

A Paper Trail to Pomerania
A True Short Story
By Marvin Bottke – © 2007

I held the package of computer paper like a treasured book in my hand, focusing on the brand name as though discovering a long lost friend.

Could Hammermill Paper have any connection to the city of Hammermuehle in East Prussia? I wondered, holding the paper close to my chest like a treasured book. The names were so similar.

Coincidentally, my great grandfather was born near Hammermuehle. I often wondered what prompted my great grandfather to come to America.

“What did our great grandfather do in Germany?”

I asked Al Goedtel during a visit to Northern Minnesota. One of the last family relatives of the older generation who holds precious facts in his memory like heirlooms in a jewelry box, Al remembered our great grandfather well.

“Wilhelm worked in a paper mill,” Al said smiling with an air of confidence and conviction as though it was an honor to have been asked the question—and to possess the answer.

And now, here I am, clutching a ream of Hammermill paper and wondering. *Is it possible?* Did Hammermill paper originate in old East Prussia and am I holding a piece of my ancestry...a prize descendant from the labors of my great grandfather before he came to America?

Those questions and more prompted me to don my Sherlock Holmes cap and go on an investigative journey that took me to the homeland of my heritage.

A letter sent to the Hammermill Paper Division at the International Paper Company (IPC) in Memphis, Tennessee began my journey—the response guaranteed an adventure!

Several pages of IPC company history from Pat King in Advertising Services greeted my eyes like a long lost friend. Moritz Behrend and family had been the owners of paper mills in East Prussia—back then it was called Pommerania—with a main mill in Hammermuehle. Today the town is called “Kepice,” in Poland. Discussions to move his family and business to America began as early as 1890, and in 1892 Behrend made a trip to America to begin plans in earnest to move his company—the same company where my great grandfather was working.

I was right! My hunch way right! I clutched the letter like a child with a new teddy bear.

Perhaps my great grandfather saw a bleak future at the Hammermuehle Paper Mill, considering the owner’s plans to move abroad. Or maybe it was the political and religious events that were happening simultaneously that spurred him on to take action—whatever the motivation was, Great Grandfather Wilhelm Bottke came to America in April of 1893.

Several years after making the Hammermill connection, I was introduced to a couple, Joseph and Lodja, visiting the states from Slawno, Poland. They lived within a few minutes of Hammermuehle by car. We invited them to our home for dinner. They spoke no English, but my coworker who introduced us joined the dinner party and translated for us.

We shared our interest in the place where my great grandfather had worked.

“Is the building still there?” I asked.

“We don’t know—maybe. Come and visit. Stay with us. We know a man who lives upstairs...Irek Rozen. He speaks some English. He will help.” Their eyes gleamed with excitement as they obviously embraced our “paper trail connection” and forthcoming adventure.

After careful planning and preparation, my wife Carole and I made the trek to Poland in 2003. We arrived late afternoon in Slawno. Our hosts Joseph and Lodja were happy to greet us. The next morning, Irek showed up and we headed out looking for what might once have been a paper mill as if we were in search of the Holy Grail.

In Kepice, Irek stopped at a convenience store—something new to the area since capitalism came to Poland.

“I will ask worker if she has knowledge.” Irek bounds out of the car, leaving us to watch him through the window as he speaks to someone who turns out to be a very well informed local cashier. Exiting the store as if he’s going for the goal post in a final series sporting event, he jumps in the car enthusiastically and says, “I think I know where we go!”

Taking off like a getaway car we soon find ourselves three gear shift actions and four fast turns later in front of what appears to be a guard house where a wooden gate stretches across a winding private roadway about six inches in front of our abruptly stopped car. A tall and faded brick tower looms in the distance above the thicket of trees on both sides of the roadway. Once again Irek bounds out of the vehicle, running to the shack before anyone can come to the car. We watch him animatedly communicate with the guard while at the same time looking for our passports and anything else we might need in case we are in some sort of political danger.

Like the proverbial cat with the canary, Irek returns smiling.

“I tell him your grandfather used to own this company and that we must get in.”

My personal honesty lost out to Irek’s leadership when he said, “Is okay, we must say that in order to get in. Is okay.”

And it was okay—more than okay. Moments later we find ourselves sitting around a table with the three owner executives of the Kegar Leather Tannery. Two of three executives,

Anna Cwiekowska and Michal Borowski both speak English. We begin to share our story about how my great grandfather worked in a paper mill over 113 years ago.

“I believe the paper mill was located in this very building.” I say, handing them the paperwork from IPC outlining the history of how the Hammermill brand of paper came to be.

“Look at these photos,” I point, “the tower—isn’t this the same building?”

“This is wonderful!” Anna and Michal exclaimed. “The only history we know of our building is since it became a leather tannery operated by the government.”

They explained how, as new owners, they had taken over the building and modernized the plant after the government failed to operate it profitably under communism.

We were treated like royalty as we received a private tour of the plant, walking the grounds with the CEO’s. I imagined how logs may have once floated down the river alongside the building to begin their multi-faceted operation into the making of brown (bag-like) wrapping paper which was invented or at least originated here.

I imagined walking the same paths that my great grandfather Wilhelm trudged on the road of his emigration destiny so long ago. I prospered in satisfaction because I proclaimed a self accomplished victory following a paper trail to Pomerania. It was a double-sided paper trail with the Hammermill brand of paper on one side, and the Bottke Family history on the other—both originating where the same logs floated down the river.

You might say, it was “Log ago and far away.”

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