

The Funeral of My Mother

Text written by Louise (Regehr) Wiens, Leamington, Ontario, August 2014

A week ago today we buried my mother. In her published obituary I wrote "After surviving the atrocities of World War II in Europe, Maria met her husband Viktor in the wilderness of Siberia, where they, along with hundreds of thousands of others had been sent into exile, which lasted for a long ten years. In 1961, they brought their young family to Canada in search of a better life. Maria never took freedom and living in a democracy for granted. Daily she thanked God for faithfully leading her throughout her journey on earth, which lasted for 95 years."

Meeting with the funeral attendant Craig he expressed surprise at my mother's history and my knowledge of it. From Toronto, now working in our area which boasts a large population of Russian Germans, he had dealt with many of these families in recent years. "Most tell me their parents never talked about it" he relayed to me. "I recently had a family in here making funeral plans, and a grandson had come along who told me that he had secretly taped his grandfather talking as he asked him some questions about those years. "My kids have absolutely no idea what some people have gone through in life" Craig continued. "Kids today are too busy with all their electronics." I recall nodding in whole-hearted agreement.

"Yes, when I die bury me in a white wedding dress" my mother had said over the years to her best friend Irma, drawing a parallel to the scriptures which refer to the church as "the Bride of Christ." In the 1940's during the resettlement of the Germans from Bessarabia, my mother and her family had found themselves in Warthegau, Poland. Brother Helmut was roughhousing, as children do, with some other boys in the camp as he fell over a broken railing to his death below. Within days sister Emma had some type of surgery and also died. "We made Emma a dress out of white paper" my mother often told me. "She looked just like a doll when we buried her". The morning of my mother's funeral my 18 year old daughter emerged from her bedroom with a lace dress on a hanger. "Yes, I think that I will wear this white dress to the funeral" she announced to us, as I immediately nodded in approval. My husband voiced some concern over the length, which I immediately dismissed.

"Well, I will try and get those in for you" the florist had remarked as I ordered a casket spray comprised of sunflowers and other types of brightly coloured blooms. "My mom often talked about the fields of sunflowers in Bessarabia where she grew up," I educated my friend, Simona, the florist. As photos were snapped over the years my mom always grabbed some type of colourful floral bouquet, real or artificial, to hold while she posed.

In the days between her death and the funeral we gathered at our home for meals as friends dropped by with much appreciated platters of food. "Don't you have any paper plates?" my niece asked as she saw me setting the table with my mom's fine china. On the table I had placed one the many tablecloths which she had sewn, this one being white, with lace edging. The lace reminded me of the lace trim on my daughter's dress.

Late one evening my husband and I stopped by the home of one of his uncles as I chose 2 CD's of hymns from their collection for the funeral. The CD's were comprised of both German and English songs. "Sure I'll bake some platz for the funeral" his aunt, also named Louise Wiens, offered to me. "But I'll need some fruit. Peaches

or plums, not too green.” I again felt slight guilt over not making platz, having witnessed my mother weekly producing piles of baking in her kitchen. The next morning as my husband dropped our daughter off at the orchard where she works he picked up some peaches for Aunt Lou. Owned by Russian Germans, this is the same farm where my parents for years regularly bought peaches as well as sour cherries by the pail.

For the funeral program I typed out “Das Heimatlied der Bessarabiendeutschen.” Although I snapped a few photos to send overseas to my cousins, I did not ask any of the grandkids to pose beside the casket. It was an eclectic group that gathered that morning for the celebration of my mother’s life. My best friend arrived at the funeral and immediately exclaimed “I told Bill that you would be wearing pink!” Friends, family, former neighbours, former co-workers of my father and other German Russians from town. Waking with a case of laryngitis I was nevertheless able to read her life story and a written account I had found in her dresser dated March 31, 1986. It detailed the day she was babysitting her first grandchild (now age 29) and what had transpired on that day as she had accidentally locked herself behind the door in the stairwell, with the baby sitting on the other side, crying. Humorous, it described her to a tee. Although my mother was not known to journal, she regularly wrote letters to her 4 siblings in Germany. I often would come home from school to find the dining room table filled with pages and pages detailing her life in Canada on thin blue paper referred to as “airline paper”. Her letters read as if one were having an actual conversation with her.

As our Pastor was on vacation he had arranged to have Pastor Derek do my mother’s eulogy, with which I had no qualms, although he did not know my mother. I had promptly directed him to the NDSU site, from which he gleaned valuable information regarding her life. After the funeral several German Russian women came to me and exclaimed “we have been waiting a long time to hear a story like that,” which I will admit caught me off guard. The day after the funeral as I took a tray of baking to the long term care facility where my mother lived, a worker gleefully exclaimed to me “oh, what did you bake for us?” as I cringed. Her co-worker spoke up and responded, “you should know that Louise doesn’t bake, or garden, for that matter.” Nodding in agreement I again informed them that I do in fact I do many other things, as my husband’s voice resonated in my ears. “Yes, Louise thinks that she is a writer.....”

Several months ago on a visit to my mother she had excitedly told me about an experience she had had the night before. “God showed me all the places that I had worked. Where I had lived. Where I had hungered. Where I had run around barefoot.” I gasped as I responded “that must have been some dream.” Shaking her head she continued, “it was not a dream. He took me there. To all those places.....” Having lived in Bessarabia, Poland, Germany and Siberia, my mother was content, in her 80’s to stay put. “I have seen enough places in the world,” she had surmised to me. In recent months my mother had lost her gift of being a conversationalist. “There is nothing more to say” she had concluded to me while shrugging her shoulders. “Everything has been said.” This statement had given me great comfort over the past year.

Talking to one of my cousins in Germany on the telephone about the funeral, Martina again remarked to me “you are all alone over there. And we are here.”

I hear my mother’s voice resonating in my ears “well.... that was war.....” Yesterday I sat at our dining room table organizing pages and letters to send overseas. Photos had been copied and envelopes had been addressed, except for one destined for Russia. To my left sat a casserole dish with sunflowers floating in the water. It is a piece belonging to my mother’s fine china, stamped “Bavaria” on the bottom. I sat at the table as the wind blew and a storm came in. “It’s raining” I commented to my husband as he walked in the door. “Well,

she's not there anyways....." I concluded, referring to her casket in the ground. In her Bible my mother had kept a photo of a windswept, dusty open field, taken in Martuk, Kazakstan in the 1990's. "Yes, the Sawatsky's from Germany went back and fixed up some of the German graves," she had told me. There were no gravestones to denote the location, but some field stones had been arranged there by the Sawatsky's, it appeared. The soil looked orange. "This is where Egon (her 10 year old son) is buried," she continued, as I see no trace of the wild grasses, trees and bushes as captured on the original black and white photo taken in 1952. "It looks like a pasture now. There are probably cows running all over it," she had sighed, "but then.....he is not there anyways....." she concluded to me. "What's wrong with this computer paper?" I ask my husband. "It seems thicker than usual," as I calculate the costs of the postage in my head.

The night before she died I again whispered to her, as I had so many times before "if I don't see you on earth then I will see you in heaven." She had again, as so many times before, nodded her head in agreement. The next evening, shortly after the sun had slipped behind the horizon, I sat at my mother's bedside humming "Amazing Grace" as she took her last breath and slipped into eternity. The Pastor spoke about her pursuit of, and relationship with God and her determination, against all odds, to survive those horrible years. With a constant theme of thankfulness to God for her life, she had ploughed ahead, often into unknown territory.

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so I would have told you. I am going to prepare a place for you" John 14:1-2