

Memories of Christmas

Written by Louise (Regehr) Wiens, Leamington, Ontario, December, 2017

I once again retrieve the small dogeared black and white photo from the top drawer. It is dated December 23, 1955 and the new mother Maria is lying in a white wrought iron hospital bed in Gottingen, Germany. A young nurse is handing her the infant she has just given birth to, a chubby little girl with wisps of blond hair, born full term and healthy even though the mother has had no prenatal care whatsoever.

Maria's long black hair hangs loosely on the crisp white pillow. She looks exhausted and her cheeks are sunken and hollow. Her dark skin is weather beaten. After all, she had only arrived at the resettlement camp in Friedland, Germany the day before, returning after ten long years of exile in Martuk, Kazakhstan where she labored for free on a collective farm milking cows. She had long ago given up hope of ever seeing her beloved homeland of Leipzig, Bessarabia again. Her thin lips are pursed and she is not smiling although her heart is singing. Her brown eyes are expressionless and remain focused on the baby as she gazes at the small miracle lying beside her. The nurse is wearing a white pinafore uniform with a starched white collar secured with a Red Cross pin under her chin.

Maria's hand is tenderly touching the infant's cheek. Her husband and young son are back at camp enjoying their new found freedom along with German delicacies, including chocolate. They had all arrived by train the day before carrying one mostly empty wooden suitcase between them. As the train was about to cross the Polish border into Germany a loud announcement had been made. "If anyone would like to change their minds and return to Russia, that would not be a problem. We promise it will be very good for you."

My ninety-three year old aunt Hulda, who was also on this exodus, laughed as she again recently recounted this eye witness account to me. "Of course nobody changed their minds," she said, as she shook her head in disbelief. At the hospital in Gottingen an MCC (Mennonite Central Committee) worker, who still resides in Winnipeg, Ontario, was working in Germany and arrived with a baby layette for the new mother. It was Maria's first and only baby item and she was always elated as she relayed this story many times to her daughter, who grew and flourished and also became a nurse.

Unbeknownst to Maria, her husband Viktor was out for a leisurely walk in the woods that day when he was summoned to quickly come to the camp office where he was informed that the Red Cross had just located his mother, living in Gronau, Germany, a textile town near the Dutch border. His mother would be calling him on the telephone that evening at seven o'clock. The twenty-six year old father of two reeled with shock and doubt. Shaking his head he exclaimed to Hulda and her husband Hans. "What? It can't be true! Liars! They are all liars! For years they lied to us in Russia, and now here in Germany it looks like they are liars as well!"

Viktor had been forcefully exiled from his home in Kleefeld, Ukraine in 1941 at the age of twelve as German divisions advanced near Melitopol 45 km from his hometown in eastern Ukraine. He and many thousands of fellow victims were evacuated to the steppe regions of Kazakhstan and young Viktor had long ago accepted the fact that he was an orphan. "And my sister! Why would she have moved to Belgium? Never! She would never have left my mother alone in Germany!"

Forty-one km away in the town of Dassel, at the health resort, Maria's husband was being interviewed for the local newspaper. An excerpt states "like children they marveled over this totally strange environment. The white tablecloths, the bedding, the running water and the caring reception. Only a year earlier, in their adobe hut not far from the Indian border, they would never dared the hope of standing next to a Christmas tree in their ancestral homeland. Viktor opened the conversation in accent-free German. Four days earlier, he had set foot on German soil for the first time. Even as a boy, he had hoped that fate would someday grant him his most ardent wish. After a workday, not one Russian syllable was uttered in our household," Viktor proudly said.

German Christmas carols play as I finish last minute correspondence to my cousins overseas, including a letter to my cousin Paula in Belgium. After several minutes I tuck the treasured photo, the only one I have, back into the top drawer. A familiar mix of sudden sadness mixed with thankfulness sweeps over me as I take out a folder stuffed with documents I will need to renew my nursing license for 2018. I should do it tomorrow, but that is the day I volunteer at our local MCC thrift shop. The renewal license process has been simplified and is now online. Name, address etc. Nothing has really changed. And my birthday is still December 23, 1955.

"And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord." Luke 2:10-11