

"The land where our fathers lived on once ..."

An attempt to introduce the villages Burgneudorf (Neudorf - Royal), Burghammer and Spreewitz in the year 1850.

Preliminary notes

When I was a child, my grandmother told me that ancestors of the Kasper family emigrated to America. But then, during the Nazi-times and in the years of socialism, it has been forbidden or at least not expedient to look for any relatives in capitalist countries. So we found out about immigrants from the villages of our parish in Spreewitz only some years ago.

With respect and joy we heard that there is a Wendish museum in Serbin. We also heard that the Wendish language had been spoken until the beginning of the 20th century. For example, at church during the services. At long last we met Evelin and Arnold Kasper from Warda and some other married couples from Texas. We have been touched by their need to look for the roots of their origin. To our shame we had to confess that your interest to ask for your ancestors has been much more than ours, although we are still living on the land of our fathers. Our interest to ask for our ancestors grew more and more because of you. The result of our searches is still very scanty - but we go on searching and we'll inform you about some new knowledge.

In the following reflections I try to write down some facts about the homeland of your ancestors, and I hope it'll find your interest.

The landscape of the parish Spreewitz at 1850

The landscape around the villages Spreewitz, Neustadt, Neudorf-Kaniglich (-Royal), Burghammer and Burg looked different in 1850 than today. There didn't exist any mining industry, and so there weren't any stigmas at the landscape like today. The river "Little Spree" rises in the district Bautzen, flows through Burg, Burghammer and Neudorf-Royal (now: Burgneudorf) and joins the "Big Spree" near Spreewitz. These named villages were surrounded by meadows, fields and woods. It was especially attractive in the near of both rivers. They winded through green meadows and riverside meadows. At their banks there grew alders and willow-trees. And nobody wasn't surprised if a merman would appear there. The meadows were fertile because of the inundations almost every year, because the rivers transported smallest soil particles (clay) from the upper areas to the lower ones. Under the roots of the trees there dwelled many fishes, muskrats, but also otters and other animals. The rivers were famous for being rich in fish. That's why rural families often had fish for their meal. Because farmers were only allowed to fish a little, stealing fish was done like a kind of sport. Around these remoted villages there were large areas of woods. Wood was an important life basis for the villagers, because there they collected their firewood, berries and mushrooms, and it gave them lumber. Two third of all the woods were in state property. They were called royal, woods at that time. For that reason, Neudorf was also named Neudorf-Royal.

One to ten hectares of wood and one to six hectares of field belonged to each farm. How far the monoculture of pines just existed, you can't realize exactly any more. Probably the organized growing of pines started at 1850. Until then there existed mixed woodlands with different kinds of trees and bushes. Heather and also juniper grew in that area and made up its attractive heath character. Almost all farmers did wood bee-culture to improve their scanty earnings from farming by selling wood honey. Charcoal burner produced charcoal in these royal woods. That charcoal was wanted badly by the developing industrial firms like glass works in Hoyerswerda and WeiBwasser and iron works in Burg-hammer. Through that the pine supply got lower and lower and a planned afforestation became necessary. The ways and streets of that time you can't compare with streets and roads nowadays. In 1850 you could go from Spreewitz and Neudorf to Hoyerswerda via Burghammer and Burg. Paths through the fields and woods, which were only used by carriages and pedestrians, connected the villages.

In Burghammer there was an iron works since the 15th century. Iron ore which was found in the uppermost ground was smelted there to iron. Because it was necessary to transport the finished products, the road from Burghammer to Hoyerswerda was just a tarmac road.

In a summary we can say:

The named villages were situated idyllicly among meadows, fields and woods. They were passed through by brooks and rivers. The water in them was clear and could be used for everything. The woods consisted of several trees and bushes and had heath character. Farming was the main branch of industry.

The landscape in the present

The landscape today is very different from that in 1850. Today that area has many stigmas caused by the industry. When they started lignite-mining, the times of idyllic woods and heath quiet were over. Giant mines were excavated with huge tools and the lignite layers (mammoth woods of the Tertiary) were transported to briquette factories or power stations. The ground water, which had partly been up to 30 centimetres under the surface, sank into unattainable depths. The wet and fertile sandy ground of former times became dry and infertile. Mostly the mines in Spreetal / North-East and in Burghammer influenced very negatively the landscape around the villages Burg, Burghammer, Burgneudorf (Neudorf-Royal) and Spreewitz. From 1952 a giant gas factory in Schwarze Pumpe and a power station in Trattendorf were built in the north of that territory. Because of both there was an extreme air pollution here.

But the wounds which were made to the landscape heal up slowly now. The named coal mines haven't worked for 20 years now. Most of the big holes are refilled with soil. On that new skin woods grow there again and meadows and fields are laid out. The so-called rest-holes are filled with water. After their flooding they will give a new fascination to this area and will attract some tourists. The former mines of Burghammer and Scheibe will also have nice beaches.

After some decades these stigmas to the landscape won't be seen any longer and mines will only be like legends. The gas factory in Schwarze Pumpe, which polluted the air very much, has already been redeveloped and doesn't damage the environment any more. Now you can breathe better in these surrounding villages.

People - how they lived in the parish Spreewitz in 1850

Like everywhere in the world people were born there and buried, it has been loved, laughed and cried there. People worked hard to earn their living. Their means were limited because farming in that ground didn't allow any comfort or wantanness. Living in the retirement of the villages in the woods developed a special team spirit (thinking). Helping each other became necessary for living. So the neighbour was the closest relative. Believing in God and trusting in God had been the highest law. Today's demands for a rising living standard were unknown. Bread and everything which people needed for living were esteemed as a gift of God and the people were grateful to that. In that way I imagine the people of that time. There were certainly some exceptions - but those were seldom.

But now I'll tell you some details.

Farms in these villages were small. Hardly a farm had more than ten hectares of productive land for agriculture (fields and meadows). The majority lived on less than five hectares. They had small fields and meadows and often some hectares of wood. Till 1786 farmers depended on their feudal lords. Before that time farms and land belonged to the authority Hoyerswerda. In 1786 this dependence and socages were abolished. Land and farms got the property of farmers. But nothing was given to them as a present. They had to pay for their property and had to raise a mortgage. So there were added high debts charges to earning their living day by day.

Farms were divided more and more in order to give their children possibilities of life. Because only one of them could inherit the parental farms, it was difficult for their brothers and sisters to marry and to have a family.

And now some historical facts:

All named villages were probably founded in the 13th century and are so-called colonist villages. They were built as villages along streets. Mostly Wendish immigrants, who came from the area around Bautzen, founded these villages at that time. At first those new villages could develop well, because the taxes were low. But just in the 15th century the taxes and socages to the authority Hoyerswerda became heavier and heavier. The authority often changed the owner, and everybody wanted to become rich very fast at the cost of their subjects. Only in the 18th century the farmers got free and became the owners of their land. But they didn't become rich with it because they had to pay a high prize for their freedom.

On these small farms they worked with horses and cows. But only a few farmers could afford two horses. They mainly grew rye, oats, potatoes, and after 1800 they grew buckwheat, millet, linseed, (fodder) beets and water beets. In their stalls they had horses, cows, pigs, sheep, goats and poultry. Till 1836 all cows were tended together in herds. But after the partition of community meadows they had to be kept in cowsheds.

All farms were able to accomplish on a complete self-sufficiency. Bread, meat, sausage, milk, butter, flower, millet, groats, honey, linseed oil - that means all food was produced by themselves. They only had to buy a few things like salt and sugar. Popular meals at that time were: potatoes with curds and linseed oil, buckwheat groats, millet dishes, bread soup, potatoes in their skins with different additional and many other simple meals. A buckwheat soup and beef with horse-radish belonged to a typical wedding-dinner. Their clothes were mostly self-made. Linseed straw was worked up into flax and spinned. Each farm had a weaving-loom. Every two years it was set up and table linen, bed-linen, sack linen and clothing material were weaved. Only a few clothes had to be bought. Because of this self-sufficiency and thrift it was possible to pay the debts and to save some money, too.

Most families had many children - but only one child could inherit the parently farm. A few children could marry into other farms, but not everybody could hire out as a farm-hand or a maid. In their surroundings only a few found other jobs. Drifting from the land to the towns or the emigration to other continents was often their only way out.

But the work on the farms continued. If there was a gap in doing farm work, it was filled with work in the forests or woodwork, for example making wood shingles.

They used the winter months also to do different things. They made lumber and firewood, they binded brooms, they repaired waggons and other equipments and did much more. Each farmer was a good workman, too.

The homes and the village

I've just written about the development of the villages. The farm houses were built along the streets and around the riverside meadows in these three villages. Because almost all farm houses (dwelling-houses, sheds and barns) were built of trunks in 1850, the danger of fire was very high. So, at that time, there were built some houses in the open fields, because people felt safer there.

Almost every year the two rivers, "Little Spree" and "Big Spree", ran high which causes a lot of damages. That meant, beside worrying about the bread for every day, the villagers had to fight against natural disasters.

Often three generations had to share the housing accommodation in the dwelling-houses on farms. In most houses there were three rooms and a kitchen on the first floor. But the kitchen wasn't used as a room for living at all. There they didn't only cook their meals, the kitchen was also used for washing clothes, for baking and to prepare the fodder.

The biggest room was the living-room, which was sometimes used as bedroom, too. Daily life happened there. Especially in winter, the big tiled stove was in the center of attention. Ca. six people could sit on the bench around this tiled stove and warm their backs. Grandfather and grandmother took their usual seat on it. In another corner of that room there was a corner-bench with a big table in front of it. Every day the families had their meals there, also their banquets. A big cupboard for table linen and kitchenware (or service) completed furnishings. And often there was also enough room for a chest and a big bed. In winter, a weaving-loom was set up there, too. Also all preparations like spinning, coiling up and twinning were made in that room. Spinning-evenings were organized together with their neighbours. During those evenings they told the latest news to each other. Telling stories was very important at that time. The best male and female story-tellers were looked up to great respect in the village.

Much more could be reported about the way of living of our ancestors. It was really difficult for them to have something to eat on the table day by day. But, perhaps these simple meals and drinks tasted them more delicious than us, who are pampered and surfeited today. Certainly, a new gannet aroused more joy at that time than it does today. But who is able to compete the joys and sorrows of our ancestors with our ones?

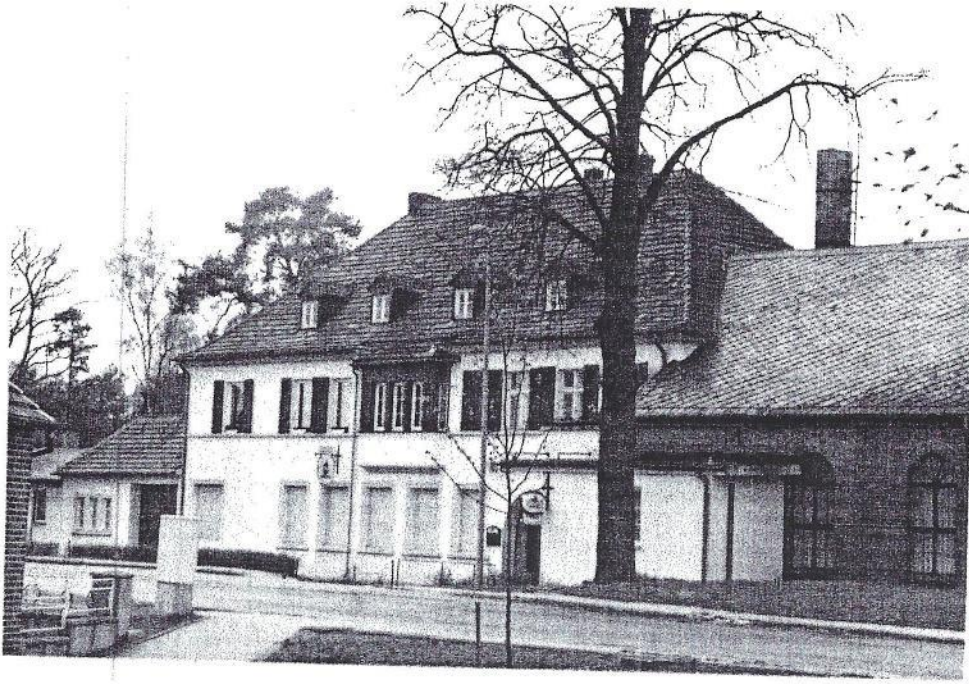
Dear friends in the USA, I wanted to make you happy with these short remarks. I hope I succeeded in doing it.





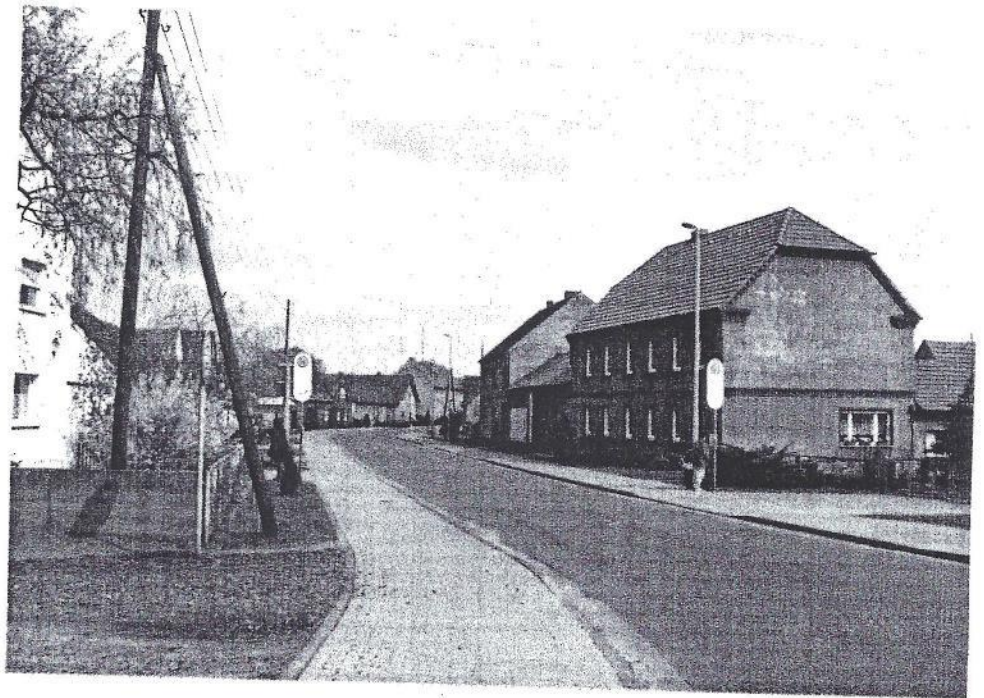
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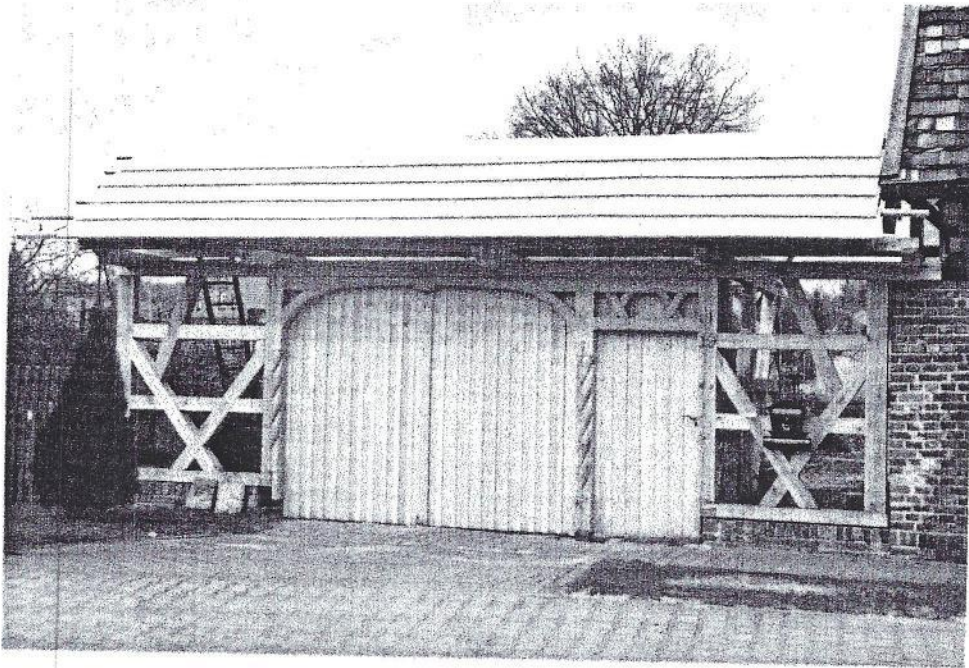


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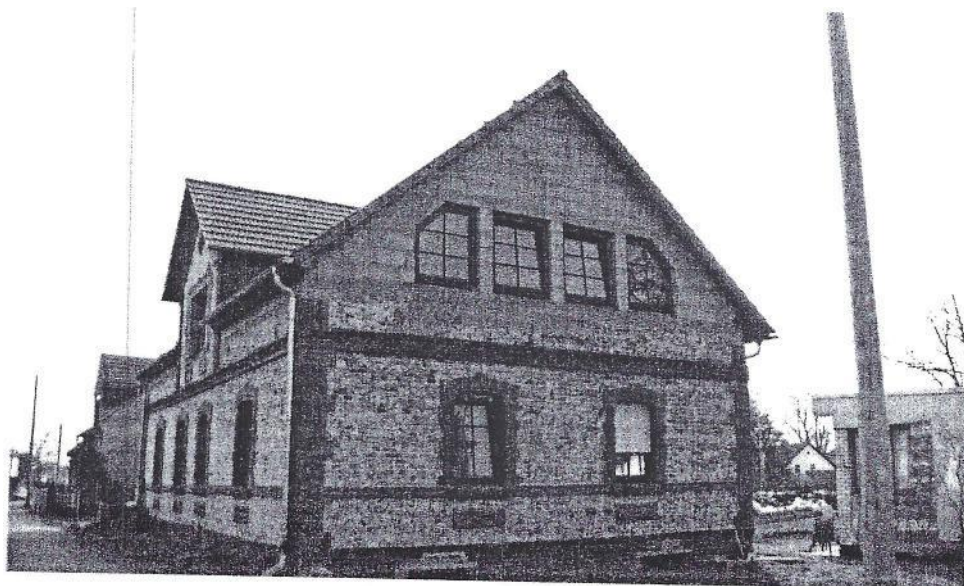


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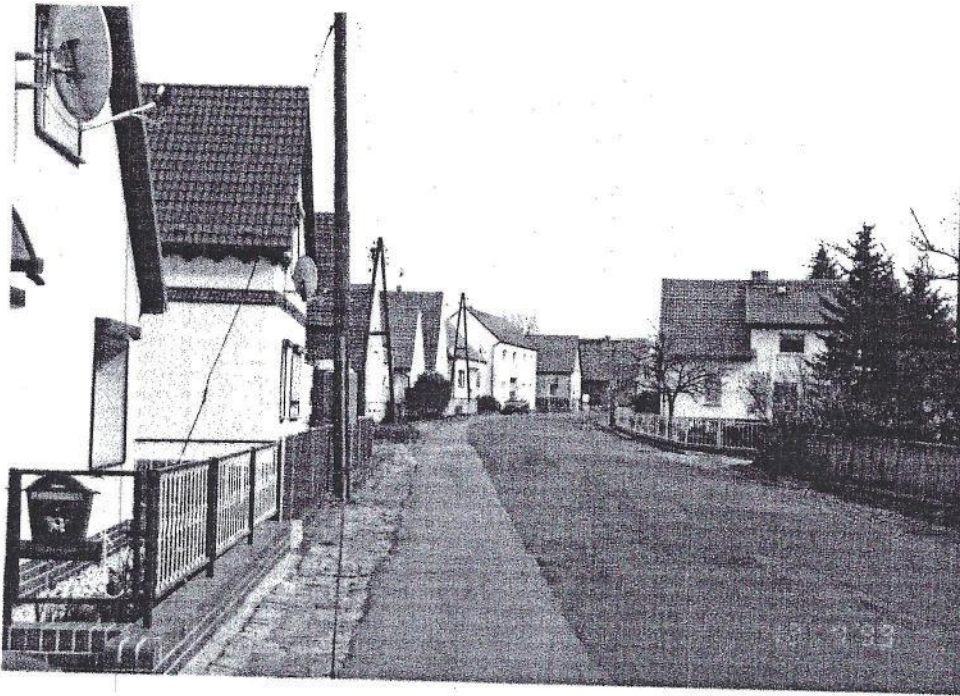
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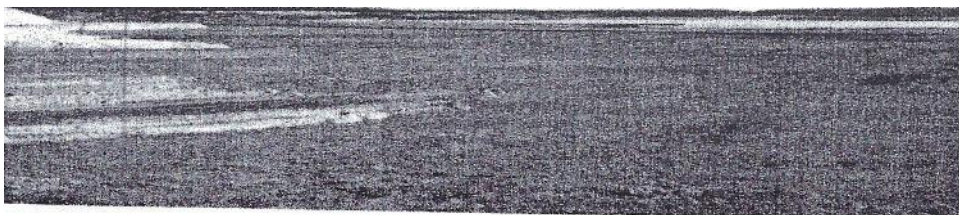
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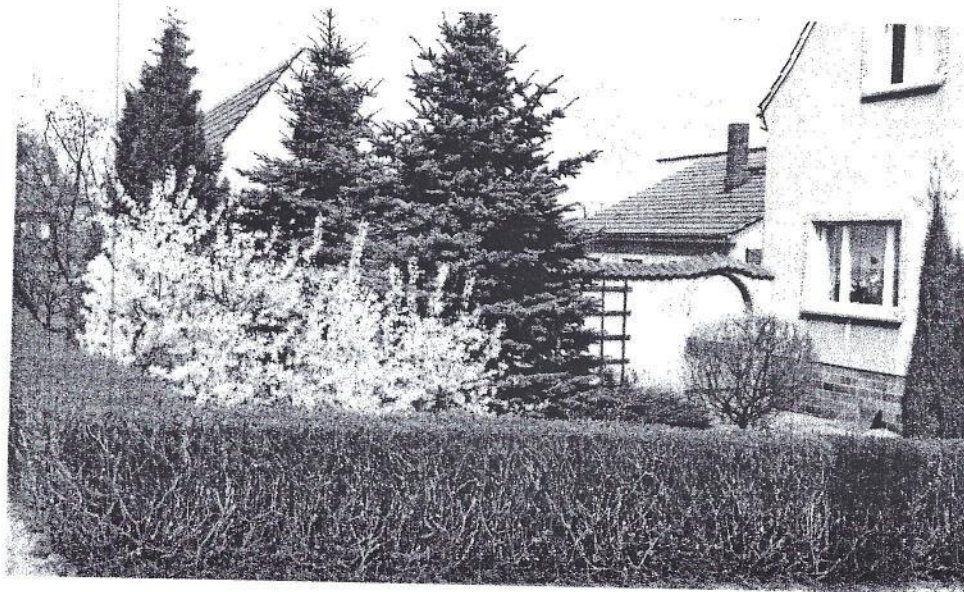
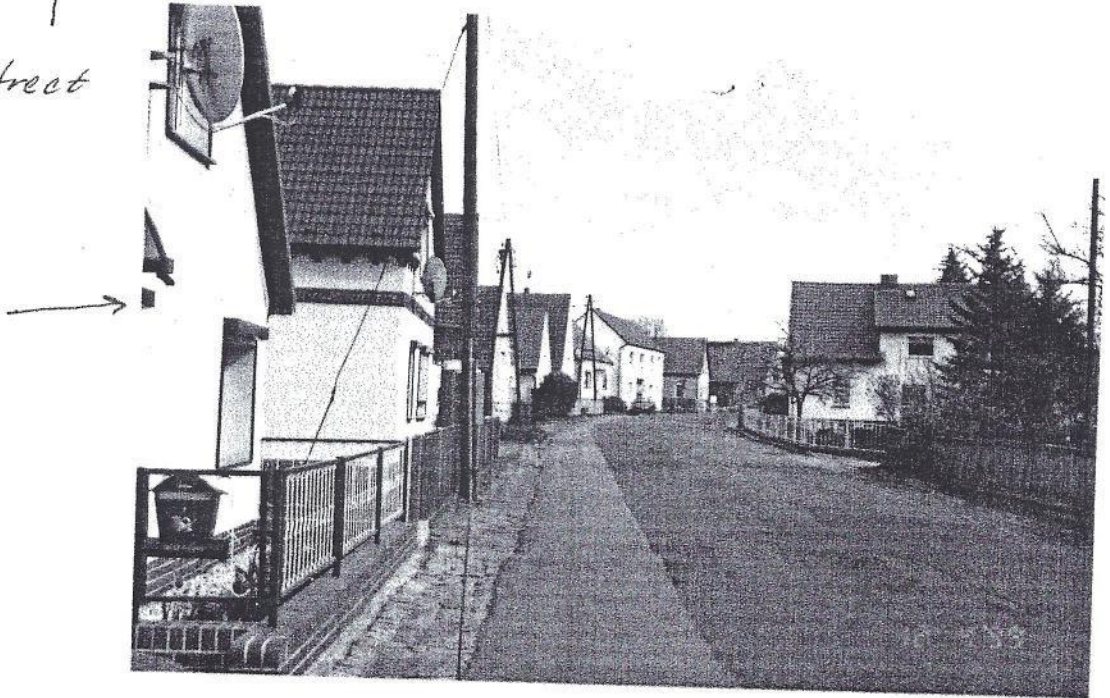
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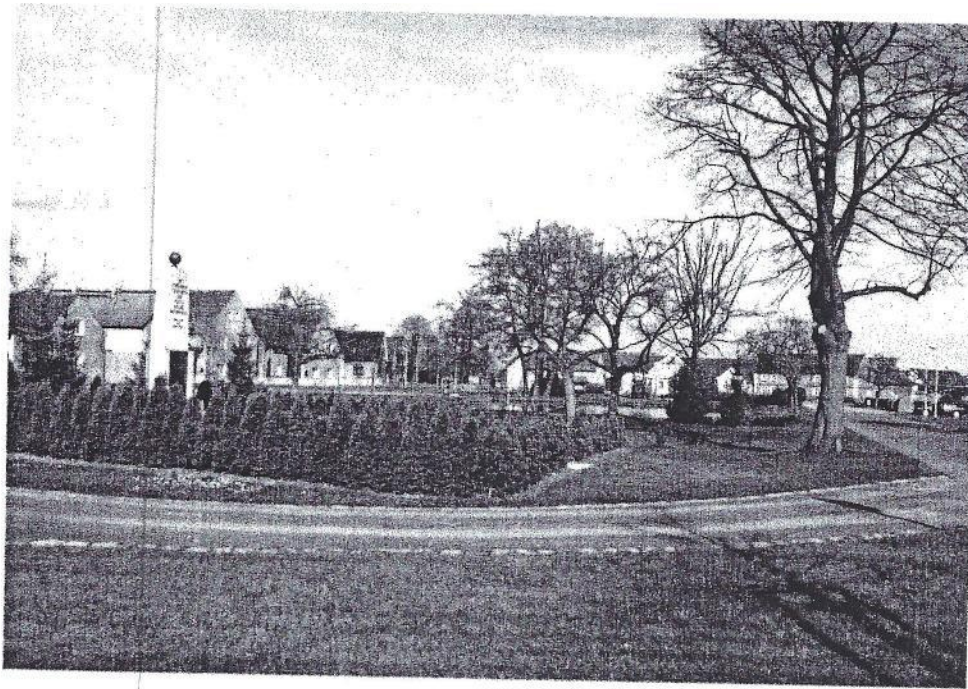




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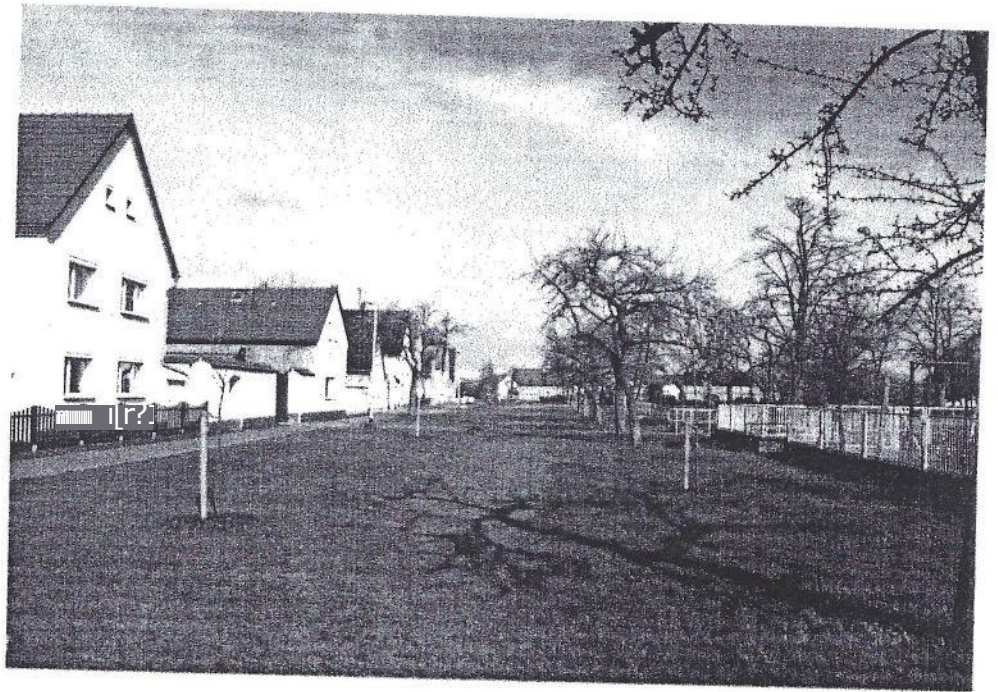
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