

The Volga Flows Forever ~ Book Three

*From Gulag  
to Freedom*

The Indomitable Spirit  
of the Volga Germans

Sigrid Weidenweber

From Gulag to Freedom  
The Volga Flows Forever ~ Book Three

Typography by Lori A. McKee.

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Summary: A novel, drawn on historical material, about growing up in a Volga German colony and surviving the hardships of Soviet collectivization, deportation and imprisonment in a Siberian gulag. Katharina, the heroine, with the help of a native Komi tribesman, escapes from the gulag and makes her way to the San Joaquin Valley of Central California where she becomes part of the Volga German community that had been established there decades earlier.

1. Russian Germans – History. 2. Germans – Russia (Federation) – Volga River region. 3. Forced labor – Soviet Union – History. 4. Immigrants – United States – Economic conditions. I. Title. II. Weidenweber, Sigrid, 1941-. The Volga flows forever ; 3.

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To Anne, my daughter,  
ever loving, ever faithful.

S.I.W.



## *In Appreciation*

During the years of researching and writing the trilogy “The Volga Flows Forever,” I was sustained by the support I received from my husband and John Van Diest. Their belief in my work elevated my mood when I tired, their promotion of my books spurred me to greater effort, and their excellent humor cheered me.

I must mention that aside from books and materials available to me, the Internet, Google and Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, made finding the small details enriching a story much easier. I was amazed that, upon crosschecking, Wikipedia’s facts were correct. I, at least, never came upon egregious errors. This useful tool has been a blessing.

Most helpful in promoting my understanding of Stalin and his inner circle was Dmitri Shostakovich’s book *Testimony* and the answers to my questions directed at Vadim Yakovlev, who had personally known “The man.”

I am very thankful for Kate Joseph’s intelligent, erudite treatment of my book. To my amazement, few subjects introduced in the book were foreign to her. I marvel at her astounding wealth of facts concerning WWII, and I marvel at my fortune to have her for my editor. How she came into my life is another story; a story I have to accredit to my husband Donald who knew Kate, and thought she would be perfect for the task.

Lori McKee has produced once again a cover that does the story justice. She is also responsible for the layout of the book, a beautiful continuation of the trilogy.

My grateful thanks to the people who helped with the publication of this and previous works, their labor did not go unnoticed.

Thanks and blessings upon the head of David Henson, my son-in-law, who, with his knowledge, has saved my work countless times from falling victim to ruthless hackers.

Furthermore, I have to thank my loving family for the support that has enabled me to keep monastic hours and still be part of a rich life.

S.I.W.



## *Preface*

As I was researching and writing the story of Katharina Grushova, a Volga German woman, I was eerily reminded of the fact that, in parts, I had lived in East Germany the very life I was describing.

There are so many parallels to lives lived in communist countries that to this day, when we “former inmates from behind the Iron Curtain” meet, we soon begin to compare those details of communist life we experienced that were the same and those that were culture-specific.

With a few notable exceptions—Romania and Albania come instantly to mind—none of the communist satellites were quite as gruesome and ruthless in the treatment of their citizens as were the Russians. Russian communism was made utterly dreadful and inhumane through sheer class-envy expressed in violent hatred and murder. The savagery loosed upon their own people is comparable in recent history only to the exploits of Hitler, Mao Tse-tung and Pol Pot.

Stalin created an artificial famine of devastating proportions designed to eliminate classes of people he and his henchmen designated “enemies of the Party.” In this endeavor he had millions of willing executioners who robbed the people at gunpoint of their last grain of wheat. They shot those showing the slightest resistance. By such means the starvation of close to fourteen million people was accomplished. Most of the victims resided in the Ukraine, in the North Caucasus, Kazakhstan, along the Volga and other regions deemed recalcitrant in their resistance to collectivization.

Stalin and his communist ilk killed altogether over twenty-two million people, innocents labeled kulaks who had the misfortune to have worked hard, lived without debt and perhaps owned a horse or a cow.

In the words of Mao Tse-tung: “Classes struggle, some classes triumph, others are eliminated. Such is history; such is the history of civilization for thousands of years.” Yes, he is correct. History does show this pattern. However, history also documents that people involved in the extermination of another class become barbaric and set civilization back by centuries. Furthermore, the psychopathic elimination of another class clearly shows that when man usurps the role of God, by assuming power over the life and death of groups, all hope for humanity to attain a higher spiritual ground is driven underground.

It is embarrassing, no, shameful, that today, seventy years later, the world at large overlooks the cataclysmic Russian tragedy. Few monuments have been erected to the victims, and the world media, with certain exceptions, seems to have neglected exposing Stalin’s atrocities. I wrote this book to shine light on these gross injustices.

As I went through the editing process, I relived part of my childhood, which was often painful and daunting, and left me with a lifelong paranoiac concern about governmental powers.

But now that it is accomplished, I feel relieved. I am glad that I told the story of the Volga German victims and, within the documentation of one woman's life, a bit of my own life's tale.

The most powerful tool of any totalitarian regime is the extermination of all opposition. If a government silences its critics and forbids ideas contrary to its ideology, labeling such ideas "hate speech," that is the end of freedom. Stalin, Hitler and Mao are frightening examples of such oligarchic dictatorships.

And may we never forget how quickly a nation can lose its precious freedom and fall under the aegis of fear and the power of ruthless demagogues. This moving story has implications for our lives in this complex world today. Readers will draw their own conclusions. The book speaks for itself.

S. I. W.

## *Cast of Characters*

KATHARINA (KATYA) ALEXEYEVNA GRUSHOVA—*heroine*  
ALBINA GRUSHOVA—*her mother*  
ALEXANDER PETROVICH GRUSHOV—*her father*  
VICTORIA AND HOLGER HILDEBRANDT—*her grandparents*  
MARTIN—*her uncle*  
GUDRUN—*her aunt*  
MICHAEL AND PETER —*her brothers*  
SOPHIA ANDREYEVNA PESTOVICH—*Soviet teacher*  
ANASTAS SERGEYEVICH PELKOV—*Soviet teacher*  
JOSEPH BAUMGARTNER—*adopted brother*  
    MARIA BAUMGARTNER—*his mother*  
    ARKADY SEMYONOV—*his friend*  
ANDREY STEPANOVICH VERONTZEV—*Kolkhoz commissar*  
KARL—*neighbor*  
ALYOSHA SEMYONOVICH KULOV—*gulag commander*  
    MARYONNA IVANOVNA KULOVA—*his mother*  
TIMOTEO BEROKODZE—*Stalin's valet and body guard*  
ANGELA HUBER—*Schaffhausen neighbor and gulag camp-mate*  
BARBARA HUBER—*camp-mate*  
HANNA MÜLLER—*camp-mate*  
VASYA—*young soldier and camp guard*  
GENADY MARKOV—*camp sergeant*  
YEVGENY ANDREYEVICH KHOLSTININ—*train commandant*  
PROKOFIEV—*camp sergeant*  
ANTON PETROVICH BELUSKOV—*Ukrainian camp cook and survivor of three gulags*  
DEMYAN KROPATKIN—*convict shoemaker*  
ILYA GRIGORIEVICH—*adjutant to Kulov*  
IVANKA—*convict woman*  
KALACHNIK BOGDANOVICH MATVEYEV (IVAN THE TERRIBLE)—*new gulag commander*  
SUOMO—*Komi native*  
    PAVEL—*his brother*  
    SAMEA—*his mother*  
    KORYA—*his friend, Katya's guide and protector*  
AMUTA—*Nenets native woman*  
EVGENY OKRUG—*Nenets elder in Arkhangelsk*  
    MARIA VASSILYEVNA—*his wife*  
ANTON ANTONOVICH DEREVNIKOV—*merchant*  
ROBERT HOWARD—*captain of the destroyer HMS Intrepid*  
ELLIOT BROMFIELD—*ensign*  
HERBERT BAUMEISTER—*American pilot*  
CORA BLACKWELL—*boarding house owner*  
HARRY PILLMANN—*druggist*  
CARY MCKENNA—*husband*  
FIONA—*her daughter*  
KEENAN—*her son*



*From Gulag  
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## *Prologue*

My people once resided on the east bank of the Volga River where the Kazakh steppe begins and seems to stretch to the very end of the earth. On this bank, just a few kilometers removed from the great Volga, six villages were strung together along her side, like beads on a ribbon. The largest, Katharinenstadt, was closest to other settlements while my village, Schaffhausen, was the lone bead at the end of the ribbon. Beyond our houses began the open land, fields, meadows, a few copses, and then—the vast steppe.

Closest to Schaffhausen was Basel, then Zug, Orlovskaya and Ober-Monjou. When I was born, our village was quite large—about five thousand people. Our houses were clustered, almost melting into each other, along a broad road and straight side streets. Because most houses had roofs fashioned from straw or reed bundles, we feared fires as much as we feared the devil.

Our houses were constructed from wood that was sometimes left unpainted, weathering to a silvery gray. But, houses inhabited by proud owners were painted a deep blue, a blue that I call to this day “Russian-blue.” Different colors were used for the trim around the windows and artful designs embellished the shutters and doors. Each small house possessed a minuscule porch, a kitchen garden, an orchard, a barn and stables. Our fences, protecting the gardens and orchards, were mostly made from brush and wattle. Looking at Schaffhausen from afar, I always marveled how a place of many people could be so stark, so monochrome. Thus it looked, especially in early spring and before the onset of winter.

The Podstepnaya Creek, dry for most of the year, creased the land surrounding us. And, of course, there was the Volga, the blessed. Her mists cooled the heated land about us on summer evenings, and her waters saved us in years of drought. Forever I will remember my misty, mystic morning walks up high on her banks, looking into her slate-gray, seemingly placid depth.

My village owned more saline and sandy land than arable acreage. We cursed this barren ground when we had bad harvests. The best of the soil could barely sustain us in a good year.

Yet, although our lives were drab, hard and desperate at times, we loved this small spot in Russia's vastness, for it was ours—had been for generations. We were born to this soil, and our blood, sweat and tears had enriched the barren earth and tamed the wilderness.



*A New Life*

RUSSIA  
VOLGA VILLAGE SCHAFFHAUSEN  
JULY 1921

Baptismal water dribbled over the baby's head into the font. In his traditional Lutheran garb, a simple black robe with a worked-in stole decorated with Christian symbols that was worn over a black shirt with white tabs, the pastor pronounced in the ancient sonorous singsong: "In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, I name thee Katharina Alexeyevna Grushova." I, the small person sound asleep on the white, silken pillow did not deign to acknowledge the rite with so much as a blink of the eye.

Content in the world of dreams, my failure to acknowledge the few drops of water was an indication of how I would handle the problems presented to me by the world in the future. And the problems would be countless.

I had chosen a most unhappy time to make my entry into a world plagued by a miserable succession of wars. In addition to world upheaval, this particular spot on the planet was not auspicious for a child's birth either. Russia, in the throes of the Bolshevik Revolution, was not a place guaranteed to nurture and shelter a small girl whose fate had placed her into the womb of a Volga German mother. My father, a Russian, gave me his name, but that was almost all he could give me. However, he vested in me enough courage with which to live an entire life.

The Russian Revolution had been in full swing since March 1917. In its very early antecedents, it had been an event, stimulating ideas of greater freedom for minorities. Anticipation of *Mitbestimmung* was raised; having a voice in government was significant especially for my people, the Germans, who had cultivated the wilds of the Lower Volga. However, their hopes were placed into shifting political sands. For, not long thereafter, Lenin decided that the philosophy giving impetus to the Revolution, a bourgeois state with a socialist agenda and a parliamentary system of government, was not going to provide him with the power he craved. Under such a system the Bolsheviks would have to parlay and bargain with other parties and be forced to forge compromise; otherwise they would have been an ineffective opposition, for they could never hope to become the majority in a Russian parliament.

And so, Lenin with Trotsky's help—a man well respected by the masses—began to isolate and destroy all opposition to the Communist movement. Only four months prior to my arrival on July 20, 1921, the communists had put down a mutiny by the fractious sailors of the naval base in Kronstadt, with rivers of blood and human sacrifice. History will remember the slaughter of good Russian men and credit the massacre, absolutely and imperatively so, to Field Marshal Tukhachevsky of the Red Army.<sup>1</sup>

The sailors in Kronstadt had clamored for free elections and access to the soviets and rejected the total domination and staffing of the determining committees by the Communist Party. The Revolution that was to have been the saving grace of all disenfranchised Russian peoples had turned, as it often happens with such peculiar notions, into a search for the singular power of a particular group. What began as a revolution of all Russian Marxist Socialists, Bolsheviks and Mensheviks alike, became a venue for Lenin and his Bolshevik Soviets to assume power, ridding themselves of all interference from their “brothers in revolution” by killing and intimidating them. This was the bloody path they would follow throughout their entire reign.

I knew neither that our village of five thousand people was in the throes of a famine caused by the Bolsheviks, nor did I know that, between the day of my birth and the same day in July two years later, 1,965 people would have died of starvation in our small village. Later I would learn that one of Russia's greatest writers, the incomparable Maxim Gorky, had in July 1921, movingly appealed to then Secretary of Commerce, Herbert Hoover, begging for famine relief. Hoover responded by founding

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<sup>1</sup> Author's note: Immediately after the Bolshevik revolution personal military ranks were abandoned in favor of acronyms for full positional ranks. For example the rank of officer became commander, as in Division Commander—Kom Div, or Brigade Commander—Kom Brig. The nomenclature was restored after 1943. In favor of clarity I used the old rankings throughout.

the American relief agency responsible for saving over half a million lives of Russian Germans and Ukrainians.

But I, the baptismal object, knew nothing of my country's woes. My mother and other villagers filled in much detail as I matured. As early as I can remember, I knew that I was special, German. Why that was so special, I acquired laboriously by and by. Even my Russian papa, I recalled in my later years, made me aware of the fact that it was a good thing to be German and live in our Lutheran village of Schaffhausen.

Yet before I was old enough to figure out what the good thing was, at age four, in 1925, the Red henchmen came. They came after the noon meal, during which only a little bread and milk had been consumed because we were in the second year of a famine. They looked like uniformed bandits, these soldiers allied with the communists. Their uniforms were dirty; their hair matted; their boots encrusted with mud; their eyes wild and drunk with power. They rode filthy horses and ponies geared with dirty tack and swung grimy rifles over their heads in their headlong approach.

We heard them from a mile away. The thunder of hoof-beats, their shouts and yells traveled as one mighty sound wave across the flat land, bringing us running from our homes. Wide-eyed and frightened, we stood in the doorways, as if our huts and houses could protect us from this massive onslaught. We heard tales that they had been to other villages before. So far, we had been left unmolested, perhaps because our village was small, one of the poorest in the region.

My papa had pushed my mother halfway behind his broad frame. My grandfather, grim-faced, stood beside Papa, Grandmother was next to him. I squeezed between Father and Grandfather, for I was a nosy, precocious child that, like the proverbial cat surveying the hot stew, needed to know everything that was going on. To my emotional peril I was soon to find out.

There were perhaps thirty riders who descended upon our village. The moment they reached the village center, marked by the church, they stopped their horses short with great bravura. Looking on, I was breathlessly excited and impressed by their riding skills. Stopped short, some of the steeds reared until they stood vertical on their hind legs. Some horses slid to a halt, sinking back onto their haunches, but the riders, looking like bandits, sat solid and straight-backed in the saddles.

Their leader, an unshaven giant, as unwashed as the rest of them, was distinguished by a red armband sporting a yellow hammer and sickle and a white stallion, a much more handsome horse than the rabble under his command. How would a four-year-old snot nose, especially a girl, know about horses you

ask? Well, I had been on horseback since age two. Papa had been an officer in a cavalry regiment and the manager of one of the greatest stud farms in all of Russia before he married my mother. We had the best horses in the village and our stud, Borodin, was the sire of a considerable herd of horses in the area. Before I was born, Papa owned a small breeding business, but the soldiers had come and confiscated most of the horses for service in the Army.

From the moment I began to understand language, Papa taught me the anatomy of the horse. Repeatedly, he mentioned that the withers must be high and the hocks broad, so tendons and muscles have a good hold on the bone; chests must be wide and barrels deep for the lungs to be able to expand when the horse ran. "Never buy a horse with a narrow chest," he admonished. "They always have lung problems."

The giant on his powerful stallion grimly mustered the assembled Germans and then, after a moment of silence, he bellowed with stentorian might that he was appointed by the Supreme Soviet as commandant of the Saratov region; that under this dictate he was to appropriate the properties of all counterrevolutionary propagandists, their followers, and all kulaks. Under this designation we were all enemies of the state, for kulak meant wealthy peasant and, compared to many Russian farmers, we were prosperous. Furthermore, he declared that all families designated as counterrevolutionaries had five hours in which to collect their belongings and leave their properties for deportation and detainment in Siberia. Their land and holdings would be given to deserving families of revolutionaries. I grappled with the content of his directives, but only discerned there were dire consequences for the village once they were put into practice.

He came prepared. From the depth of his ill-used leather riding coat, he pulled a paper, much like the dreaded *ukase* of the Tsar and just as arbitrary as these writs of old. He read from the parchment what he had proclaimed already, followed by the names of the unlucky victims of Bolshevik persecution.

The first name rolling from his lips was the name of our saintly pastor, Paul Eisenherr. At that time the village had been the sheep in this good shepherd's fold for thirty years. It had been declared a miracle that our pastor somehow survived the great purge of church leaders, allowing him to remain with us until then.

He answered strong in voice: "I am Pastor Eisenherr, and I am here."

Slightly bent, he was after all close to seventy, silver-haired, his cheeks reddened by rosacea, giving him the ruddy, healthy look of so many Germans in late life, he stood in front of his small church. It was not much

of an edifice, nothing but a weathered, planked building with matching two-story tower. His slight, mild-looking wife, Anna, her gray hair braided and pinned around her gentle, creased face, stood beside him. She raised her childlike blue eyes to the giant on the horse.

"*Babushka*," he bellowed, "why are you not shaking at my words? I said loud enough for you to hear that your husband is a traitor."

"Ah, but I fear only one thing, and that would be the wrath of my Lord," said the old woman in a surprisingly strong voice. "And, by God, I know we have not done a thing against man or God that we need to fear His anger. The small trespasses He will forgive us. As for you calling my Paul a traitor, I know that is wrong. He has loved this country ever since he was born on its soil, and he would not betray it."

I saw that the giant commandant was not comfortable. He looked as if his skin was itching and he could not scratch. His eyes were restless and unhappy. A good man, a brave man, never liked to do the dirty work of the mighty, and he was no exception. He was caught up in the natural perversity of his fate. In agitation, he smacked his boot with his riding crop and then yelled at the pastor.

"You, what kind of man are you to let your gray, old wife speak for you? Have you nothing to say for yourself?"

"What is there to say?" Pastor Paul spoke loud and clear, the way he did on Sundays when he wanted to reach the sleepy last row in the church. "My wife ably said what there is to say. I am no traitor. I serve God and He will judge and protect me. There is no more."

Perhaps the giant wanted him to put up a better defense, perhaps he grew impatient, but he jumped off his horse, and all those with him dismounted also.

"Where is your house?" he asked, twirling the riding crop irritably between his hands. The imperturbable Pastor Eisenherr led the way to his small, immaculate, blue wooden house, with an open porch facing the main street. There he sat every evening in good weather with those parishioners in need of counsel. At one time or another all the souls of his parish had joined him there. Sometimes, even insignificant persons, such as I, had sat there. If I felt like it, I skipped to his house, past the poplars planted long before I arrived in my parents' life. I skipped along on the unpaved, barely raised and graveled road until I reached his porch and the safety of his presence. Yes, he and his sweet, dear wife, they always made children feel welcome and safe.

The pastor could not keep up with the rabble of Soviet goons, and they half-dragged and half-carried him the rest of the way to his house.

Not long after they disappeared inside, as the village watched in painful silence, the door of the pastor's house opened. The disgruntled giant strode angrily across the porch, into the street, and shouted something, in disgust. I was close enough to hear, although I did not understand the meaning of his words.

"Who made this insane mistake? This is a house worth nothing, with nothing worth taking inside. So, who gave me the information that this is the house of an important man who needs to be disowned. Damned Dogs! This old fart heads the top of the damned list. How could this be?"

"He is a pastor, that's why." A young Mongol soldier spit the words together with a wad of *machorka* from his lips. "You know what they say at the Soviet: 'The church is finished and God is dead'."

There was a strange look of pity in the commander's eyes. Nevertheless, he told the pastor and his wife that they would have to take what they could carry; they were leaving for the train in Saratov. At the end of this cruel pronouncement, the congregation—the entire population of our village—broke out in a loud, heartbreaking lament.

"Have mercy, man! Not these dear, old people."

And shouts of "Take us. Take all of us, but not the pastor and his wife."

I looked around. The grown women were crying while calling for the Russians to have pity on the pastor and his wife, while their children, scared by their mothers' despair, were bawling and clinging to their thighs. The men looked somber and unhappy. I wonder why no one stopped the giant and his rabble. I pulled my father's hand: "Why don't you stop him, *Papushka?*"

My father was strong. Together with the other men he could resist. But the German men, sworn to their God not to kill, stood like sheep in the pasture. Their heads were hanging as if their necks had lost all muscle; their eyes scanned the dirt. What were they looking for—a sign? Did their heads hang in humility or in shame? I did not understand then that a fight would have availed my people nothing. We were a minority in a vast country and any kind of resistance was put down with bloody force, as in other villages, where psychopathic commissars provoked resistance.

Moments later, the commandant was much happier at the home of the next name on the list. This home belonged to Christian Unterhalter, the village smith. Christian was a man of the same stature as the Bolshevik giant. He shod our horses and made and repaired the iron implements used throughout the area around Schaffhausen. Christian, unlike our pastor, was well-off. His house was also made of wood, but the front advertised prosperity with its brick façade. Inside, the furnishings were beautiful and solid.

There were paintings on the walls of the sitting room, the *gute Stube*. Moreover, Christian had beautiful Astrakhan carpets on his wooden floors. The shelves in the kitchen were filled with items of chased copper and polished brass. Gleaming pots and pans hung from an iron device shaped like an eight-hooked anchor above the huge stove. His beds were dressed in fine linen and soft down bedding. Well-crafted nightstands, wardrobes and chairs filled his bedrooms.

Yes, that was a house worth taking. “Go pack what you will need in exile, you kulak,” the giant bellowed and proceeded with the reading of the next name. Christian found himself instantly surrounded by a pack of soldiers. For a moment he stood like a giant moose surrounded by a yipping pack of dogs. Then they pushed him into the house. His wife, Carolina, blond, plump and pretty, followed the group. Her body seemed stricken by horrific pain, the hem of her apron was raised to her face as she was dabbing at her eyes. Their three small children toddled behind her in bewilderment.

The reading of names went on and on. Farber, Erzmänn, Baumgartner, Krüger, Waldmeier, Eggers, Wohlheim, Brenner, Salzmann, Erdinger, Schuster, Schneider, Kramer, Hellman. The list seemed endless. Like Christian Unterhalter, those chosen for deportation had one thing in common—they owned the best farms and houses. Those called forth by the Soviet commandant had a short time to collect what they could carry during the exodus. The rest of us remained standing—ashamed, astonished, impotent and, in the case of most children at least, without understanding why this awful, monumental change was happening in our lives.

Our name was never called. Mother and Grandmother pulled me forcefully into the house. I was disinclined to leave my post between Papa and Grandfather, despite the hurtful, anguished drama unfolding before us. When the monstrous reality of their position registered, some women of the afflicted families again broke into heartrending lament. Others faced their fate with a pitiful, aching stoicism, pulling stronger on my heart-strings than the laments and tears. Many of the men, about to lose the fruit of their life’s work, crossed themselves against the evil permeating the village center. They squared their shoulders, gathered their offspring, and entered their homes for the last time.

Crying and sulking, I was deposited by Mother onto a chair at the kitchen table. A soft knock on the back door, leading into the garden, both startled and frightened us. Taking heart, Grandmother Victoria opened the door and discovered Maria Baumgartner and her seven-year-old son

Joseph. Frau Baumgartner had been created with Valkyrican proportions. Corresponding to her figure, she possessed the spirit of Valhalla. She pushed the half-opened door to accommodate herself, slipping, Joseph in tow, into our kitchen.

“I got away from the soldiers,” she said, dry-eyed. “I don’t think anyone saw us.” She set her eyes on my mother. Her glance was not so much beseeching as willing Mother to do her bidding.

“Albina,” she half sobbed, “they are taking us to God only knows where. It looks that most likely it will be Siberia. You know, I have five more to look after. How am I going to feed them in the barrens of Siberia? How am I going to clothe them? I just don’t know. God put it in my mind that you might keep my youngest for me, seeing that you get to stay.”

Now she was on her knees in front of my mother. “Please, Albina, for the love of God, keep him for me. I could not bear to have him freeze to death in hell’s own garden. The others are older. We will cope. They can help themselves better, but Joseph? He is too sweet, too dreamy, he would be doomed.”

Grandmother Victoria suddenly pointed her forefinger at me in a way that brooked no disobedience. “Take Joseph into the *gute Stube*, and show him your father’s trophies.” Dutifully, I took Joseph’s cold hand and pulled him into the parlor, the usually forbidden room. In this sanctum, which only saw human faces for funerals, births, high visitations, and on Sunday afternoons for coffee and *Kuchen*, I showed a bewildered, teary-eyed Joseph the trophies of horses my father had trained to become champions in their divisions. Yet, while I explained with four-year-old zeal the wondrous feats of hunting, racing and dressage steeds, his attention was woefully directed toward the kitchen. His ears seemed to turn toward the slightest sound emanating from there.

“What is it, Joseph? Why are you so worried?” I asked. Without hesitation he answered, “My mama wants to get rid of me. She does not like me anymore and now she wants your mother to take me.”

Here his coherence broke and the slim, tow-headed boy with large gray eyes just bawled as if his heart was breaking. He stood before me in his high-water pants, hand-me-downs from his older brothers, in his checked shirt, well mended but too short in the sleeve, looking like a small, frightened scarecrow.

I had no clue what do with him. I was, after all, only four, and did not know about these things. In place of something better, I took his hanging hands in mine. I knew that his big, powerful mother loved him. She

would not give him away. I had seen her sail through town like a brig in rough waters firmly clasping Joseph's small hand in hers. Nothing could break that bond. Therefore, even I could sense, her reason for bringing Joseph here must be of enormous importance.

I wiped his tears away with my hand and beckoned him to follow me. We put our ears to the kitchen door and listened intently. I heard mother's voice: "Don't cry Maria, *Liebchen*. If you think that they do not know he is yours, I will gladly raise Joseph like my own. Katharina could use an older brother to tone her down a bit. But are you sure you can bear to part with the dear boy?"

Outside a commotion ensued. The voice of the commandant demanded of my father that he open the door. "I must have an account of all heads in your household," he shouted gruffly. "You have to vouch for everyone there and identify their relationship to you."

"Maria, you must go. I promise I will keep him as my own," swore my mother, tears in her eyes. Then, louder, she begged: "They are coming, Maria. You must leave. Now!"

Listening behind the door we heard a heartrending sob and the closing of the back door. My grandmother rushed into the *gute Stube* knocking us backward with the door. She gathered Joseph in her arms and while she wiped his tears with her apron, whispered, "*Bubele*, when the men ask your name, you must say Joseph Grushov. Katharina is your sister and I am your *Oma*. Do you understand? If you don't do this, they will send you to the coldest place on earth. Your mama does not want you to go there. She wants to save you. So, be good, and do as I ask. I will explain all later."

She quickly pulled both of us into the kitchen, only a second before the front door opened. Papa entered, followed by the giant commandant. The moment Mother saw Father, she flew to him, kissing his face, saying something in German. Fleeting, Father looked perplexed, then stunned. Scanning the room, his face assumed his normal father-look.

God was watching over Joseph that day. Bewildered, and frightened by the giant man, he stopped his crying, clinging to Grandmother's hand.

"Who are these people?"

"They are my family," answered Papa. Pointing at my mother he explained, "This is my wife, Albina Grushov, my mother- and father-in-law, Victoria and Holger Hildebrandt, and my children, Katharina and Joseph. This is my whole family."

We were standing almost in a circle. Papa and the giant, looking us over sharply, were standing at the door. Grandfather and Mother stood

by the kitchen table. I stood in front of the window while Joseph and Grandmother closed the circle. Joseph's eyes were huge. It seemed as if he drew understanding through these orbs. Grandmother Victoria stood very straight, one hand under her apron, the other attached to the boy.

People mentioned often how much I looked like my mother. I was tall for my age, skinny, oval faced, with silvery-brown hair, just like Mother's. I was quick, sure-footed and had nimble fingers. Grandmother Victoria, who was not born to farm work, liked my nimbleness when we worked together in the house and the garden.

It had been hard and bitter for my grandmother to adjust to the miserable life on a small, communist-restricted farm. She, who once supervised a staff of servants in her house and garden, had to kneel in the dirt, bend and *schlep* like the least person in the village, now that she was old and frail. She and Grandfather had been robbed by the Reds of every possession they had acquired through many years of hard work. Now, they were among the poorest in the village. I adored her, for she lived even her new, deprived life with the dignity of a queen. She and Grandfather praised God every morning and were able to joke about their predicament.

All in the family circle, except me, had assumed defensive poses under the scrutiny of the commandant. Only I, unable to understand the gravity of the situation, was not intimidated. Looking from one face to the next, I smiled happily. No one smiled back. The solemnity of the others dampened my natural exuberance.

A sudden movement of the commandant's hand startled me back to the state of affairs. After a moment of silence the commandant eyed me expectantly and said, "What is your name, *dyevochka*?"

"My papa just told you, Katharina Grushova. You should listen when people talk to you."

The commandant grinned broadly, exposing *machorka*-stained teeth. "Who says I should listen better?"

"My mama. She always tells me that when I don't listen."

"*Ochen horosho*," he said, petting my head, whereupon he left with a hearty, "*Do svidanya*."

For a moment the adults talked in high German. I understood little. Something about "sparing the children *das Austreiben*." I knew they meant the deportation going on outside. Grandmother herded us into the parlor once more, where she praised Joseph. "You behaved like a good, smart boy," she told him. "Your mama would be very pleased with you. She feels very good that you can stay safely here with us, when your brothers have

to leave for a bad place.” Promptly Joseph began to cry again, keeping Grandmother busy, murmuring sweetly and drying tears.

I was entertaining myself by kneeling on the back on the sofa and leaning against the window. This way, I could see the scene in the street. The white lace curtain hung over my head and my back. I think, from the outside, I must have looked like a miniature bride. Hanging onto the window, I could see what was going on in most of the village.

The soldiers had begun to load the richest of our neighbors onto open trucks, much the same way the farmers loaded cattle for the market. Most women cried, clutching children and bundles. The men were stone-faced, stoic. But there were exceptions. I could tell by their eyes, a few would gladly have fought. They were barely able to contain their anger and seething fury. But how could they have fought a well-armed enemy with their bare hands? So they forcefully heaved the bundles and cases onto the trucks that would take them, like animals to slaughter, to a miserable fate. They had, of course, heard of Stalin’s slave-labor camps.

Stalin, the self-declared man of steel, had become the head of the Soviets. He had managed a meteoric rise among the Red revolutionaries, displacing and crushing every opposition. It was Stalin who emulated Ivan the Terrible. It was Stalin who, even then, in the infancy of his powers, became a terrible visionary, who dreamed of electrification for all of Russia, of a steel industry unrivaled in the world. For this man had plans to become the head of a super-power. Everyone knew it was impossible to turn his dreams into reality unless one ruthlessly sacrificed human lives, for Russia was poor, backward, underdeveloped, and overextended with the expenses of a war. Only cheap labor could realize his dreams and so he did as Ivan did, as every ambitious Tsar had done; he sacrificed humans. He had at his disposal the minorities. Germans, Kalmyks, Chechens, Ukrainians, and Tartars as well as rebellious Mongol ethnicities, Cossacks and prisoners of war, were dispensable and without advocates.

By evening, all of those named on the lists had been driven away to Saratov’s railway station. Arriving there, all Germans were dispossessed by edict and herded into trains to Siberia. Reports came back to the village, describing how families were torn asunder, by herding the people, with baton-blows, crushing them into different cattle cars.