

Oh, What a Lovely War -- Horse Sense

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My grandfather Simon Zacher served the Czar of Russia during the Russo-Japanese War of 1905 and also in World War I. During both tours of duty, Simon was in the Cavalry - a position in which he was proud to serve. Besides being a farmer, Opa Zacher was a blacksmith and a horse breeder. Although my grandfather was not in any front-line battles, he came to know war stories about Cavalry men and their horses. Although in these wars Russia had a Navy, on land they were light on motorized equipment and even that had its limitations given the condition of the country's roads. The railroad and natural horsepower became the means of transport for the Russian Army. My grandfather had a very committed stand to doing his duty serving the Czar in World War I. For his devotion to the cause, his Major rewarded Simon with a silver pocket watch and a promotion to Corporal. My grandfather cherished that honor all his life.

Simon Zacher saw action in the Balkans where he was in charge of a group of men that operated a smithy-shop and horse stable for the Russian Cavalry. The unit he was with were mostly young men from rural areas who had grown up with horses. All possessed horsemanship skills. To be chosen for the Cavalry was a proud assignment that young men dreamed of - to be a Cavalry man was glamorous.

In the Cavalry, man and horse trained together. The soldier was trained in military skills and the horse learned obedience to commands. My grandfather always said that a horse has feelings equal to a man. It was of utmost importance that rider and horse respect one another. These men lived with their horses to maintain that vital trust. The horse had to learn to function despite gunshot noise and visual obstructions. Handling a horse under these conditions took wisdom. The Cavalry soldiers possessed that horse-sense and knew how to use it. To keep their horses in shape and prepare the horses to function under wartime conditions the men played games with their horses. While playing a fun riding game with the horses, the soldiers utilized a Kanschuk - a short-handled whip with a long-braided leather strap ending in a tuft of tail-hair. The trick was to give the whip the right swing and jerk over one's head, or sideways, to bring out the knall - a loud "bang" that was like a gunshot of sorts. The horse became used to such sounds and this helped the horse to not panic during a real gunbattle. Another exercise was to train the horse to lay down and roll over. This became a handy skill during some military maneuvers so that horse and rider could get down and out of sight.

One member of my grandfather's unit was Ivanovitch Boris, who came from a well-to-do family with lots of land. Boris rode a nice horse named Luscha whose eyes and ears were always alert. My grandfather loved that horse. One day, Boris and four of his comrades got the call to go on patrol to check on enemy positions. Getting close to the enemy, Boris and his buddies were moving into position when all of a sudden Boris got hit by enemy fire. After hitting the ground, Boris saw blood on his leg and on his horse. The horse bravely didn't move. Boris grabbed the saddle strap and pulled himself up onto the horse. Unable to notify his comrades, he gave his horse a tap to go and she went. Luscha instinctively ran as fast as she could back toward the camp while Boris was holding onto her neck for dear life. Boris lost so much blood that he was barely conscious by the time they got to the camp. He was immediately rushed to the medic tent for treatment. Grandpa and his men praised the horse

for its bravery in saving Boris' life. Boris' condition slowly improved, but he was confined to bed for a long time. Luscha lost weight and refused to eat. All efforts to bring her back to health failed. The Major was aware of Luscha's condition and so was Boris. After some time, the Major gave the order to put Luscha down. By this time Boris was getting better, but was not well enough to get up and care for his horse. When he found out about the order, he asked his comrades to help him get up on his feet. While still on crutches, he walked over to see his horse who had been so heroic in saving his life. He spent some time with Luscha to try and help her, then put a blanket over the horse to take her out for a walk. After a while Boris was seen returning to camp - alone. Someone asked him how his horse was. Boris didn't look up but simply said, "I shot her."

My grandfather survived World War I and came back to civilian life. The memories from the war and the friendships he made there remained with him throughout his life. When the time came for us to leave Bessarabia in 1940, Opa Zacher was sad to go. We had all gone through difficult times to build a good life out of an untamed land. Again the family was being uprooted and sent away to an uncertain future. Grandpa did not give up on his faith in God and his fellow man. After surviving World War II while living in Poland, my grandparents fled to East Germany in 1945. In the fall of that year, my mother, my brother and I caught up with my grandparents. Then the area was assigned to the Russians. One day Grandpa was out working on a farm when he was stopped by a Soviet patrol officer for ID. My grandfather, fluent in Russian, reached for his ID to show the officer. In so doing, the officer spotted grandpa's silver pocket watch and reached for it. Grandpa explained the story of the watch to the officer, but the officer was unmoved and kept the watch. However, the officer did continue a friendly conversation with my grandfather. After a while, the officer told my grandfather that the Soviets were closing the borders to the West and after that nobody would be able to get in or out of East Germany. Two days later we were on our way to freedom in the West and were safe. A month after that, Opa died in West Germany from typhoid.

In times of darkness, we always find light - often in strange ways. A horse saves a human life but then dies for it. The shine of a silver pocket watch could not be hidden, but in its glimmer was reflected hope and kindness that saved us from again being trapped by Soviet rule. Grandpa lived and succeeded by such providences. We will too.