

## Opa's Creatures Great and Small

Who would have guessed that my Opa's story about his childhood animal friends would be the first step in a chain reaction that led to him meeting my Oma and me being here, in Canada, telling you his story today? Certainly not me! The beginning of it all was because my Opa ("grandpa" in German) had a way with animals that was effortless and accidentally attracted a few companions to him throughout his youth. These animal friends seemed drawn to him and some would even save him and lead him to unexpected findings as well as teach him skills he would use to ensure his family's survival later on in his life.

Growing up in Germany, both East and West, my Opa had little to entertain him on the farms where he lived. But at the age of four, he was introduced to a gosling who was later named "Gans" (the German word for "goose") that was newly hatched and a years-long companionship followed. The goose clung to my Opa every chance it was given, following him everywhere: "Wherever I went outside, he was with me. If I played around he would be close by." They were inseparable for five years before Gans mysteriously disappeared from the farm and not so mysteriously reappeared on the family dinner table.

During Opa's years on the farm, Gans was not the only companion that was at his heels all day long. A Shepard dog named Asta would accompany Gans and my Opa on their escapades but was far more serious than they were. It was a different time, according to my Opa, and his Tante (aunt) Elsa would often simply send him outside and on his way to play. Any time my Opa left the farm for the day to go out and play, Asta would follow closely to watch over him and be his keeper. On a particularly exciting day, my Opa took his Tante Elsa's bike and rode it around the town with Asta running alongside him. Over the garden path, he was met with a flight of stairs, which he obviously rode the bike down. The first few steps went smoothly but then, he "wiped right out...through this one section, about an eight-foot section—unbelievable—of a picket fence [and he] took that out." Asta raced back home to the farm and returned with Tante Elsa to help my Opa, although she was rather more distraught over the condition of her bike, which was much worse than the state of my Opa.

As my Opa grew, so did his responsibilities on the farm and he was given different, evolving jobs. When he was around ten, he began taking the four goats from the basement of the house (yes, the goats lived in the level below the humans) up the hill behind the farm to graze. Every morning he would let the goats out and lead them through the trees, up to the meadows surrounding the ruins of the Hallenberg Castle. He went to collect them every evening before dark and, although the goats were not companions like Gans or Asta, caring for them often led him to find little treasures nearby the ruins. His most proud discovery was a pair of brass knuckles with spikes that likely belonged to the knights who long ago inhabited the castle. He took his treasure back to the farm to keep it safe but over the years since then, he lost them. While his other animal companions gave him emotional love and comfort, the less affectionate goats still offered him something more than a long walk at day's start and end—a unique, tangible object he still remembers to this day!

His love for animals and spending so much time on the farm taught my Opa many things about how to run a farm. When his family moved to Manitoba, Canada in 1954 and struggled to get on their feet, these skills came in very valuable for him to be considered for jobs. The move to Canada was already difficult to adjust to but became more difficult when money was short after the war and the family was starting from very little. My Opa was able to contribute to the family income by securing a job in the farming industry in his late teens. Working in the farming industry set my Opa on a path of looking for better places to live with more opportunities for his family that led him to Vancouver, where he met my Oma, married her and began a family with her. Ultimately, if my Opa had not spent so much time on Tante Elsa's farm, he would not have been able to help support his family and may never have met my Oma or even been able to stay living in Canada.

What I learned as I heard the story my Opa told was that, in the absence of other children, he formed unusual but essential and fulfilling friendships with many of the animals on his Tante Elsa's farm even though he did not live there all of the time: Gans the goose who grew with Opa from when they were both very young (until his sad but tasty demise), Asta the dog who protected him during all of his

adventures, and the billy goats four who grazed in a very convenient place for finding trinkets and treasures. They taught him how to care for others, how to be a good companion, and the difficulty of the work that goes into farm life. Without them he wouldn't be the human he is today with his unique, quiet, patient, calm way of interacting with his family that is clearly based on how he learned to act with the creatures great and small of his youth. They all provided friendships, companionship and learning opportunities for the long days at the farm of my Opa's childhood, as well as the happy memories that he has to this day as the eighty-two-year-old man whose story I can now tell to continue the cycle of learning about my family's origins and escapades.