their faces. The plight of wounded German refugees affected Ernst deeply, setting alight the adolescent desire to fight and maybe even die on the front.

To this end, Ernst volunteered with the Freikorps Sauerland, a military unit independent from but supportive of the German army. Its battalions, made up largely of disabled war vets and ill-trained teenagers like Ernst, dressed in old German army uniforms. Wehrmacht and SS officers trained the recruits on Sunday mornings. Yet much of the Freikorps aggression was ultimately taken out not on the Allies, but on fellow Germans, particularly deserters and after-bombing looters.

The plight of refugees affected Ernst deeply, setting alight the adolescent desire to fight.

Hours after Ernst told his mother of his plans to join the Freikorps, she broke news of her own. "I've just learned that we need to leave Iserlohn right away. East Prussian refugees like us aren't supposed to be here, but farther east in Saxony."

In fact, East Prussian refugees were spread across western Germany like seeds scattered by wind. But it didn't matter.

"We have to leave. Now."

Ernst never fought for the Freikorps. He left Iserlohn and travelled east by rail to Radeburg, a small town near Dresden, where Tante Elsa—Ernst's father's sister—was staying with her family.

Ernst, Auguste and his sister Lydia all arrived in Radeburg safely, but their baggage, loaded onto a separate train, was ripped apart by bombs.

A LATER CONVERSATION WITH OPAPA. "Where did you get that information about the Freikorps Sauerland?" He isn't convinced by my findings on their activities.



“From a 1999 article in the *Central European History* journal. I’ll e-mail it to you if you like.”

Opapa doesn’t sound keen on it. “I do not trust all of the historians that I have read. And when it comes to wartime, the truth always dies first, so what we get from so-called historical sources may or may not be reliable.” Opapa launches into a long lecture about the bias of “so-called” historians. “I rather doubt that children or old men were involved in killing their own. Maybe that was another Freikorps, but not the Freikorps Sauerland.”

I push back a bit. “No, it’s definitely the Freikorps Sauerland. I don’t know if teenagers or adults were doing the killing, but much of the Freikorps’ aggression was toward other Germans.”

He sounds more interested, but still unconvinced. “They wanted to fight the Allies. That’s really what it was.”

O

OPAPA IS IN THE CARDIO WARD WHEN WE VISIT him Saturday morning, almost 35 hours after he went into emergency. Patients are allowed four visitors at a time. Opapa has eight. After a couple of hours we decide to leave again. Before we go, I get up my guts and say what I’ve never said to this looming, lecturing figure who now lies helpless on a hospital bed. “I love you, Opapa.”

“I love you too.”

That night, Omi sends an e-mail to her three children. “Tonight while we were alone, Papa for the first time talked about death. He said to me that there are still some things he wants to do—he’s not ready. He wants to work with Jeremy on his project.... Papa has never opened up either to me or anyone else as he has the last few days. He has never shown

how he really felt about things (except when he got angry). Jeremy, your drawing him out has brought out a side of him that I didn’t know—after 53 years. I thank you for that.”

The following weekend, we visit Opapa again. This time Saturday is quiet. Everyone’s at church. Two of my cousins, Opapa’s granddaughters, are being confirmed in the Lutheran church today after studying Luther’s catechism for two years. Opapa badly wanted to attend but can’t.

Confirmation—an essential part of any good Lutheran upbringing. I was confirmed in 1995 at age 12, my dad in 1974 at age 14, and in 1945 Opapa was confirmed at age 15. He dug into the catechism in Dresden, Saxony’s artistic capital, along with eight other teenagers.

“I appreciate Luther for many of the things he said,” Opapa says. “I certainly don’t agree with all of them and whenever I say that, people are listening up. ‘What, you don’t agree with Luther?’ Well, no. I don’t agree with him on his attitude toward women. I don’t agree with him on his attitude toward Anabaptists. I don’t agree with him on what he said about the Jews.”

In confirmation we never studied Luther’s more incendiary writings. In his hateful 1543 tract *On The Jews and Their Lies*, the German theologian describes the Jewish people as “a heavy burden, a plague, a pestilence, a sheer misfortune for our country.” He goes further, calling them “an incorrigible whore and an evil slut.” Christians, he writes, are to “set fire to their synagogues or schools and to bury and cover with dirt whatever will not burn, so that no man will ever again see a stone or cinder of them. This is to be done in honour of our Lord and of Christendom...” Luther goes on like this for more than 65,000 words, his words darkly prophetic of the Nazis’ crimes.

I find Opapa’s struggle with his faith and church, always hidden from me as a child, extremely encouraging. To me he was always a patriarchal symbol of proper behaviour and belief—the very things I wanted to break away from in my adult life after being immersed in religious fundamentalism throughout my

childhood. Private Christian schools, all the way through Grade 12. Church every Sunday, and youth group on Friday nights, where we prayed feverishly for the “lost” while listening to lame music drenched in religious slogans. After awhile I couldn’t believe I was fortuitously “saved” while those not drowning in evangelical kitsch were somehow inferior and “lost.”

The exclusionary theology had to go. And by the time I finished college, it did. I found a church with a more inclusive understanding of faith.

Until recently, I never knew Opapa experienced a similar struggle throughout his life. He questions his religious upbringing as much as I question mine, and now I’m discovering a spiritual friend in a man I always regarded as spiritually and emotionally distant. “What bothers me about my childhood is that we were brainwashed,” Opapa says. “I hate to use that word, but I have to. We were brainwashed into believing what we were told about other religions, other faiths, other confessions, other denominations.” Confirmation was just one step in this unfortunate process.

But Opapa’s confirmation classes were violently interrupted on a night burned into memory for many Germans.

“It was the first time I saw parts of a human body lying here and there...”

RADEBURG. FEBRUARY 13, 1945. ERNST SLEPT QUIETLY in his upstairs room, sick with pneumonia, his breath making quick, white clouds. Frost clung to the south-facing window. There wasn’t enough wood to heat the small room.

Outside and above, British planes flew toward nearby Dresden, Saxony’s cultural heart and a transportation hub swollen with refugees from the east. The bombers announced their arrival by dropping spectacular flares of green and white that illuminated Dresden’s baroque churches and famed art galleries.

Ernst missed the light show happening outside his window. By the time he awoke an hour later, too sick to crawl downstairs, the walls of his room glowed orange-red. Groggily stumbling to the window, he looked to the south and saw only flames.

The British planes had fanned out over the city and bombed with mathematical precision, first at about 10 p.m., and again at 1:30 a.m. Refugees in Dresden burned like tinder in the midnight firestorm. Not just refugees—Dresdeners as well. Not only Germans, but also refugees from the Baltic States, and the handful of Jews left in the city. The storm of fire made no distinction between one human and another. They roasted as equals. Many baked in underground tunnels where they had sought escape.

American planes bombed Dresden again the next day, further stoking the inferno. In the midst of the fire, Ernst’s pastor clambered into his church and rescued a stack of documents from his desk, including the certificates he’d written up in advance of the teenagers’ confirmation ceremony. Afterward the pastor added another line, in blue ink, to Ernst’s large-lettered certificate: “This document was retrieved from the burning parsonage during the terror attack on Dresden on the 14th of February 1945.”

Opapa and his cousin Heinz visited the city a week later searching for twin girls from their confirmation class who lived in Dresden and often invited the boys over for dinner. As they made their way through the city’s Great Garden, the park to which refugees had fled after the first wave of bombings, the boys saw intestines and other body parts dangling from the charred remains of trees. The park had been set alight in the second wave of bombings. The refugees had no defence and no escape.

“A plague, a pestilence...” Luther goes on and on like this, his words darkly prophetic of Nazi crimes.

“Watch your step,” Ernst cautioned his younger cousin. Together they carefully walked past the corpses still strewn throughout the city. Lifeless hands, heads and arms poked from the rubble. A passerby warned Ernst and Heinz not to go where the bodies were being piled.

“It’s too terrible for young eyes.”

At last the boys found the girls’ house. The inside was gutted by fire; the outer four walls were all that remained. The boys searched for bodies but found only ashes.

The death toll from the Dresden bombings is as hazy as the smoke from the fire. Whether it was 40,000 or 25,000 that died, the living were still cremating corpses in the city’s Old Market nearly a month afterward, piling the decomposing bodies onto pyres made of iron-girder grates before soaking them with gasoline. Ernst and Heinz were relieved to learn that the twins from their church weren’t among those torched. They’d somehow escaped the fire that so many others hadn’t.

IN HIS 1962 ESSAY *TARGET EQUALS CITY*, THOMAS Merton writes: “There is one winner, only one winner, in war. The winner is war itself. Not truth, not justice, not liberty, not morality. These are the vanquished. War wins, reducing them to complete submission.” The Cistercian monk gives the bombing of German cities as an example. I first read Merton’s essay—censored by the Catholic church until after his death—as a 19-year-old student who, after years of fundamentalist indoctrination, was discovering a humanist dimension to faith. I never even thought of Opapa when I first read the essay, but as I listened to his story, Merton’s words jumped to life. I began to empathize with so-called “ordinary Germans,” the ones I never saw in those disturbing Hitler film clips we watched in school.

Germans like Anna, the sister Ernst regularly visited in Danzig when he lived in Tilsit. At 23 years old, Anna gave birth to a son, Friedrich, while fleeing from Danzig to the port city of Swinemünde in January 1945. Little Friedrich sucked in vain on his starving mother’s dry breast.

After arriving in Swinemünde, Anna took Friedrich to a hospital and called on her mother and Ernst to come visit. Auguste and Ernst answered the call and went by rail. At the hospital, they met Friedrich for the first time. A feeding tube led up his tiny nose. “For the first time, I looked at someone who was starving



to death,” Opapa says. “His body was a ghastly colour and there was a little bit of blue mixed into his skin. It was like skim milk that has that kind of bluish tint when they don’t add colour.”

Opapa and his mother returned sadly to the village of Grossbothen, the next stop on their zigzagging journey around an imploding Germany.

I ask again if Opapa remembers feeling any guilt or shame about learning of the Nazi death camps.

THE SUNDAY OF THE WEEKEND OPAPA is hospitalized, Colleen and I return to work in Calgary. Opapa’s condition goes up and down in the days following. He talks incessantly—even more than usual—and shows signs of dementia, getting angry when anyone interrupts him. Even an affirming “uh-huh” mid-way through a story sets him off. He warns the offender, usually Omi or one of his daughters, that they are increasing his blood pressure. He goes on and on about the shortcomings of the healthcare system, his speech badly slurred. I phone on my lunch break and he rambles uncharacteristically, mashing one idea mercilessly into the next. “I lose the thread so easily,” he tells me faintly. “The thread of thought.”

We stay abreast of Opapa’s condition by talking to my father. My dad and I have never been close. He was always busy with work when I was a kid, either with his construction job or other projects around home. So when I moved out, we never really kept up a relationship. But I now phone my father

two or three times a day.

“How’s Opapa doing?”

“Not good. He won’t stop complaining about the healthcare system. He treats Omi very badly, and...”

Dad breaks down. I’ve never heard him cry like this before.

“There are some things you want to be able to say to someone before they die...”

Struck by my father’s rare honesty, I force out a tearful “I know.”

The tender moment passes. “But we’ll see. He’s having a geriatric assessment soon and that should give us a better idea of what’s going on.”

After I hang up, Colleen tells me she’s never seen me talk with my father so much. “It’s good to see.”

I continue speaking with Opapa, phoning his hospital room every day or two. When I can, I direct his thoughts toward childhood. His memories are crisp, even now, and when he talks about life in Germany, it’s as if we’re sitting across from each other in his living room, just like old times.

GROSSBOTHEN, SAXONY. MARCH 1945. THE AWFUL screech of metal on metal.

Ernst looked toward the distant hills beyond the town in the valley. He knew what those hills obscured; his heart pounded stronger as the squealing got louder. He’d been prepared for this moment a week ago by a draft board in nearby Grimma. Yet Ernst didn’t feel ready to report for duty and challenge the American invaders as he’d been instructed.

By now the war was all but lost. Grossbothen was one of many German towns caught in Allied pincers: Russians to

the east, Americans to the west. But Ernst, even now, refused to believe that Germany was defeated, as did his cousins and friends. They often whispered hopefully about a secret weapon they'd heard was in the making.

"What kind of weapon is it?" they asked each other.

"A bomb that could flatten a city the size of Berlin." The boys were giddy at the idea. "Or New York."

"The fatherland isn't defeated yet."

As the tanks came thundering into view unopposed, like horrible growing insects, Ernst felt less sure of his earlier optimism. The sight of them made him tremble. He had to leave immediately if he was to report on time.

"I have to go."

He ran to the house and had just stood up his bicycle when his mother came out and stood directly in front of him.

"Stay with us, Ernst. You know there's no hope in going down there."

Ernst looked away, torn. He felt obliged to fight but knew it would be futile. Even well-trained teenagers couldn't stop tanks, and he and the other recruits had little training.

"Please, Ernst."

He listened to his mother and decided to stay as the tanks rolled into the village.

That night, one of Ernst's classmates scurried up the hill. The boy, 15 or 16, arrived at the house pale and trembling. He'd deserted, a crime punishable by death.

"Heinrich!" Ernst recognized his friend.

"I barely got away, Ernst. We dug foxholes but couldn't dig fast enough. They handed us guns but I didn't know how to shoot mine."

"So what happened?"

"Absolute bedlam. Our bullets did nothing. Theirs did. Half our class is dead." Ernst had just met his classmates two weeks earlier and shuddered to think eight of them were gone.

Once the Americans took over the village, they freed all the POWs in nearby camps—many of them Russian soldiers. These newly freed soldiers were different from the POWs Ernst encountered in Tilsit. Those men were sad and kind. At night, the unusually lenient Tilsit commandant let his prisoners assemble into a choir. The wistful voices, singing Russian folk songs, raised goosebumps on the neck of anyone who heard them.

These soldiers in Grossbothen ran from house to house looting, stealing and raping. And drinking, always drinking. Stolen watches dangled from their arms.

Ernst had one run-in with the Russians when they broke into the room he shared with his cousin. The soldiers kicked open the door, shone a light into the bleary eyes inside and jammed a gun against Ernst's temple, barking something in Russian. No one got hurt, but the soldiers stole everything of value from the house, including a gold watch.

The Americans were gentler, often leaving half-full cans of meat and other food on the garbage pile behind their camp.

Ernst adjusted quickly to living under occupation. Using binoculars they'd swiped from the American camp, Ernst and his cousins looked down from the same hill where he'd first seen



the tanks. This time, however, the Americans weren't far away but assembled in a U-shape on the meadow below. Through his stolen lenses, Opapa saw colours of red and blue bursting from the soldiers' lapels. They began singing, like the Russian POWs in Tilsit, but with less skill. "O say can you see by the dawn's early light, what so proudly we hail'd at the twilight's last gleaming..."

The boys wept bitterly as they listened to this strange new song. There was no denying it anymore. The fatherland was lost.

"I CAN'T REMEMBER IF I WEPT OR NOT," Opapa says, thinking aloud. "I can't remember. I just don't. Why can't I remember if I wept?"

The first time Opapa told me the story, he said he cried. The second time he wasn't so sure.

Many of Opapa's boyhood feelings are holes in his memory. He remembers where he travelled when and what he did where, but when I ask him what he felt, his storytelling falters. Günter Grass, the Danzig-born novelist and ex-Jungvolk member, describes it well in his memoir *Peeling the Onion*: "Memory likes to play hide-and-seek, to crawl away. It tends to hold forth, to dress up, often needlessly. Memory contradicts itself; pedant that it is, it will have its way." Opapa similarly acknowledges the shortcomings of memory and often quotes a line from Farley Mowat: old men remember the past the way it should have been.

I circle again to the Holocaust, asking Opapa if he remembers feeling any guilt or shame when he learned about the Nazi death camps. His answer comes surprisingly quickly. "No, I never felt that guilty. I was not involved."

I press further. "Then what was your response?"

"Shock." A few days later, Opapa calls me on the phone. His answer had sounded final but he's clearly been thinking of it some more. "You were probing about how I felt. Feelings are terribly difficult to describe. How do you feel 60 years later? So much has happened in between."

He has a question of his own. "How did you feel when you found out that the Canadians put all the Japanese Canadians into concentration camps?"

The question catches me off guard. "I wasn't alive at the time, but it was a bad choice."

"Right. You were not involved. I wasn't involved in Hitler's atrocities. Regret is really all one can feel. You can't say 'I'm sorry,' because I didn't do it. Those things just should not have happened." ■

This is the second instalment in a three-part series; the final instalment will run in June. Jeremy Klaszus lives in Calgary.

MR. TREE

One question gnaws at me as my Opapa recalls his happy childhood in Nazi Germany: *How much did you know?*

By JEREMY KLASZUS

This is the final instalment of a special three-part feature on Ernst Klaszus, written by his grandson Jeremy. The first section was published in the April issue of Alberta Views, the second in May. Both are now online.



M

MARCH 1945. THE SEA ROSE AND FELL AS A BITTERLY cold wind swept over the ship. Restless refugees, chilled and miserable, stood on the deck nervously scanning the brackish Baltic waters for Soviet submarines.

Ernst's sister Anna went into one of the cabins below and opened a small compartment where she'd hidden her dead baby. He was still there, wrapped tightly in an off-white sheet. Friedrich had stopped breathing shortly after boarding and Anna feared he'd be thrown into the churning sea below if his death were discovered. She resolved to get Friedrich to Rostock, the ship's destination, where he could be properly buried.

Once the ship arrived, Anna hid her first-born in her coat and succeeded in bringing him to land. She seldom spoke of the experience afterward, trying always to forget the horror of hiding her lifeless child aboard the ship that, in a cruel irony, may have saved her life.

ALMOST THREE WEEKS HAVE PASSED since Opapa first went into the hospital. I've come up from Calgary to give

Omi a break for a few days—she's worn out. We immediately get back into Opapa's story, jumping all over the place. When I focus too much on his childhood, he turns to the later years of his life, after he immigrated to America in 1952. "I want you to get a full picture of who I am," he says.

Soon he's spilling regrets about his disciplinarian parenting. Besides having experienced some of his severity first-hand, I'd also heard my dad's stories, like the one about the broken typewriter, when Opapa came home and found one of the keys

broken. He lined up his four children and asked who broke the key. No one confessed, so he gave them all spankings. He asked again. No one confessed. More spankings. My dad, getting wise to the pattern, stepped forward and admitted to breaking the key—only it hadn't been him.

"Which key did you break?" asked Opapa. Dad guessed incorrectly. Spankings again.

Omi later revealed she had broken the key.

When I ask Opapa about the incident, he can't remember it. "Maybe that's one of those incidents I wanted to forget."

"When you look back on your life as a parent, are there many things you would change?"

"Oh yeah. But my understanding of child-rearing came much too late." Strictness and severity, he explains, are parts of his Prussian heritage. "Don't spare the rod. You want the child to grow up straight, then you have to enforce it manually. Well, that's not the way to do it."

Later that night, while watching CNN with Omi at the acreage, I relay my earlier conversation with Opapa. She asks

me to e-mail her that section of my interview notes so she can forward it to my dad and his sisters. She CC's me. "I think you might find some comfort in what is contained therein. I know that I wish that I had stood up to Papa more on your behalf. Some individual scenes are etched permanently on my memory—how I wish I could forget them."

I never heard anyone talk about that e-mail afterward. Maybe they are hoping to forget, too.

MAY 1945. VICTORY IN EUROPE. Liberation for many Europeans, but not Germans. The Allies decided all Germans, including children, were guilty for the crimes of the Nazis. *Stars and Stripes*, the American military newspaper, proclaimed that "in heart, body and spirit every German is a Hitler!" In the following months, the Allies imposed punishing rations on an already hungry population, waving aside requests by the Red Cross and other relief groups to send aid.

June 1945 is a gaping hole in Opapa's memory. He remembers only that he stayed at a refugee camp in the medieval city of Erfurt. It could have been hunger, he says, that blanked out the details. All he remembers is staying in wooden barracks with his mother and sisters.

His memory picks up again at the end of June, walking south on a dusty road, along with his sisters Anna and Gustel. All three carried rucksacks and blankets on their backs. Their mother had sent them to find a new home in Büsingen, a German village just over the Swiss border more than 400 kilometres away, where the family had relatives. They had left the camp just in time. The Americans pulled out of Erfurt and the Red Army occupied the city in July. There was no going back.

After a long day of walking, the travellers came to a Bavarian village where they found all the doors—even barn doors—shut to them. No one would give them lodging. The young refugees were strangers in a strange land and knew it. They decided to ask at one more house, their last hope for the night, on the edge of town. An elderly couple sat on the porch watching the sun set beyond a potato field. Upon seeing the tired travellers, the couple waved them over.

"Of course, stay with us tonight." The man and his wife were old, probably in their 70s. "Have you eaten? We'll make a meal"

Inside, the three refugees sat in the kitchen and drank tall glasses of water as the woman prepared soup and sliced bread. The refugees stared wide-eyed at the Catholic imagery decorating the walls: rosaries, images of Mary, a cross *with*



Jesus still on it. The Lutherans couldn't remember ever being in a Catholic home before.

Then the wispy-haired old man entered the room with a wooden bowl filled with warm water. "May I wash your feet?" he asked softly.

The three guests exchanged bewildered looks. "If you wish, yes. Thank you so much."

Their feet were dirty and cracked after the day's journey. But the old man kneeled down and gently washed each foot with care until all were completely clean.

WHEN I VISIT OPAPA NEXT, HE'S back at home. Omi is away at a church conference and I take her place in driving Opapa around Edmonton in his Volkswagen Jetta on errands. As we go to pick up brötchen rolls and Tilsit cheese, he gives constant orders from the passenger seat: get into the left lane, slow down, get into your right lane, let off the gas a bit, turn here, no, sorry, it was back there, and SLOW DOWN, there are rules. His

directions are often wrong and he incessantly asks me to slow down, even when I'm going below the speed limit. "Your driving is bad for my blood pressure."

I try to see how fast I can go without getting him too upset. It's a mildly cruel game that makes his endless instructions somewhat tolerable.

"There's an emergency vehicle ahead. Slow down to 40."

The "emergency vehicle" is actually a concrete truck parked 20 feet off the street. I gently step on the gas, barely topping the speed limit of 60.

"You're not slowing down."

"Yeah."

These days, there's not much Opapa can do when someone breaks one of his beloved rules. I zip past the street parking spots in front of the bakery, irritating him even further.

"Ach, slow down!"

Later, back at home, I ask Opapa more about his relationship with authority. I think I've figured it out, shrunk it down to a sentence. "Let me know if this sounds right to you. It sounds like you discovered the freedom to question authority throughout your life, and yet you struggled to extend that freedom to others, particularly those in your own family." I brace myself.

"That's correct, yes." I relax. "That's where the influence of my childhood comes in. My mother was strict with us, overly so. She would punish us for little things like not being tidy. She pointed out that that's the way she was brought up."

BIOGRAPHY

Opapa pauses. "You live the life of your parents all over again, to some extent. The problem then is that one learns too late."

His voice breaks. "You have to be 78 before it sinks in."

S

SEPTEMBER 1945. ERNST RAN UP THE GENTLE GREEN slope, two cartons of cigarettes stuffed in his underpants. The paunchy customs officer followed close behind but the gap widened with each step.

"Get back here!"

Ernst kept sprinting. He usually smuggled cigarettes calmly



through the Swiss/German checkpoint but this time he'd decided to make a run for it. Ernst knew that if the officer caught him, he'd keep the contraband for himself and trade it on the black market. Ernst had similar plans. He didn't smoke, and in any case cigarettes were too valuable. They could be traded for food. Ernst's main meal each day was a watery, saltless soup—not enough to live, but too much to die.

The pursuing officer tripped on a root and fell, unleashing a string of curses and empty threats before returning to his post.

Weeks earlier Ernst had arrived in the French occupation zone with his two sisters. Only Anna could actually live in Büsingen, however, since it was her husband's hometown. Ernst and Gustel found separate rooms in Gottmadingen, a town on the German side of the border, and regularly went back and forth to visit Anna.

The three talked worriedly about their mother and other sisters. Did they get out of Erfurt in time, or were they stuck in the Soviet zone? Were they even alive? No one knew anything. After talking about their worries and reassuring each other as best they could, Ernst and Gustel would cross the border and return to Gottmadingen.

Ernst's last border crossing was by far his best. He'd approached the border like he always did: nervously.

"Anything to declare?" asked the customs officer.

"No. I have nothing. Absolutely nothing." Ernst's bright blue eyes darted away.

"Let's see about that." The officer called him in, confident he'd busted a wily young smuggler. He patted Ernst down but found nothing. He asked the boy to strip completely naked. While Ernst undressed, he emphasized his innocence.

"I had no money when I went into Switzerland. I tell you, I have nothing."

Finally, Ernst stood in only his skin. The officer checked the pockets of his shorts and rubbed his finger along all the seams, desperately looking for something of value. His face was drawn in disappointment.

"I told you I have nothing." Ernst tried his hardest not to grin. It was the only time he'd crossed the border without cigarettes.

COUNTLESS OBLONG BOXES OF TREE SEEDLINGS soak in the June rain beside Omi and Opapa's grey tarpaulin garage: pines, spruces, birches and Siberian larches, their root balls tightly wrapped into bundles of twelve. Every spring, Opapa collects thousands of seedlings from greenhouses that would otherwise throw them out. This year is no different, despite his sickness. He gives the young trees away to friends, relatives, colleagues, strangers—anyone willing to pick them up from the acreage.

Opapa's planted hundreds of thousands of rejected seedlings all over Alberta since he arrived here from the United States in 1965, sent to St. Albert to start a new Lutheran church. One day he lets me in on a secret: he's actually a guerilla tree planter. "My seedlings are planted everywhere," boasts my authoritarian grandfather. "Even in places where they're not supposed to be."

He doesn't want to go into detail "because it will upset people"—Alberta has strict regulations on tree planting in forests, rules Opapa says "must not be bent"—but he explains his gonzo forestry habits by telling a story about a rogue stand of Douglas fir trees in the Rockies near Alberta's David Thompson Highway, trees that drifted east over the mountains long ago, carried as seeds from what is now British Columbia. This is the dominant theory among botanists, Opapa explains. "That theory satisfies them." But Mr. Tree, ever the contrarian, has his own theory and the highway's titular fur trader is the central character. "My theory is that when David Thompson came back from British Columbia, he had bags full of seeds that got too heavy for him. So he spread them in that area. That's my theory, and I may be very wrong."



Like the David Thompson of his imagination, Opapa planted trees where they don't belong. Pine in spruce forest. Spruce among pines. Siberian larches in both. When he leads schoolchildren in a planting he follows the rules, but planting on his own he did whatever he liked. He tells me, smiling, that his trees are growing in many of the campgrounds where he's stayed throughout his life. "They're growing there without permission."

The larches, Opapa says, will add autumn colour to a green forest with their yellowing needles, and people will come up with their own theories on how those trees got there: they were planted by the government, or perhaps a logging company.

Or maybe just the wind.

SOMETIME IN 1946. DATES BLURRED BY HUNGER. Ernst and Gustel moved from Gottmadingen to nearby Murbach, two kilometres away, into a house owned by a German farmer stuck in a Russian POW camp. That's where Auguste, their mother, found them more than a year after they parted in Erfurt. But the details of the reunion have gone missing from Opapa's mind.

"I don't have a clear picture... There are so many fuzzy times..."

Together they made one last move to Randegg, a village a kilometre or so northwest of Murbach. "And then from that time on, it got a little bit better each day, each week, each month." Randegg was home for Opapa until 1952, when he transplanted westward yet again, first to Wisconsin and finally to western Canada. His mother lived in Randegg until she died in 1983.

When Opapa was in the hospital, I asked if he ever found a place of belonging in life. He said he did. Naturally, the forest topped his list. Lying beneath monitors and medical charts, he longingly described his favourite spot on the acreage. "I call it my cove. There's a little bench in the trees and everything's just sitting there, waiting for me."

At the time, we weren't sure he'd see that or any other forest bench again. But less than three months later, Opapa and I are on a campground bench overlooking Alberta's Kananaskis

River. I have to give Dad credit. We're here because of him. The last couple years he's arranged weekend camping trips for our family, even borrowing a fifth-wheel camper so Omi and Opapa can come along. We never went camping much as kids—Dad was always away or busy—but now he's the one working to bring us together.

Opapa looks better than he has in months. He easily pushes his blue walker around the campground's paved black roads, no longer the frail skeleton we saw in the hospital gown. His white beard is long and full. His voice has regained the quality it had lost while he was

sick. Opapa admits he's still impatient, but Mr. Tree is looking treeish again, here in the forest he loves.

I look up at the mountains across the river, crisp grey stone against the rich blue of summer sky. But Opapa is looking downward at the earth, at the fallen pinecones and budding wildflowers. Indian paintbrush bursting with red and green leaves. Fireweed with pink petal towers.

I asked Opapa if he ever found a place of belonging in life. Of course, the forest topped his list.

The summer sun pounds against the tattoo on my left arm, a work-in-progress sleeve of Alberta forest flowers. I chose it as a way to remember Opapa, to keep his memory alive when he's gone. Of course, when Opapa sees it, he sets into lecture mode. "Do you know you can never get an MRI now because of the metal in your arm? That is very serious. Did your tattoo artist warn you of that? What? You think there is no metal in tattoo ink these days? Do you know anything at all about metal?..." The summer before, Opapa had given me his copy of *Wildflowers of Alberta*. I decide against telling him I lent it to my tattoo artist as a guide.

Opapa gives me a lot of his stuff lately. Last year, it was a couple wilderness books and his flint and steel. This trip, it's *Plants of Alberta* and a knife he bought when he visited Randegg in the '70s. He opens the knife's saw blade. "This is used for amputating appendages or even limbs," he deadpans. "But it can also be used on wood if need be." He opens the main blade but doesn't have the strength to close it. "Here, you close it. It's yours now."

He swats at a mosquito on his long-sleeved shirt. For a long time, we sit silently on the bench. Woodland birds dance in the rustling trees above until finally, Opapa is ready to leave and together we walk slowly back to the campsite. ■

This is the final instalment of a three-part feature; the complete "Mr. Tree" is at www.albertaviews.ab.ca and will be published in Cabin Fever: The Best New Canadian Non-Fiction (Thomas Allen, 2009). Jeremy Klaszus lives in Calgary.