

A DAY OF SONG AND CELEBRATION

It was the summer of 1987. My husband and two young sons and I drove to Colorado to see my maternal grandmother, Maria Wohn. Then nearly eighty years old, she was a remarkable woman. But we did not get to see her very often. And we never called her “Grossmutter.” We always called her “Oma.”

Although Oma was born in a Volga German village in Russia in 1908, she had lived in West Germany since the end of World War II. Like so many of the older women in West Germany then, she was a widow. One of Oma’s daughters had immigrated to the United States, while the other two daughters remained in West Germany. Every few years, Oma would board *Lufthansa* and fly to America to visit her oldest daughter (my mother) in Denver, Colorado. There, at my parents’ home, we all would congregate to see Oma and catch up on the latest family news from Europe.

Whenever our Volga German relatives came together, there was always more than enough to eat. Soon we sat down to a scrumptious meal of *Rolladen* (steak rolls), meatballs, mashed potatoes, gravy, *Rotkohl* (cooked red cabbage), rye bread, dill pickles, watermelon slices, German liquor chocolates, hard Russian candies, *Halvah* (a sesame seed and honey concoction), German wine, *Riwwelkuchen* (crumb cake), coffee, and tea.

When Oma saw the table groaning with so much food, she said in German: “What a feast! Ei, ei, ei! It reminds me of our big *Kerp* celebration back home in Russia.”

After we had eaten, we asked Oma to tell us more about the *Kerp* celebration and how it was observed on the Volga in the early 1900s. She said it took place in the fall, well after the harvest. The schoolteacher referred to the celebration as *Kirchweih* (literally, church

consecration) or *Kirchweihfest* (parish festival), but the villagers always insisted on using the old dialect term “*Kerp*.”

During the annual *Kerp* celebration, there was a lot of food, socializing, music-making, dancing, and singing. Special *Kerp* songs always were heard, especially those that focused on the Biblical character Zaccheus. Oma reminded us that Zaccheus was a wealthy tax collector who lived in the ancient city of Jericho. Despite his great wealth, he was an extremely small man. Zaccheus had heard about Jesus and learned that the great miracle worker soon would pass through Jericho.

In keeping with Volga German folk tradition, Oma was of the mind that the Biblical Zaccheus was a “*Buckligam*” (hunchback). Perhaps for this reason, the sight of a hunchbacked individual in the Volga villages was never to be feared or pitied. In fact, it was believed that if someone treated a “*Buckligam*” kindly and then touched the hump on his back, this would bring good luck and even prosperity. [In those days, many Volga Germans did not realize a hunchbacked appearance often was the result of a rare medical condition known as Pott’s disease, or tuberculous spondylitis.]

By now our curiosity really was aroused. We all wondered if Oma still remembered one of the special Zaccheus songs that the villagers sang during *Kerp*. When we asked her to sing such a song, she cleared her throat and folded her arms. (She always sat up straight and firmly folded her arms before singing a song.) Oma needed no written notes or songbook; all of the lyrics and melodies were in her head. As Oma closed her eyes, we knew she was going back to Russia and to the village of her birth. With her beautiful soprano voice, Oma sang the opening lines of one of the old Zaccheus songs:

*Jesus heut' durch Jericho reist,
Ein reicher Mann Zaccheus heisst.
Sein Verlangen war allein,
Dass er moechte Jesum sehen.*

*Weil er aber war so klein,
Konnt es also schwerlich sein.
Darum er einen Pfahl aufnahm,
Stieg auf einen wilden Feigenbaum. . . .*

(Jesus, He went through Jericho
Where the rich Zaccheus lived.
And Zaccheus, oh, he longed so
To simply get a look at Jesus.

Because Zaccheus was so little,
It proved very difficult for him.
He had to take hold of a pole
And climb onto a tree limb. . . .)

“You see,” Oma stopped to explain in German, “Zaccheus, he was such a little man. With all the crowds, he just couldn’t see anything. So he had to get up into a fig tree to see the Lord Jesus. Yah, that Zaccheus, he found a way. And Jesus saw him up there in that tree. Jesus

called out that He would be visiting Zaccheus at his home that same day. Oh, was Zaccheus surprised!”

Although we had not planned it, we now had a surprise for Oma. My husband and I told her that our sons, Mike (age 8) and Matt (age 6), also happened to know a song about Zaccheus. They had learned the song in Sunday school and they often sang it at home. The boys now stood side by side and performed the song for their great-grandmother and the rest of the family. The words were all in English but the boys gestured with their hands as they sang:

Zaccheus was a wee little man,

A wee little man was he.

He climbed up in a sycamore tree,

For the Lord he wanted to see.

And as the Savior passed that way,

He looked up in the tree,

And He said:

“Zaccheus, you come down from there,

For I’m going to your house today,

Yes, I’m going to your house today. . . .”

Oma was thrilled to hear the Zaccheus song. The only English she really knew were a few words and phrases like “hello,” “okay,” and “thank you.” But because of the boys’ gestures,

Oma understood nearly all of their Zaccheus song. She hugged each of the boys in appreciation and she thanked them again and again. Maybe, Oma murmured, there was hope for the youth of *Amerika*, after all!

Seated around the dinner table were members of four German-Russian generations: a great grandmother born in tsarist Russia, the oldest daughter and her husband who were both born in the USSR, the granddaughter and her husband who were born in Colorado, and the two great grandsons who were born in Minnesota and Indiana. At various times, four different languages could be heard: Volga German dialect, High German, Russian, and English. Thus, strange and diverse sounds punctuated the air, words like “*Lieweherzche*” (dear little darlings), “*Flugzeug*” (airplane), “*Erbus*” (watermelon), and “Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles” (!!!).

Yet because of something so simple as the singing of two Zaccheus songs from two separate parts of the world, all of us now felt truly connected. The very oldest and the very youngest among us had bridged the generation gap. It was an extraordinary family happening, a day of song and celebration.

The Biblical Zaccheus may have been a “wee little man.” But on that day in the summer of 1987, he did a mighty big thing. Zaccheus helped bring a far-flung German-Russian family closer together.