

FAMILY HISTORY PROJECT

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With the close of the Civil War and the Industrial Revolution of the 1880's and 1890's, the "Land of Opportunity" attracted a vast number of immigrants. Most of my relatives came to America as a part of this influx of people.

Joseph Leisz's family lived in Germany prior to settling in the small town of Arat in Austria (or possibly Bohemia). He was one of eight children and was born in 1868. The political situation in Europe of that era (the unification and rise of Germany, the destabilization of the Austro-Hungarian Empire) dictated that the major powers maintain a standing army. This led to mandatory service of all young men over the age of seventeen. As a result, Joseph and three of his brothers served their four years in the military service of Emperor Franz Josef. With Germany's rise to political dominance and the inability of the Austrian economy to recover from the depression of 1873, the Leisz family, including John and Leo, who had married, decided to emigrate to the promising land of America. *Grandpa played a classical in the Kaiser's time*

Leo, FRANK, JOE, — Michael, Anthony, John

On the evening prior to their departure, a huge party was held in the town hall of Arat. A fire broke out and Joseph's father was killed. Since final arrangements had been made for the voyage, no one could stay behind to tend to the funeral details. These were of necessity left in the hands of relatives.

Passage to America took an entire month. With the money from the sale of their land and possessions in Austria, the Leisz family started a new life in America. Leo Leisz's wife had relatives living in the

Chicago area. Deciding to use these contacts, the men found work on the boats - unloading grain using nothing more than a shovel and wheel barrow. The pay was a dollar a day for ten hours work. The immigrants, in this sense, had to contend with their own "slave labor".

During this time, the lumber companies had cleared much of the forests covering the ^{NORTHERN} southern part of Wisconsin, and in turn were selling off the land. They advertised these land sales in the Chicago papers - "\$10 an acre!". Using the money they had saved, Joseph, his mother, and his brothers Leo and John each bought 80 acres. Clearing the land of stumps was tedious but yielded relatively good farm land. Each year a little more land was cleared and a few more crops planted. In the off season, Joseph worked in Minneapolis to add some much needed capital. Here he met and married his first wife, Anna Graenke. Her parents were store owners and did not approve of the marriage. A year later, after returning to Wisconsin, she died in childbirth.

Joseph continued to add to his farm, as did his brothers to theirs. He eventually owned 120 acres. As their farms grew in size and profits, they saw a need to protect themselves and the surrounding farmers from outside entrepreneurs. They organized their own dairy cooperative. The Leisz family had become well known in the area. Their children made up more than half of the children in the elementary school - a sizeable group.

Joseph was thirty-one when he married again. This time he married the daughter of a French-Hungarian family who lived in the area. Louise Hasprai was one of six children. She grew up ten miles outside of Budapest, Hungary. Her father was a Frenchman who had moved to Hungary. Her mother died when Louise was a small child and her father remarried. His

second wife died after their son was born.

Louise's father decided to leave Hungary for America in the 1890's, probably for much the same reasons as others in that mass emigration. Stefan, his oldest son, had come over earlier and had settled in the Cleveland area. He is first listed in the Cleveland City Directory of 1900. It was Stefan's letters confirming that this was the "land of opportunity" that convinced them to come. The cheap land in Wisconsin led the family to settle there. Her half-brother, Louie, was forced to stay in Hungary. He had been diagnosed as having a scalp disease. It was ten years before he was reunited with his family.

Joseph Leisz, at 31, decided to look for a second wife. He knew an immigrant family had bought land near his and decided to make their acquaintance. In spite of the language barrier (he knew no Hungarian and she knew no German or English), he somehow arranged a marriage with one of the Hasprai daughters. This took place in 1900, and shortly thereafter the Hasprais sold their farm and moved to Cleveland.

My father, the sixth of ten children, was born November 30, 1910, at Turtle Lake, Wisconsin. All of the Leisz children were born at home as was common in those days. In 1918, a diphtheria epidemic claimed a brother and sister, along with many other lives across the country. The following year, after the birth of their ninth child, the Leisz family sold their farm and moved to Cleveland, staying with Louise's sister Therese and her husband Joe Vargo for the next year. My grandmother had insisted that since she spent the first half of her life in Wisconsin, she wanted to spend the next half in Cleveland with her family.

The farm had been prosperous and the auction left them with a

sizeable amount of money (\$30,000). Joseph Leisz bought a two-family house and worked as a hod carrier, carrying mortar and bricks to brick layers. He stayed in the construction business as an apprentice for eight or nine months before his knowledge of the trade and business contacts encouraged him to go into business for himself as a private contractor. (He was told that all you needed were a little brains and a lot of money. He determined that he had enough of both.) In 1922, he built his first house, and for the next five years he built two houses a year, selling the houses for \$2,500^{profit} per house. Due to the declining economy, he was unable to sell the last two houses and decided to rent them, using that income to pay off the mortgages he had incurred in the purchase of additional property. With the onset of the Depression, he was forced to sell one house to prevent foreclosure and the loss of all his property. In 1934, FDR declared a moratorium on mortgages and saved many people from losing their homes. As it was, Joseph lost two parcels of land and most of his investments during the Depression.

My father was nine years old when he came to Cleveland. Due to his inability to speak English (having been raised in a German community by a Hungarian mother), he was placed in the second grade. My father is not a short person, and the embarrassment he suffered being so much taller than the other children forced him to become very introverted. The next year his family moved to another neighborhood, removing him from the few friends he had made. He put all of his efforts into his studies. He completed the third and fourth grades and the fifth and sixth grades in two years. In 1926 he entered Saint Ignatius High School and graduated in 1930, still one year behind others his age. He attended Fenn College

for one year before the Depression curtailed his education. Through relatives he was able to work for the Style Crest Cloak Company as a shipping clerk for \$8 a week (a week being fifty working hours). In 1933, when minimum wages became law, the company went out of business. My father picked up odd jobs, one of which included distributing handbills at \$1/1000. Again through family connections, my father found himself employed, this time in a butcher shop at \$10 a week. That same year, 1933, he took the Cleveland Fire Department examination and placed 47th out of 2,500 applicants. He became a fireman on September 1, 1934.

Social activities were limited and a newly-organized church singles group offered an outlet for the young adults of Saint Ignatius parish. It was through this organization that Joseph F. Leisz met Jean F. Buchholz.

My mother's family was harder to trace, but through immigration records we found that her grandfather John had emigrated with his father Johann, his mother, and a brother (or a sister) from Germany in 1854. The Cleveland City Directory lists a John Buchholz in 1877 and Charles Buchholz was found in the census records for 1880 living on Wade Avenue. Johann settled in the Cleveland area and John went to work in the oil fields of Pennsylvania. The Pennsylvania census of 1880 lists John Buchholz, age 31, with wife Lena, 24, and children Charles, 3, and Lizzie, 1. When Charles was ten years old, his parents were killed in a fire which destroyed their home. (Lena had reached over a kerosene lamp and caught her sleeve on fire. She panicked and as she moved about, the curtains caught. This is one of the few memories my grandfather shared with his children; it happened while coloring Easter eggs on Holy Saturday.)