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Preface



*To feel the present sliding over the
depths of the past, peace is necessary.*

— VIRGINIA WOOLF

It has only been in the last few years that my father's memories have surfaced. They flow to a distant river which is turbulent in spots, nearly impossible to navigate, let alone cross. But along the river bank now and then are stretches of sugar-white beaches, various hollows where willow trees cast deep blue shade over fishing holes, and, further along, near the old quarry, high rocky ledges from where boys whoop as they slice, like blades of pocket-knives, through air and water.

The wide Dnieper River flows over two thousand miles, two-thirds of it through Ukraine. Not far from the village of my father's childhood, an island splices the waters surging towards the Black Sea. These southern lands of the vast Russian plain

were once dotted with colonist's villages, situated along countless small tributaries like blood vessels that pulse into the artery that is the Dnieper. The black earth of this place produces wheat and rye, sunflowers and watermelons. It seems as though the soil of that distant place is under my fingernails as my father tells about living there, and I am struck with this thought: the soil of the steppes and the river are the flesh and blood of our heritage.

But we are not Russian and not Ukrainian. We are descendants of a migratory people, the Mennonites. We are the survivors of dictatorship and war, and are now a Canadian family. In an effort to ascertain my place in history, within both a general context and the intimate family narrative that has thus far been vague, I gather my father's memories into this story that is simple and complex, personal and universal.

Through silence, memory and imagination, I journey into the heart of family, tradition and heritage. My own story is in some ways common these days: the child of immigrants, a first generation Canadian. However, tracing the past has been complicated. Although the Mennonite heritage is one in which ethnicity and religion were interwoven for centuries, the "Russian" Mennonites of this story — as they are called — did not consider themselves citizens of the country they had lived in for more than a century. Moreover, this history was followed by flight and statelessness. And when I ponder that this heritage stems from pacifist convictions that were continually tested in life-and-death situations — a revolution and World War II — I realize that all of these roads are leading to a place of significance. While place is essential to the story, I am not speaking only in terms of a geographical location, but a place along the horizon between two worlds: a place of connectedness by knowing and understanding the past of the present.

Writing this story has not been a straightforward journey. It has been one without clear directions, one in which I had to chart my own way to the true starting point, the first traces of

the Mennonite people. But I am not a genealogist, rather a gatherer of stories, and this has been difficult because of the violence of the Soviet regime and the dark side of the German “liberators” in Ukraine, followed by the horrific displacement of the Soviet-German conflict and the ensuing post-war silence. So much was lost, or was too difficult to talk about. The late philosopher Paul Ricoeur acknowledged that before it is even possible to tell the stories of loss, before silence can pass into language, the act of remembering requires “temporal distance.” The appropriate amount of time must be allowed to pass. He also stressed that stories empower the marginalized to become agents of history. To borrow a metaphor from Julia Spicher Kasdorf, a writer and poet whose heritage is Mennonite, “the wound becomes a mouth that finally speaks its testimony.”¹

Recently, my father has reached the place, not of remembering, because I do not think he ever truly forgot, but of telling. He narrates for me the era comprising the last of Stalin’s purges of the late 1930s, the clash of Hitler and Stalin in Ukraine through to the final days of the war — a time that defined his childhood. These events and experiences are the memories of a traumatic childhood, but the language of trauma is bare, and so those early memories are overlaid with the reflections of a father and adult daughter. Although the rough edges of minimalist nouns and verbs become blunted with time, I don’t mean that we softened what was harrowing; I mean that together we sorted through the available stories and filled in some of the spaces between them, crafting the language of narrative.

Along with my father, I owe gratitude to my late grandfather Jakob. The information he gathered in 1947 about the period of Soviet repression was later published (in 1954) by a Mennonite minister in Canada. Unfortunately, Jakob did not reveal much of his interior life, only sparse facts from the perspective of a Mennonite pastor whose church and way of life had been systematically destroyed, and fellow human beings dehumanized under a despotic regime. He recounted the Stalinist persecution

that he must have intended to leave as a historical record, but without specific details or exact dates. There are a few possible reasons for this: to protect people still in the Soviet Union, and, because when he wrote, the emotional wounds were simply too deep. From the few pages of the Canadian minister's edited version, I sought to recover Jakob's story.

My grandmother's story was also largely missing. She died when I was too young to know her. Maria's keepsakes were divided among the children, who put them away: a few photographs from life in Siberia and Ukraine, a slim file of documents from the time the family was stateless, Jakob's death certificate dated 1948, along with a few sheets of poetry Maria had written in her twilight years. When my father began to tell his story, his three sisters recovered those artifacts, which served to shape and assist the writing process, an experience that for me became life giving, like that of creating flesh from dust, for narrative and memory ensure the continued temporality of a person.²

Through words, along with the imagery of photographs, I have stepped into the lives of Jakob and Maria and their children, if only for a time — a reconfigured human time that is the magic of narrative. The family story I tell is crafted mostly from remembered history. The Canadian poet and author, Anne Michaels, has said, “[h]istory and memory share events; that is, they share time and space. . . . Every moment is two moments.”³ A moment contains the actual event, and, thereafter, while we may never return to the actual event, the remembered moment is derived from it. Conversely, through memory, we attempt to access the trace of the original moment. Whether through history, or in memory, one must seek the truth of the event and of experience. In this attempt, I have added historical research to lend context, and to assist in sequencing personal memories chronologically.

Throughout, I have employed both present and past tenses, the present tense to represent memory and the truth of experience as it was lived by the people involved, the past tense to

represent what is known from the historical record. At times, these distinctions of tense become blurred, but essential truths are sharpened.

In this way, it can also be said that history is two histories, that is, the dominant “textbook” history, and the marginalized life story. Again, I turn to Ricoeur, who held that narrative positions history within the realm of *all* participants. Therefore, the story of this family represents the stories of many others, two or more generations, and all such stories inform us about the fullness and truth of history.

The journey of discovery that became the writing of this book has concluded in two ways: with the last page, and with a physical journey to Russia and Ukraine together with my parents and my family in the summer of 2005. The image of rolling steppes gold with sunflowers and wheat is imprinted like a photograph in memories that are now my own. I remember an endless August sky, tall white clouds growing upwards in cotton-candy layers and my first sight of the Dnieper. But the landscape is one of stark contrast; the natural beauty is blighted with signs of the former Stalinist regime’s drive for economic progress. At the river, only locals dared swim in the water polluted by industrial waste. The white-and-red striped factory stacks along the banks belched plumes of gray smoke into the air, and the breeze carried it to the villages nearby, just beyond the skyline of crumbling concrete Soviet-era apartment blocks. This setting has become a metaphor of those who came before me — the persistent and resilient. Along the horizon, the shimmering river fused steppes and sky, past and present. And from this vantage point it became clear to me that new life emerges from brokenness and ashes.