

# THE ASHBOURNE FAMILY SAGA

## CHAPTER XII

and

**Saucy Sophia's Snippets plus trailer for next month.**

**April, 2024.**

Not just in the province of East Prussia of the German Empire, but right across central and eastern Europe from the Urals to the Rhine, snow fell from the heavens covering the land in a thick cloak of dazzling white when the sun emerged, otherwise a dull grey reflecting the grey snow laden clouds which scudded across the darkened sky.

Although too long ago for living memory, the sons, and daughters of those who lived in these northern regions seventy-five years ago remembered from their parents' narrative of how the hated Corsican's defeated, ragged, and starving army, the remnants of the great disturber's Grande Armee struggled westwards in an effort to return home, for many a forlorn hope. In tattered uniforms the miserable and exhausted remains plodded through Prussian towns and villages, the inhabitants of which could only stand and stare remembering the confident troops who had marched to the east in the summer of 1812. Now, many loaded with loot, they traded gold candlesticks, icons and gold snuff boxes for a few potatoes offered by the Jews who drove a hard bargain, whilst some Polish or Prussian cottagers, from pure Christian charity, gave them a little food and drink; the soldiers' misery increased by the penetrating cold exacerbated by their soaking wet clothing from the snow turned to watery slush by the staggering column of rank humanity.

Whilst the French retreat was many years ago, local resentment remained especially against the wealthier Jewish families. It was said their wealth had been procured at the expense of the desperate and destitute. The dead bodies of their comrades had littered the route from Moscow, either killed by harrying Russian Cossack cavalry or the biting cold which stopped their hearts when overcome by exhaustion they collapsed and slept in the snow, to die where they lay, a harvest for the grim reaper.

For six days after the 2<sup>nd</sup> of January, 1888 the inhabitants of Schloss Lansdorf remained isolated by the snow drifts some over ten feet high which completely blocked the roads and prevented travel. During this time a small army of recruits had been working their way northwards from the bahnhof (railway station) at Insterburg. A combination of this endeavour plus a renewed freezing of the levelled snow enabled sleigh troikas to make the journey across the frozen waste, and by this method Herr Hans Hoffmann, his wife Klara and their three children Otto, Ina Marie and Eitel Friedrich accompanied by Edward Ashbourne travelled to Insterburg to board the express for Berlin, travelling first class on the 9<sup>th</sup> of January.

The decision for Edward to go to Berlin with the Hoffmann family had only been mooted the previous evening after dinner and also after the ladies had withdrawn

leaving the men to converse over schnapps and cigars. Hans Hoffmann had suggested that Edward is just the candidate his office at the Kaiserliche Marine (Imperial Navy) had been searching for to replace an undersecretary who had been promoted to command of the Legation in Trieste, the Austrian naval port at the head of the Adriatic. Edward was at a loose end, and he could not continue to impose on the generous hospitality of Andrius Martinkus, the Master of Lansdorf, but neither did he relish the prospect of returning to the life of a merchant seaman, especially after his experience in the rather unwelcome service of the French Republic, the luxury of Karlsbad and Schloss Lansdorf. Hans had offered him an opportunity to make his way in the world and to stand on his own two feet; especially to be worthy of Alexandra's hand in marriage, if she would accept him, and the Count consider him acceptable as a son in law. When they rejoined the ladies in the drawing room there was no time to explain to Alexandra why he needed to leave tomorrow. She was very tired and retired to her room.

Edward could not possibly go to Alexandra's room, quite unthinkable, and so she did not discover what had been arranged until shortly before their departure the following morning. When Edward revealed that he would be leaving as he had agreed to go to Berlin where he understood he had been offered employment at the Head Quarters of the Kaiserliche Marine Alexandra burst into tears, she was too overcome with emotion to say anything, and fled to her room where she flung herself on her bed sobbing her heart out. How could she tell Edward what she thought of Uncle Hans, that he is a pompous nobody who traded on the good fortune of his wife's family, principally her father the Count, and that she did not believe there would be anything in Berlin, least of all at Naval Head Quarters, other than pretty fraulein eager to spend his money for him. It was all too awful. An enjoyable Weihnachten (Christmas) utterly ruined by that fool of an uncle. He had not even been invited, as far as she knew, just announced that he would be coming with his family, and Otto, who was twelve years of age, thought he knew everything, and constantly reminded her that living in Berlin, in the suburb of Grunewald, to the west of the city, is the only place to live, and only the best people lived there. Alexandra thought Otto even worse than his father, but just perhaps he would grow up, one day.

Seated in a first-class compartment of a Preußische Ostbahn (Prussian Eastern Railway) carriage, one of the newer type, the whole train being composed of corridor stock which enabled transit along the entire length of the train, thus access to the dinning saloon, toilets and luggage van, absolute luxury. On the carriage flanks the crowned black eagle below which on a scroll the letters "K.P.E.V." Königlich Preußischen Eisenbahn-Verwaltung (Royal Prussian Railway Admini-



-istration). The carriages were also steam heated from the locomotive thus dispensing with the not altogether effective feet warmers which were often stone cold before the train arrived at its destination. The occupants of the compartment, still wrapped in their long fur coats, settled into the deep soft plush seats, their luggage having been stowed in the luggage van. Edward should have been quite content, travelling in some style with the prospect of lucrative government employment ahead of him, but he was not. He sat in a corner seat and did his best to appear happy and grateful to Hans and his family, but he failed to deceive Frau Klara. The train followed the same route as the train in which Edward had travelled from Berlin in November, but there was no necessity to change trains at Königsberg, although they stopped at the same railway stations. It was at Königsberg, as there was a fifteen-minute delay, that Hans took his three children, Otto, Ina Marie and Eitel Friedrich, along the platform to see the engine, and also the castle as a good view was afforded from the Hauptbahnhof. Whilst her husband was absent with the children Klara turned to Edward and with a look of considerate concern, taking his hands in hers said in a most kindly manner. “You are not happy, Eduard, what is the matter?” and as Edward became rather alarmed, she continued. “Do not be perturbed my friend, a woman understands these things even without being informed, you are concerned at the manner of our departure, and Alexandra thinks you have deserted her. Possible she is afraid you will be abducted by the beautiful young ladies of Berlin. You must write to her when we arrive and reassure her of your love. You do love her, don’t you?” Edward had just time to thank Klara for her timely advice when Hans returned with the children, but not before she had informed Edward that despite her husband’s authoritative mannerisms he is very kind to them all, and his position at the Kaiserliche Marine is very arduous and often most difficult. It is a very small Navy, although it has been expanded since the days of the various wars which led to the creation of the Empire (German).

Exactly on time the guard blew his whistle, waved his green flag, and the engine driver opened the regulator to allow steam to enter the cylinders, there was a blast of steam and smoke from the funnel, the engine’s steam whistle emitted a shrill shriek, and the train rolled forward on its four-hundred-and-sixty-mile journey to Berlin. The delay at Königsberg had been occasioned by the replacement of a large tank engine for a much larger tender engine, and the addition of four extra railway carriages. As the train drew away from the Hauptbahnhof they were rewarded by an excellent view of the fortress and cathedral, and now they were speeding through the countryside of the province of East Prussia.



**Königsberg Dom (Cathedral).**

As they sped towards the west Edward noticed that they whistled through Preußisch Eylau which Alexandra had wished to visit, although from the train he missed the monument to the battle and while the train raced on Edward briefly wondered why they had not seemed to consider the railway, then he remembered the Masurian Lakes which Alexander said were worth visiting.



**Monument to the Battle of Eylau.**

Travelling during the day Edward was able to see the country through which they passed, unlike his journey in the opposite direction in November, a mainly flat featureless landscape interspersed with interesting towns. The railway crossed the river Nogat at Ordensburg Marionburg providing a glimpse of the original fortress of the Teutonic Knights .



### **Castle of the Teutonic Order of Marionburg.**

The railway now ran across open country, and Herr Hans turned to Edward, and enquired if he was familiar with the Order of Teutonic Knights to which Edward replied saying that he is not acquainted with the order, adding that at Alexandra's behest her father had been going to inform him, but the narrative had been overtaken by events. "Then at the risk of boring you and my family, I will tell you the little I know. It is a story taught in all Prussian schools as it is so fundamental to the national identity." Edward listened attentively, this was all fairly new to him, and as his future seemed to lie in the German Empire he had better be aware of their national heritage.

"I have to admit that I am not the best to recite the history of the Orden der Brüder vom Deutschen Haus der Heiligen Maria im Jerusalem or in English the Order of Brothers of the German House of Saint Mary in Jerusalem, but I will give you a summary. The Order was established in Acre in Palestine in 1190 in the (Christian) Kingdom of Jerusalem to assist pilgrims during the crusades, and quickly developed into a military order, hence the knights. From their home in Pomerania, they carried the word of God eastwards along the Baltic coast into the lands of the old prussian tribes. This beneficial conversion to Christianity brought with it a civilising influence and constrained the heathen tribes from their cruel and warlike practices. The Teutonic Knights, as they became known, built castles from which they established an effective administration of the lands they had conquered after, I think 1230, on the authority of the Holy Roman Emperor. We should remember, Eduard, that although you in Britain were spared the ravages of the Mongol Golden Horde, the peoples of what was then generally known as Rus, Russia today, were not, and in the late 1230's they, the Mongols also overrun Kievan Rus, Poland, Hungary, Volga Bulgaria, Slovakia, and Bulgaria. The mighty stone castle of Zipser Burg in Eastern Slovakia was destroyed by the Horde.

"Was the Emperor trying to create a defensive barrier to protect his lands from the Horde, do you think." Enquired Edward.

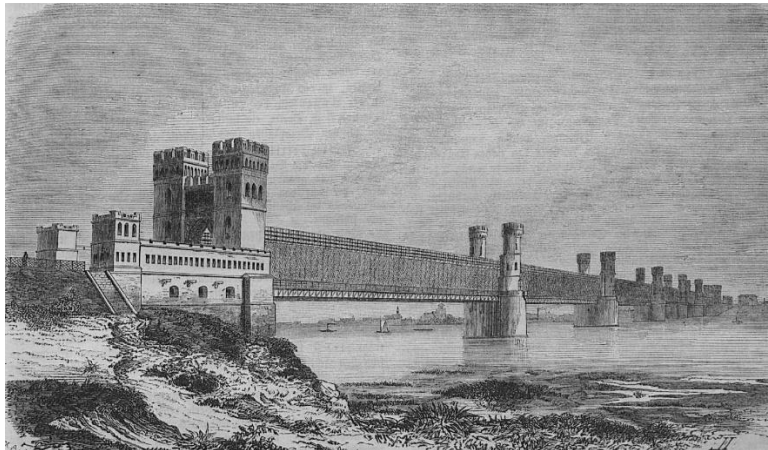
"That is a reasonable assumption, and the Emperor could well have argued that if he made it more difficult for the Mongols they would attack elsewhere, hopefully the enemies of the Empire." Replied Hans.

Edward's appetite for more detail had been awakened, and he now wished to know if Prussia was governed from Berlin why the authority to push eastwards had not come from there and not, presumably Vienna, the seat of the Holy Roman Emperor.

"But in the thirteenth century Berlin was not even the capital of the Duchy of Brandenburg." Replied Hans. "It remained a duchy until the Grand Master of the Brotherhood of Knights picked a quarrel with their more powerful neighbour the King of Poland Lithuania, and in the ensuing battle at Grunwald in 1410 the Knights were defeated. But there is much more. Are you wondering, Mien Herr, how our country of Prussia came to be Prussia, when Prussia was only this land bordering Lithuania?"

"It had crossed my mind." Responded Edward.

Whilst the two gentlemen had been engaged in conversation the train had entered West Prussia and thundered across the box girder bridge over the expanse of the Vistula (river) before entering the railway station at Dirschau where there was a variety of platforms to accommodate railway traffic to and from Danzig, the ancient Hanseatic League Port on the Baltic coast to the north and Bromberg to the south, thus a major junction station.



**The railway bridge across the Vistula.**

There was much activity in the station, which intrigued Edward, and so interrupted their conversation that the matter being discussed was postponed for the time being. There was a smartly dressed nanny with three well behaved and neatly dressed children in her charge who descended from the train which had arrived from Danzig and which she expertly marshalled across the platform to the first-class section of Berlin train. They were followed, in Edward's gaze, by six sailors of the Kaiserliche Marine whose hat bands, as Edward only just spotted, proclaimed them to be serving on the SMS Oldenburg. From the opposite direction lumbered a rather overweight woman boasting rather overdeveloped upperworks dressed in what appeared to be leftover clothes from the previous decade and displaying an ostentatious collection of obviously fake or paste jewellery. She marched along the platform trailing a porter struggling with a two wheeled barrow on which were piled an assortment of cases and boxes atop a rather large cabin trunk. Edward opened the window and leaned out to watch the procedure. On reaching the guard's van the woman commanded the porter in the best imperious voice she could muster, "In here mien Liebherr and don't damage anything!" The guard promptly appeared and enquired if the woman is travelling first class.

“Certainty not!” was the aggressive reply, “Third class has always been good enough for us.”

“Then I am very sorry madam, but the guard’s van is strictly reserved for first- and second-class passengers only, and I have not enough space for that lot anyway” And addressing the porter continued. “You had better put that lot into a third, but its some way along der gleis (the platform).”

Edward’s curiosity was awakened, the train was about to depart as confirmed by the departure indicator. The porter wrestling with the heavy load trundled along behind frau Braun. They were halfway along to the third-class carriages when the platform indicator changed for the train to depart, the guard stepped onto the platform, waved his green flag, and blew his whistle. There was a loud blast from the engine, and with a slight jolt the train began to move along the platform leaving a very bewildered and furious frau Braun to vent her rage on anyone near enough to hear.

As Edward brought his head back inside the carriage and closed the window Herr Hans remarked to him, “A most unfortunate occurrence, but then all our trains keep to their timetable. That may be because all officers and men of the Reichswehr (army) and the Kaiserliche Marine, after serving their allotted term, on retirement are automatically offered employment on the railways. Thus, the railway employees are all ex-army or navy with a deep sense of commitment, service, and pride in the railway, coupled with gratitude that when they are no longer able to take part in active service they are not cast on a scrapheap of unwanted humanity.”

Edward gave the information considerable thought, and quickly concluded that it would be difficult to transfer to Great Britian with our collection of separate independent railways.

The interruption of the halt at Dirschau had disrupted the chain of thought of the two gentlemen, and for a while they all sat in silence, Edward watching the country roll past, frau Klara quietly reading a leather-bound book and the children enjoying a game that Otto had devised and Edward failed to understand, although it seemed to involve prediction and observation.

They passed through many stations with no more than a blast of steam whistle including Rittel with its church of the Virgin Mary Queen of the Rosary, without even slowing. The comfort of the carriage together with the clackity clack of the wheels crossing the joints in the lengths of rail proved quite soporific and the three adults gradually closed their eyes and slept, although ugh somewhat fitfully.



**The church of the Virgin Mary Queen of the Rosary at Rittel.**

Then the train began to slow, as the brakes were applied and they glided into the Hauptbahnhof at Kreuz, another major junction station with lines running south eastwards to Posen, the principal city of the administrative region of the same name in which Kreuz resided. To the northwest ran the line towards Stettin on the Oder (river). It was now late in the afternoon, that period of twilight and soon would be quite dark. Perhaps the cold had driven passengers to seek shelter in the refreshment rooms or stay at home, whatever there were few joining the train and precious little activity, although Otto was delighted to see a young couple who appeared just as the train was leaving, the man opened the door of the nearest carriage, bodily placed the young lady inside and scrambled in himself as the vehicles gathered speed. Again, the train rolled forward, and after a while they crossed the Oder at Kilstrim. They were now in Brandenburg and some time later the train slowed for the approach to Ostbahnhof where they all alighted.

Hans had arranged for an Admiralty carriage to meet them, a four wheeled vehicle which Edward judged to resemble a clarence, with a pair of horses, and they all climbed inside. It had been arranged that the railway company would deliver their luggage tomorrow, thus although very tired and the two youngest children slept, Edward witnessed the city after dark. Their route led them across the Spree onto the island where stood the royal palace, then across the canal, originally dug to create a defensive moat, and onto the Unter den Linden, passed the opera house and the equestrian statue of Friedrich der Grosse (Frederick the Great), then Pariser Platz and under the Brandenburg Tor. Hans was delighted to keep up a running commentary for Edward, including pointing out, to their right, the Reichstags Gebaude with the victory column in front set in Konrgrs Platz (the column to celebrate the victory over the French in 1871). They traversed the Tiergarten along Charlottenburger Chaussee and in due course passed Charlottenburg Palace which Herr Hans was keen to point out to Edward much to his wife's chagrin who complained the deviation only wasted time, and Edward saw little in the dark.

Arriving at the Hoffmann family residence, the carriage was dismissed, and cook had prepared dinner which they all heartily enjoyed. Later, after the family had retired for the night, Edward burnt the midnight oil penning a lengthy letter to Alexandra, a declaration of his love for her and a mixture of apology for having been the cause of her unhappiness, and explanation that he has need to make his way in the world to be worthy of asking her father for her hand. It was the closest he had come to a proposal of marriage. The letter would be posted the following day.





The Hoffmann family residence in Grunnewald.

## Saucy Sophia's Snippets



“The Flirtation” by Eugen von Blaas

## Trailer for next month.

In Western-under-Penyard Annabell receives a regular trail of callers after the ball at the Chase, not all of them welcome. Does she receive her preferred gentleman, see next month.

*Dorian M. Osborne*

1<sup>st</sup> April, 2024.