



## Gerhard Oberland

Gerhard Oberland left Germany for America in 1938 at the age of ten. Though he loved his homeland very much, he felt he had no choice but to leave: Germany, having been defeated in World War I, could not provide the food, jobs, and opportunities necessary for a successful life. And so 69 years ago, he and his family boarded a ship bound for New York. Today Gerhard is retired from the Burlington-Northern Railway, a job he held for thirty years. His life seems comfortable and rich as we sit talking in the sunlit kitchen of his modest home. He is surrounded by photographs of his wife and children as well as many of what he calls his "best friends," his books.

Gerhard said that one of the biggest surprises when he first came to America was his good luck. He and his family arrived at Ellis Island on a Sunday, alone and unable to speak any English. Fortunately one of the Americans working that day at the immigration headquarters knew some German, so Gerhard's family was processed through very rapidly. Gerhard said, "The clerk even invited us to his house for dinner. His wife served wonderful German sausage and sauerkraut. I can still remember how it felt in my always empty stomach. But the height of the visit was when I met his daughter, Helga. Even though I was only ten years old, I fell in love with her at first sight. I eventually married her."

Another of Gerhard's surprises was the variety of people and languages in New York. Having come from a very homogeneous family and village environment where everyone looked the same and spoke the same language, he was not prepared for the variety that greeted him in New York. He recalls being amazed by the number of different skin colors one could see and languages one could hear on a daily walking tour of "Little Europe," several blocks New York City had dedicated to newly-arrived immigrants from throughout that part of the world. He recalled walking down the main street and being able "to travel from Ireland to Germany to Italy and to Hungary" all on his way to school.

A final surprise was the loneliness he felt when he first arrived in America. After the initial excitement and newness wore off, Gerhard said he became very depressed and many times regretted having to have left his village. He recalled often walking to the harbor in New York, staring out across the Atlantic, trying to catch a glimpse of his homeland. He said that he wished he could "jump in and swim home" because of the loneliness he felt. Fortunately, these sad feelings lasted only a few years. As he became more used to America and more proficient with English, his depression lifted and "he first true breath of freedom" entered his lungs. Another event that aided in improving his mood was marrying Helga seven years after arriving in America. He said his life then became so busy with marriage, work, and children that he had little time to feel sad.

When asked if he would do it over again, Gerhard said "Yes, without a doubt." He said that even though America is his second home, it is the home that provided him with the freedom to live the life he wanted. It rewarded his hard work and struggle with a life that few have the opportunity to live. Though he misses his wife, who passed away three

years ago, and his children, who do not live as close as he'd like, he said that loneliness has not come back into his life. "My best friends, my books," Gerhard said, "always provide me with more than enough company. My life," he concludes, "has almost always been full of very good company."