

A Remarkable Life

This brief account of my husband Robert Horst Henkel's life is compiled from his recollections, those of his sister Helga, and from my own imperfect knowledge of the last century's world wars. Some details may not be absolutely accurate, but I feel that this account should be recorded for the sake of future generations.

Robert Horst Henkel was the eighth child of Robert Jakob Henkel and his wife Erna née Küssner. Although born in Latvia, he was of German descent.

In the late eighteenth century, the Russian empress Catherine the Great brought skilled German artisans into Latvia – then a province of Russia. A Peter Küssner, a master cooper, came to Libau (Liepaja) in 1780 from Königsberg in East Prussia. He was Robert's great-great grandfather. The Henkel forebears probably came about the same time. There was already a German presence in Latvia since the arrival of Baltic knights about 1200 AD. Their descendants were large landowners, often regarded as “the ascendancy.” Under successive Russian rulers the Germans maintained their own language and were allowed their own schools. In 1918 there were about 70,000 Germans and two million Latvians in the country.



Erna Kussner about 1883



**William Henkel
about 1880**

Roberts's maternal grandfather Albert Küssner was a photographer in Libau and his paternal grandfather William Henkel a miller. Both seem to have been quite prosperous.

Robert's father was a bookkeeper and his early years of marriage were spent in Tiflis, Georgia where a son Egon was born, and then in St Petersburg where daughter Greta was born. Erna had entered her marriage with a considerable dowry of two thousand roubles, enough to buy a farm of about four hundred acres near the village of Ceres, west of Riga. Here the next four children were born – Else (died in infancy from meningitis) Rolf, Helga and Sigrid (died from diphtheria aged about six).



Erna Kussner about 1905

The family lived at “**Rehse**” until the outbreak of World War 1 when Robert senior was called to the Russian army. He was stationed in Helsinki rising to the rank of Major or Colonel. Finland, like Latvia, was then a Russian province. The family also lived in Helsinki where the seventh child Nils was born, unfortunately handicapped from what was claimed to be a birth injury. He was eventually placed in an institution in Latvia.



Farm house at Rehse

The Russian revolution took place in 1917. After overthrowing the Tsarist regime the communist government signed the Treaty of Brest Litovsk in March 1918, with Germany thereby bowing out of the war. Later in November 1918 under the Treaty of Versailles, Finland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania gained independence. For the Henkel family the Treaty of Brest Litovsk meant moving back to “**Rehse**.” They found the farm in a very run-down condition as gypsies had squatted there. But first the troops under Robert Senior had to be demobilised.

This involved a trip to **Rybinsk**, north-east of Moscow, probably the regimental headquarters. The photograph shows the family along with a few soldiers in a motley array of uniforms, in a bleak railway van en route to Russia before heading back to their farm.



Dismissing the Troops. On the way to Rybinsk from Helsinki. Henkel family in van.
Egon? Helga, Erna holding Nils, Greta, Rolf. April-June 1918.

It was at "**Rehse**" that Robert Horst was born. His birth certificate gave the date as 10th Juni (June 1918). Older siblings asserted that it should have read 10th Juli (July) 1918. This may have been a mistake by the local Lutheran pastor responsible for recording parish births. Both these dates were under the Julian calendar, then 13 days behind our current Gregorian calendar. Therefore for legal purposes in New Zealand his official birth date was 23rd June 1918. As Latvia did not achieve independence till the following November he was born a Russian citizen. His older sister Helga recollected that both mother and baby were so weak that little hope was held for their survival. Both were taken in a farm cart to the nearest hospital, probably at Tukums, where the baby was given an emergency christening. They recovered, and after 18 months Erna gave birth to her last child, Elfriede, always known as Elfi.

The family remained at "**Rehse**" till 1927 when Robert senior for obscure reasons decided to sell. He may have got into financial trouble, as the worldwide depression was beginning to be felt. He was more a gentleman farmer than a working farmer. The hard work was undertaken by Latvian employees and his family, especially Rolf who had hoped to study at an agricultural college with a view to taking over the farm management. Robert senior was taken up with a reverence for Tolstoy and tended to neglect his own family. One example was the buying of footwear for neighbourhood children while his own went barefooted. He made the mistake of allowing the new owner to move in before payment was made. This involved employing lawyers whose services eroded much of the profit. The family moved first to a rental farm and then to cramped quarters in Riga. Here they moved from one apartment to another. Was Robert senior fleeing from his creditors?

At this time young Robert suffered in several ways. As schooling may not have been compulsory in Latvia he did not attend until he was 8, kept back so that he could escort his younger sister. The only lefthander in the family, he was regarded as slow when forced to write with his right hand. A further problem was the permanent arrival at the family home of Egon, his wife and their two sons 4 ½ and 6 years Robert's junior. It seems that Egon's brother-in-law, who with him ran a business, absconded with the firm's funds leaving them destitute. Small boys are often in mischief and Robert was usually blamed and physically punished by Egon without due enquiries being made. Respite came during the long summer school holidays. Greta had married a prosperous farmer and Robert would be sent for to help out. Latvian fields were not usually fenced. It was easier and cheaper to employ a lad to keep the stock from straying. Robert often stayed in the fields all night at this task. Once he was attacked by a bull and saved only by the timely intervention of an Alsatian dog.

By 15 Robert was anxious for an apprenticeship. His first choice was carpentry. Then an opportunity came in the bookbindery of Herr Haffelberg, a master binder in **Riga**. This not only gave him a career opening but also gave him entry to an apprentice hostel away from the troubles and cramped conditions of home life. In the evenings he attended a trade night school. Remuneration was minimal after paying for keep at the hostel but independence was relished. After 4 years he qualified as a journeyman binder. It was customary for journeymen to



**Robert Henkel 18 years old
in 1937**

broaden their experience by working in other districts or countries. At the age of 19 he joined the staff of the Bibliografische Institut in **Leipzig**. This institution was like a State Library and Leipzig was the German centre for printing and publishing.

Outside events were to completely change Robert's life, with the outbreak of World War Two between Germany and the Western allies of Britain and France. At the age of 22 he found himself in the German army.

Critics have often asked how the average German citizen was duped by Hitler. Censorship in Nazi Germany was so tight that Robert, like most others, knew nothing of concentration camps or Jewish persecution unless living close by. To our ears Hitler ranted and raved, but to the ordinary German citizen his oratory was spellbinding. Robert said he had heard only one other speaker with this power – Billy Graham the American evangelist.

Two features were in Robert's favour with his ash blond hair and blue eyes, only his short stature prevented his being drafted into the S.S. His feet failed a test for the infantry and so he was posted to a tank division, the 5th Panzers. His tank was a half-track with a crew of three – driver, gunner and Robert as the target locator. The first assignment was sentry duty in Bulgaria with little fighting. This was round **Burgas** on the Black Sea coast. Robert was very impressed by the many beautiful orthodox churches. They were then transferred to Yugoslavia, near **Valjero** southwest of Belgrade, fighting local guerrillas. Here casualties occurred. Plans were then afoot for his group to be transferred to the Middle East and light clothing was issued. This was not to be, as Hitler decided to attack Russia to gain access to grain and oil. In June 1941 the 5th Panzers were hastily despatched to the Russian front.

Before World War Two commenced, Hitler and Russia signed a pact enabling Russia to occupy the Baltic States in return for guaranteeing not to attack Germany. Latvia lost its independence and its German citizens fled west leaving only about 1500 in Latvia. Robert's mother and younger sister settled in Posen in Poland. Robert senior refused to go as he had written pamphlets against Hitler. Also among those who stayed were two of Robert's aunts, Maria and Emma Küssner, Lutheran deaconesses in charge of an old persons' home. They would not abandon their posts and were shot by the Russians along with their elderly charges. Likewise, those with mental troubles were killed and these included Robert's brother Nils. Rolf stayed on as his Latvian wife Irma was reluctant to leave.

In June 1941 Hitler abrogated his pact with Russia and invaded through the Baltic States. June 14th 1941 was known as the "Night of Terror" when many from Latvia were deported to Russia. Among them was Robert's father who was regarded as an intellectual and therefore dangerous. He died in April 1942 at Kirov, northeast of Moscow, probably from cold, malnutrition and ill-treatment. Information on those deported was later compiled and stored in Sweden under the title "*These Names Accuse.*" Rolf stayed on until 1944. He had taken a day off work, and on that very day the Russian authorities were searching for him. He was tipped off by a workmate and slipped away with his wife and small daughter Ingrid.

Hitler had anticipated a swift German victory in Russia. German engineers narrowed the wide Russian railway gauge to that of the European standard. The German army in a pincer attack moved quickly through **Vyazma, Bryansk** and **Rzhev** to within a few miles of Moscow. By the end of 1941 Russia had marshalled

its forces and aided by a very severe early winter stalled the German advance. Robert remembers the extreme cold along with plagues of lice and fleas. Insufficient warm clothing had been issued to the troops and citizens back home were urged to donate warm garments. German troops and artillery were easily spotted against the snowy background. Russian troops wore white clothing and camouflaged their weapons. The front ebbed and flowed until Germany suffered a major defeat at Kursk in the Ukraine in July 1943. A slow retreat then began.

By late 1944 the 5th Panzers had fallen back to Latvia. Robert managed to gain a day's leave and visited his sister-in-law's Latvian parents Mr & Mrs Erlich living near his birthplace. They showed him where family valuables were hidden. **Riga**, the capital of Latvia, fell to the Russian army in October 1944. Robert along with others was evacuated from **Ventspils**, a Baltic port, to East Prussia. Here the task of the German army was to hold back the Russian army, enabling many refugees to escape westwards. Approximately 2 million (mainly German) fled – one of the greatest migrations in history. Years later in 1997 Robert met Kristian Morgenstern in Canada. He had married Mary Reitlingshöfer, daughter of Greta. Kristian related how his father as burgomaster of an East Prussian town had been responsible for organising the departure of the town's citizens. Kristian, along with his grandmother and brother escaped but his parents and a very young brother were never able to be traced.

Delaying tactics by the 5th Panzers held up Russia's advance temporarily. Robert recalled a group of Russian tanks attempting to pass through a narrow defile when an accurate shot from their tank immobilised the first thereby holding back the rest. In April 1945 Robert was severely concussed when a building sheltering him in East Prussia collapsed after bombing. Feeling very ill with a blinding headache he had to walk many miles along a "haf" (sandspit), probably the Frische Nehrung bordering the Gulf of Danzig.

Along with other wounded, Robert was put on a barge landing at Kiel just as the war ended. He was extremely fortunate as several ships carrying soldiers and refugees were sunk by Russian torpedoes. Many captured German soldiers were transported to Siberia. At Kiel he was taken prisoner by the English, treated very fairly, and with fellow soldiers assigned to guard farms in Scheswig-Holstein. These suffered from raids by refugees desperate for food.

Demobilisation came in 1946. Neither knowing what to do nor the whereabouts of other members of his family, he returned to his old job in Leipzig. Eventually he was able to trace family through the efforts of a cousin, Arthur Küssner, who had lived in Berlin through the conflict. His sister Greta and family had gained employment on a farm near Verden in north-western Germany.

The Iron Curtain between the east and west was not yet a full reality, but the borders were guarded at road and railway crossings. In August 1948 Robert decided to make a getaway. He caught a train heading west only to be captured by Russian soldiers at the border and taken back. He was made to work all night in a factory where machinery was being dismantled for transport back to Russia. Once again he caught a train, but this time he disembarked well before the border. He hiked several miles over hills well away from roads until he was certain of being in



**Robert Henkel 29
years old in 1947**

the western zone, before making his way by train to **Verden**. Here initially he worked on a farm, later, finding employment in a bindery. No doubt his experience as a country boy had helped him in his escape.

In late 1949 opportunity came to migrate to **New Zealand**. This was possible as his sister Helga had settled in New Zealand. Gifted linguistically, Helga had obtained a governess position in France. When on holiday in England she met Fred Silver from Wellington. Their friendship developed, and in 1938 she came to Queen Margaret College, Wellington, as a language teacher. The couple were married in 1940. They decided to sponsor Egon, Leni and their sons Gunnar and Hjalmar to come to New Zealand. However, the New Zealand immigration authorities turned down the application of the young men as they did not have a trade. At short notice Robert was accepted in their place. Along with his brother and his wife he travelled to London, obtained a passage on the "Rangitata" arriving in Wellington on 1st March 1950.

Although knowing very little English, after two days he found employment at the Government Printing Office. This enabled him to pay Fred Silver the sixty pounds which his passage had cost. At this time in New Zealand there was prejudice against Germans. The Henkels were probably only accepted as they had been born in Latvia.

In 1952 Robert met his future wife Neroli, née Wilkins on a sponsored trip to Rotorua. They married at St Paul's Lutheran Church, Wellington on 31st October 1953. A modest old house was bought at 4 Jeypore Street, Berhampore, Wellington, and during the next six years three children were born, Eleanor (1954), Geoffrey (1957) and Renfrey (1959).

Robert continued his employment at the Government Printing Office till 1961. When the University of Canterbury in Christchurch decided to add a bindery to its library, Robert was successful in winning the position of manager and set up a fully functioning bindery from scratch. He remained in this position until his retirement in 1983 at the age of 65. A home had been bought at 103 Watford Street, Papanui. The youngest child, Trinie, was born in Christchurch in 1964.

On retirement Robert and Neroli returned to Wellington, buying a house at 14 Trevor Terrace, Newtown. He did considerable work for the Bible Society. His other talents were expertise in building and decorating work in his own and his children's homes. He was once described as a man with golden hands.

Robert had been brought up as a Lutheran. His mother was a godly woman; but his father had agnostic views. Robert's spiritual outlook changed after attending a Billy Graham evangelical crusade at Athletic Park in 1959. Here, challenged as to the reality of his faith he made a commitment to Christ. Looking back on his life he feels that God protected him on many occasions. During the war a soldier next to him was killed. Later a charge on the tank gun backfired owing to sabotage. Had he been in his usual position he would have been killed. His rescue at the end of the war and his timely escape from East Germany convinced him of the sheltering hand of God.

At the time of writing this account Robert has lived longer than any of his older siblings. His youngest sister Elfi is still in Frankfurt.

Neroli Henkel
Wellington, March 2008



**Neroli & Robert after Robert's 80th birthday
10 July 1988**



**Family at Robert's 80th birthday, Robert & Neroli in front
Back: Geoffrey, Trinie, Eleanor and Renfrey**

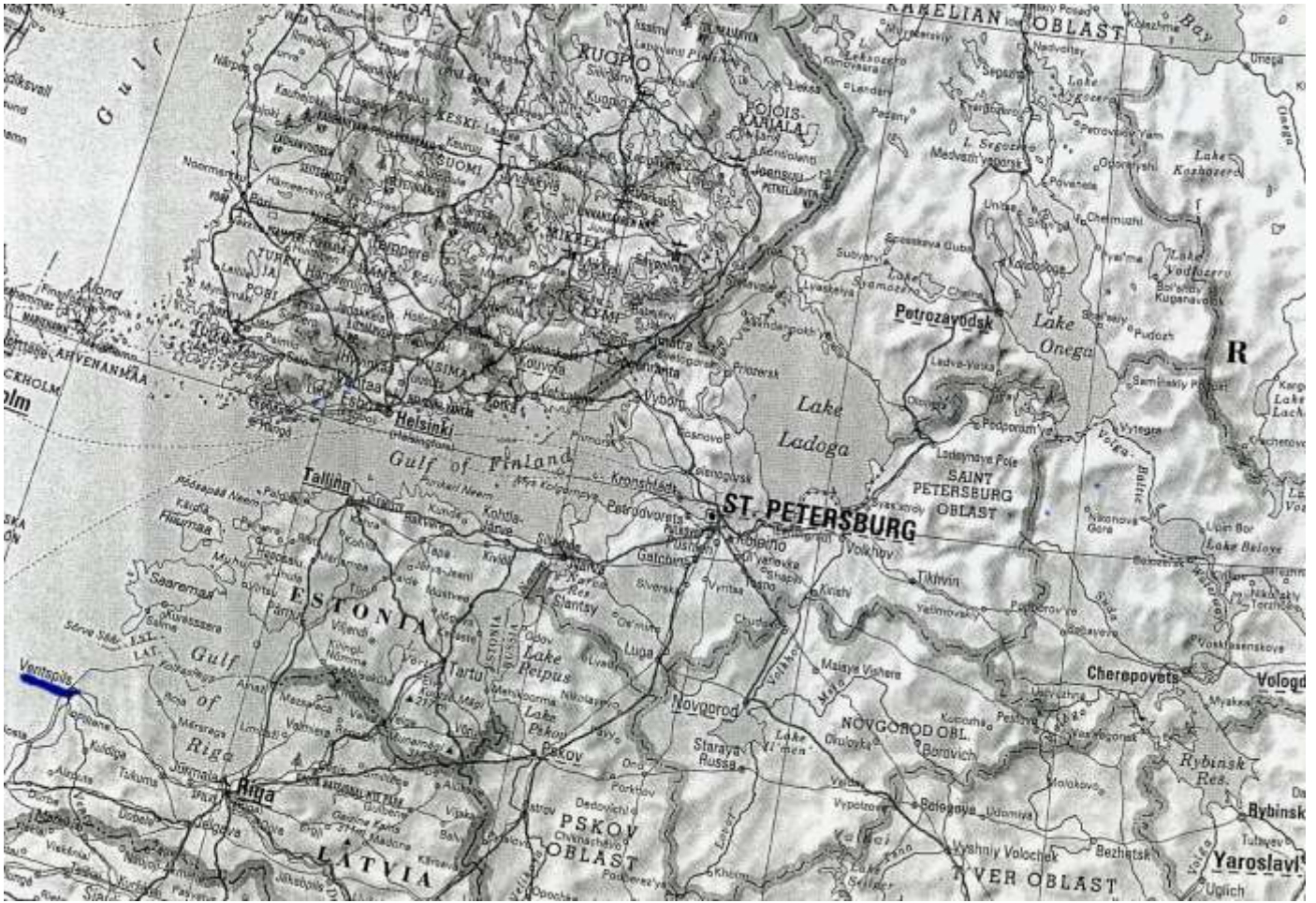


**Robert & Neroli: 40th wedding anniversary
31 October 1993**

Locations of Valjevo and Burgas



Location of Ventspils



Locations of Vyazma, Bryansk and Rzhev

