



Dear John, Wendy, Erich and Joel,
Let me tell you some things about my Grandpa John that you probably don't already know. Like all good stories, I'll start at the very beginning.



John Schlarb was born March 9, 1892, in the village of Alt-Sivac (Alt-Siwatz in German), which was then in the dual monarchy known as the Austro-Hungarian Empire (coat of arms above). Formed out of the Habsburg Empire, Austria-Hungary came into existence in 1867, only 25 years before John was born. His parents were Johann Schlarb and Elisabeth (Rehorn) Schlarb. His mother was just 16 when she had John. It's likely that his name at birth was Johann, but later changed to John when he arrived in America. But I'm getting way ahead of the story.

Austria-Hungary was geographically the second largest country in Europe (after Russia), and the third most populous (after the German Empire and Russia). Impressive economic development was occurring throughout Austria-Hungary as John grew up in his village of Alt-Sivac in the farming region known as the Batschka (Bačka in Serbian). By the turn of the century the formerly backward Hungarian economy was becoming more industrialized, although agriculture remained dominant.

The first underground transportation system in Continental Europe, the famed Millennium Underground in Budapest, was inaugurated in May 1896, a symbol of Hungarian modernization. This industrialization is important to note, because we believe John's first job when he arrived in America was in a machine shop. We can only speculate that he may have had some prior experience as an apprentice in the old country. But again, I'm getting ahead of the story.

On December 20, 1902, when John was 10, he received an early Christmas present - a new baby sister - Katharina. We are pretty sure that John already had another sister who would have been older than Katharina, but we do not yet know her name or date of birth.

In 1909 at the age of 17, John made the important and life-changing decision to come to America; a decision to which you owe your very existence. We may never know why he left his friends and family. We do know that things did not bode well for Alt-Sivac, the Balkan region, or for the loved ones left behind.

To comprehend why a teenager would leave his family and travel half-way around the world, we need to understand what his world was like at that time.

A quick review of European History tells us that during the late 1800's the major powers went to great lengths to maintain a "balance of power" throughout Europe, resulting in a complex network of political and military alliances. In 1879, the German Empire and Austria-Hungary signed treaties to counteract Russian influence in the Balkans. In 1882, this alliance was expanded to include Italy in what became the Triple Alliance. In

1892, France aligned with Russian to counteract the force of the Triple Alliance. In 1907, the British Empire joined France and Russia. The arms race between Britain and Germany eventually extended to the rest of Europe, with all the major powers devoting their industrial base to the production of the weapons necessary for a pan-European conflict. Between 1908 and 1913, the military spending of the European powers increased by 50%. With the sides chosen and the weapons in place, it was only a matter of time.

In 1909, Austria-Hungary annexed Bosnia-Herzegovina from the Ottoman Empire, greatly angering the Russian Romanov Dynasty and the Kingdom of Serbia, as Bosnia-Herzegovina contained a significant Slavic Serbian population. Russian political maneuvering in the region destabilized peace accords that were already fracturing in what was known as "the Powder Keg of Europe".

It was against this backdrop that young John made his very timely decision to leave Alt-Sivac. How he was able to travel from Austria-Hungary and arrive in Cleveland, Ohio remains a mystery. There is no record of him coming through Ellis Island like the thousands of other immigrants who were flooding to America at that time.

On November 1, 1909, 16 year old Pauline Pflaum (later Flaum) left Vienna with her mother to travel to the U.S. to meet her father who had immigrated earlier. (The 1930 U.S. Census shows the year of immigration as 1910.) As fate would have it, when Pauline arrived in Cleveland she was put up in the same boarding house where John was living.

They were wed on July 11, 1911. John was 19 years old. Pauline would celebrate her 18th birthday just 10 days after the wedding. By May 1913, John and Pauline had two children, Katherine and John Jr.



Pauline and John Schlarb's Wedding Photo

Also in May 1913, on the other side of the world, the First Balkan War between the Balkan League (Serbia, Montenegro, Greece, and Bulgaria) and the fracturing Ottoman Empire was ending. The resulting Treaty of London further shrank the Ottoman Empire, creating an independent Albanian State while enlarging the territories of Bulgaria, Serbia and Greece. In June 1913 in the 33-day Second Balkan War, Bulgaria attacked both Serbia and Romania, but ended up losing all of Macedonia to Serbia and Southern Dobruja to Romania,

further destabilizing the region and the lives of the Schlarb family left behind. But the worst was yet to come.

World War I fell on Europe like a ton of bricks. The First World War, also known as the War to End All Wars, was a global conflict which involved the majority of the world's great powers. Over 70 million military personnel were mobilized and over 15 million people were killed, making it one of the deadliest conflicts in human history.

I'm sure you will remember from your high school history class that the catalyst for the war was the June 1914 assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, by a Bosnian-Serb nationalist. The assassination took place in Sarajevo, 150 miles south of Alt-Sivac. Austria-Hungary's resulting demands against the Kingdom of Serbia led to the activation of a series of alliances which, within weeks, saw all of the major European powers at war.

The war soon spread worldwide. By August and September 1914, Austria was battling Serbia about 100 miles south of Alt-Sivac. For the next four years, until the German surrender in November 1918, Europe was in a constant state of turmoil.

By 1920, back in Cleveland, John and Pauline had added daughter Pauline and son William (Bill) to their growing family. They lived in a duplex at 3435 West 50th Street and they both could speak English and could read and write. Katherine age 8, John age 7, and Pauline age 5 were all in school while 3 year old Bill stayed home. John worked in a factory as a machinist. (1920 U.S. Census)



Immediately at the end of World War I, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes was proclaimed an independent state on December 1, 1918. Ruled by the Serbian Karadjordjević dynasty, the new kingdom included the previously independent kingdoms of Serbia and Montenegro and the South Slav territories in areas formerly subject to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In an effort to diffuse local nationalism, King Alexander I proclaimed a royal dictatorship and renamed the state Yugoslavia in 1929. He was determined that ethnic Serbian, Croatian, or Slovene nationalism would give way to a wider loyalty, Yugoslav “South Slav” patriotism.

The creation of Yugoslavia was supported both by Pan-Slav nationalists and Serbian nationalists. For the Pan-Slavic movement, all of the South Slav peoples had united into a single state with the hope they could unite as Slavs and abandon past differences. For Serbian nationalists, for the first time, the long-desired goal of uniting all the Serb people from across the Balkans into one state was achieved. At the time, this seemed all well and good -- as long as you were Serb or Slovene or Slovak or Bosniak or

Albanian or Croat. But, as we shall see, the family that John Schlarb left behind was none of these.

You probably have always thought the Schlarb family was of German descent. Grandma and Grandpa frequently spoke German, even after they had lived in Cleveland for 50 years. And I’ll bet that whenever someone asks you, “What kind of a name is Schlarb?” you answer, “German”.

“Well then,” you might ask, “If Alt-Sivac is situated in present day Serbia, then why aren’t we Serbians?” Or, “If Grandpa John was born in Austria–Hungary, why aren’t we Hungarians, or Austrians?”

The answer to that question will take some serious explaining, so please bear with me as we go way back in time.

During the 17th and 18th centuries, warfare between the Habsburg Monarchy and the Ottoman Empire devastated and depopulated much of the low-lying valley of the Banat and Batschka where Alt-Sivac lies. Eventually, the Habsburgs were successful in driving the Turks from the Banat area and it was annexed from the Ottomans in the Treaty of Passarowitz in 1718. Plans were made to resettle the region, which became known as the Banat of Temeswar, as well as the Batschka region between the Danube and Tisza rivers. Fledgling settlements were destroyed during another Austrian-Turkish war (1737-1739), but extensive colonization continued when hostilities ended. After Maria Theresa of Austria assumed the throne as Queen of Hungary in 1740, she encouraged vigorous colonization on crown lands. The land steadily rejuvenated: marshes near the Danube and the Tisza were drained, farms

were rebuilt, and roads and canals were constructed. Between 1740 and 1790 more than 100,000 Germans immigrated to the Kingdom of Hungary.

When they crossed the Danube into the farming areas of the Hungarian lowlands they became known as Danube-Swabians. But because they were spread out and isolated within the large territory they settled, the Danube-Swabians cannot be seen as a unified group of people.

Johann and Elisabeth were descendants of this group of immigrants who came in waves from the Swabian regions of southern Germany, Switzerland, and Alsace (now in France). They spoke their own German dialect and followed their own moral code and customs of religion, food, dress, and celebrations. So it's possible that Johann and Elisabeth were 5th or 6th generation Alt-Sivac Danube-Swabians. And to the question, "What kind of a name is Schlarb?" the correct answer is "German - of the Danube-Swabian variety".

Now we can fast forward to April 1930. In spite of the October 1929 stock market crash and the ensuing depression, John and Pauline owned their home at 787 East 89th Street - near St. Clair Avenue on Cleveland's East Side. Valued at \$10,000 it was the highest priced home on the block. They even owned a radio.

Katherine age 18 worked as a saleslady at a dry goods store and John age 17 worked as a helper in a machine shop. Pauline age 15, Bill age 13, and Elizabeth (Betty) age 9 were all in school. (1930 census)

By October 1940, John and Pauline's first grandson Roger had been added to the family. Daughter Betty, still a teenager, remembers her mother's frustration when

her father would send money to the Schlarb family back in the old country - at a time when money was scarce at home.

In 1940, back in Yugoslavia, John's mother Elisabeth had turned 65 and John's sister Katharina was 38. John also had an 11 year old niece - Katharina Schneider, the daughter of John's sister whose name we do not know.

In 1941, Yugoslavia succumbed to Nazi occupation. On April 6, 1941, the German Wehrmacht launched the invasion of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and quickly conquered it. Many Danube-Swabians whose families had lived in the area for over 100 years tried to remain neutral, but were forced to serve in the militaries of Romania, Hungary, and Croatia. Other Danube-Swabians may have actively supported the German Nazis by espionage and sabotage. According to German law it was not legal to draft the Volksdeutsche (ethnic Germans living outside of the German Reich who did not have German citizenship) into the regular German military. But a large number of them were volunteers in Waffen-SS units. For many, volunteering was the only choice: it was "volunteer or be shot". Among the indigenous people in the Nazi-occupied lands, "Volksdeutsche" became a term of shame and humiliation.

The end of the war meant the end of the dream for Danube-Swabians, as they were now seen as Volksdeutsche. Most Volksdeutsche left or were expelled from their countries in the course of the German exodus from Eastern Europe. Many were herded into concentration camps. Between 1944 and 1946, a concentration camp system was established for all citizens of German

origin, in almost all towns and villages where they lived.

One such camp was located in Gakowo (Gakovo in Serbian), less than 20 miles from Alt-Sivac where Elisabeth and Katharina were born. And it was in Gakowo where they died; Katharina on January 5, 1946 and her mother Elisabeth five days later on January 10, 1946.



Vojvodina (voy-vo-deena) is a province in present day northern Serbia that includes the Batschka, Gakowo, and the village of Alt-Sivac.

The Danube-Swabian population of Vojvodina was about 500,000 before World War II. As a consequence of the events in Yugoslavia, the Yugoslavian Partisan government under Tito took a bloody reprisal on ethnic Germans in Vojvodina: they had their citizenship revoked, their belongings were taken by force, and they were required to share their houses with ethnic Serb refugees from other parts of Yugoslavia who were being colonized in Vojvodina to replace the departed and departing Danube-Swabians. In concentration camps like Gakowo, ethnic Germans were used as slave labor; they were tortured, beaten, and left to die from preventable illnesses and starvation. Many were raped by

drunken Soviet Red Army soldiers and Serbian partisans. Most were killed by Partisans or handed over to the Soviet Red Army, who took them to Siberia and used them for work in mines. Smaller numbers of survivors were expelled to Germany or Austria where they were gathered into displaced-persons camps.

Today there are only about 3,000 Danube-Swabians left in Vojvodina. The elderly mostly speak a form of Swabian German, and all of their grown children are fluent in Serbian, and often speak High German, but only for business reasons.



Pauline and John - 1946

In America, the war years were good for John and his family. The Great Depression of the 30's was over and business was booming, especially in the machine shop where defense orders were strong. John's sons John Jr. and Bill and

John's son-in-law Bob Campbell worked with him at the Cleveland Planer Co.

While Betty was in school, they continued to live at 787 East 89th. Later they bought a small farm in Avon Lake where John grew grapes which he sold to Welch's, but still drove in to Cleveland to work.

Betty remembers that her dad owned a big farming operation in Thompson and then another in Trumbull. Their last farm in Litchfield was quite small in comparison, but it was the place remembered so fondly by his grandchildren. Here John grew field corn and raised pigs and dairy cows, with the usual assortment of dogs and cats. Pauline had a small garden behind the house where she grew her vegetables. John was well known at the local auction sales where he bought a wide collection of implements and farm animals, including some baby goats that resided for a while in their bathtub.



John and his grandson Roger - 1946

As Grandpa and Grandma, John and Pauline enjoyed the summertime visits of their grandkids, and the Pinochle games with the adults on the picnic tables in the front yard. The kids loved to play with the huge foot-driven grinding wheel where they could sharpen sticks to a fine point. John's granddaughter Patricia remembers picking huge strawberries in the field across the road. Pat was always Grandpa's favorite because she was such a good eater.

Visits to the barn where Grandpa did his milking on a 3-legged stool always ended with someone being squirted with warm milk. The cows ruled in their barn; each had her name above her individual milking stall. And no summertime visit to the farm was complete without a walk to the hog pens where we could toss in our watermelon rinds.

As a little girl, John's granddaughter Barbara did not look forward to the weekly visits from her grandfather when she lived on West 143rd Street. She dreaded the task of going door-to-door in her neighborhood, selling the eggs and assorted produce that he brought to town.

When John and Pauline retired from farming, they moved to a ranch-style home in Valley City where they tended a small garden. John passed away at the age of 71 on November 10, 1963, five months before his namesake great-grandson John Murray Schlarb was born.

Pauline lived another eight years after John died. She was thrilled to be able to have visits with her great-grandchildren and attend the weddings of her granddaughters Barbara and Patricia. In August 1964 she received a visit from her sister Elizabeth Ritzmann accompanied

by her husband Joseph, daughter Elizabeth Oergel and grandson Herbert. Pauline passed away on March 3, 1971 at the age of 77.

John's niece Katharina (Schneider) Diener will be 80 on her June 23rd birthday this month. She lives in an apartment in Vienna near her son Peter, born in 1959, and Peter's wife Sabine.



Peter and Sabine's 2002 Wedding Photo

It doesn't matter if your name is Diener or Schlarb or Campbell or Cottrell or Masco or Warden or Latkowski or McMahon or Jazbinski or Schintgen or Pinson or Sloboda or Wright or Adorno, you should know that you have Danube-Swabian blood running in your veins, mixed in with the English, Irish, Scottish, Mexican, and Italian. And that's a good thing. We can all be thankful that a young Danube-Swabian took that boat ride across the Atlantic 100 years ago.

Thank you for taking the time to read my grandpa's story. I just thought this was information you needed to know. I had no idea when I started researching and writing that I would end up with quite so much information. If you didn't read every single word, I understand. Save it for future reference, or for those nights when you have trouble falling asleep.

Most of the historical facts came from my personal experience after visiting the Balkan region of Eastern Europe this past March, and from Internet resources such as Wikipedia and Encyclopedia Britannica.



If you want to know more about the life of Danube-Swabians, check out the History section at www.schlarb.com and read the History of Schlarbhofen by Dr. Robert Schlarb. I am truly convinced we are all related to the founders of Schlarbhofen, but I haven't figured out how yet. To learn more about the villages of the Batschka region, a great resource is: www.dvhh.org.

Whether or not this story has a happy ending is strictly up to you, because if we can all learn something from our history, the future will always be bright. And, as they say, until we can learn from our history, we will be forced to repeat it.

Love, Dad

June 2009

A wise man once told me, "History is mainly the retelling of events that should have been avoided."