

# *Trapped in Moscow: A Russian Tale*

by Ann Marie Stewart

LENA and her two sons sat on the splintered front steps of the dilapidated dacha outside of Moscow, now shared with seven other families. The other families were kind, but they were strangers. Everything and everyone familiar remained in Crimea.

After weeks in Dschamgarowka, their lives were a pattern of Nikolai absent for long stretches of time while she stayed in the cabin or played with the boys under the fir trees.

Lena dipped her zwieback into the soup and put it to Abi's mouth. He sucked the juice and mouthed the gummy softened bread. He felt warm to her touch and she feared he might succumb to the measles raging through the villages. Kolja eyed her roasted grain drink, and she smiled. He had begged to lick the spoon she'd stirred in the watermelon syrup from home. She still had a jar she wanted to save for those days when they needed something sweet.

On any other day, Lena would have considered the forest a charming storybook setting. But with each hour her dread of the future increased.

She measured time by carefully meting out the food items they had brought. Their toasted zwieback and noodles, sausages, and the canned meat they had carried would sustain them but a short while longer.

Buying food had grown increasingly more difficult as thousands of refugee families crowded outside of Moscow. Some families ran out of money, but even if they had money to buy groceries, goods and foods were rationed. Nikolai had to obtain a registration card with a booklet that contained coupons, each one indicating the item and the quantity of food allowed to purchase. Unfortunately, the store was often out of that item.

Nothing had gone quite as planned when they sold everything and left Borangar on July 8, 1929. Or had there been a plan? She didn't know.

Kolja scratched his leg, and she rested her hand on his. The house was riddled with bed bugs, greedy insects leaving bodies pockmarked with red welts and sheets with rusty dots. Though Nikolai had set their bedposts in tin cans of kerosene it hadn't prevented the bloodthirsty insects that ran up the wall and fell from the ceiling into the baby's crib.

Lena looked to the woods, willing Nikolai to appear from the lush undergrowth. The villages along the Northern train route were crowded. The more arrivals, the more nervous she became. Something was very wrong if this many people were here and this many people were not leaving. Every night the woods cloaked the men's clandestine meetings and secret plans. They all longed for passports out. Stalin's edits were clear as the twelfth anniversary of the revolution neared.

Her pastor husband was labeled an agitator. An enemy of the state. A counter revolutionary. His name was on various pieces of paperwork, and without a vote or nomination he had assumed some sort of representative status. To be a target had never served him well, and now his increasing leadership concerned her.

They needed out. Soon.

Maybe this day he would come home with good news and she would no longer feel a hostage in the forest.

Kolja wilted against her sleepily. He could use a nap. She rested against the front door and, cradling Abi in one arm, supported Kolja's head on her lap and softly stroked his face and hair. Soon there would be a third. It was so hard to imagine loving another child as much as she loved these two. Nikolai had promised this child would not be born in Russia, but she had her doubts.

Lena closed her eyes against the warm afternoon sunshine as the slight breeze cooled her face. She yawned and took a deep breath. She was so tired; nighttime brought little sleep as she lay in fear, rehearsing what could happen. Anytime.

"Kolja!" She heard a familiar voice call out and slowly awakened, her eyes focused on the man in the woods, dreamily appearing in a shaft of sunlight. Nikolai was back earlier than usual and Kolja bolted to his side. Another day Nikolai had come home safely. *Thank you, God.*

"Papity, Papity," Abi called out, reaching upward, always longing to be picked up. Soon Nikolai had his hands full.

"Daddy, tell me a story!" Kolja begged.

Lena smiled. Here it came. Not a sermon but a story, which no one told better than her husband. He knew how to stretch suspense and spring a surprise. His stories never grew old.

"Yes, Nikolai. A story." She knew it would do them all good to hear a tale that would take them far from here. Far from the world of Stalin and the label of *Auslands-deutschtum*. But were they Germans abroad? Fatherland. Motherland. Who were their true parents? Though treated with hostility, they were Russian born citizens. This was their *heimat*.

"Papa, tell the Koptcheek and Meeshka story!" Kolja pulled on his father's jacket, calling out for his favorite.

"Papa-Meeka!" Abi chimed in.

Lena smiled. She, too, longed to hear a story that took her home.

Nikolai plopped a boy on each knee and began the tale.

"On Opa's farm there were many horses. Seventeen. Some stubborn, some diligent; some smart, some dumb; some untrustworthy, some loyal." His voice then softened and he squinted seriously. "You have to learn how to trick them into doing what you want them to do." The boys watched his every move.

"What about Mashka?"

"She was a good draw horse at the plow and at the wagon, but if the load seemed too heavy as she pulled it up a hill, she just stopped.

"Imagine that, Abi!" Nikolai smiled when he captured Abi's attention. "Just think, she stops halfway up the hill and expects the other horse to do all of the work. Of course, whipping her was useless." Nikolai lingered and then raised his finger to teach the next part. "But I had a plan.

"One night I came home very tired and very late. We had worked hard and I didn't have time for Mashka's annoying behavior. Of course, she picked that night to stop, and nothing I could do would make her budge. What was I to do? How could I get home?" Nikolai looked to each boy, waiting for their answer.

"Pull her TAIL!" Kolja exclaimed, remembering the secret.

"Exactly!" Nikolai answered and Kolja smiled proudly. "I crept off the wagon and tied a rope to her tail and pulled it back as hard as I could, then tied her tail to the single tree on the load." He waited. "And do you know what that horse did?"

Lena and Kolja remained silent. It was better to have Nikolai spin the tale.

"That horse thought he was being led backward and so he lunged forward!" Nikolai lurched forward and both boys followed. "As he went forward, I gradually let out the rope and laughed all the way home." Nikolai chuckled and the boys smiled and giggled along.

Nikolai continued telling stories about Koptcheek, Dunika, Pushka, and Tschekes and their idiosyncrasies, but despite the boys' pleas, he held off on their favorite.

"Finish more, Daddy!" Kolja begged. "Now tell us about Meeshka! Meeshka is the best." And then to Abi, he whispered, "*She's* my favorite."

Abi smiled fondly at his brother, and Lena wished she could capture his innocent and angelic nature.

"Meeshka now, Daddy." Abi called out in imitation of his older brother, his voice a scanty breath of its previous enthusiasm. Nikolai frowned and stroked his son's back.

"Well," Nikolai began. "Meeshka was clever. And beautiful, too. But each night that we put her in the barn, we wondered how she'd outsmart us next. We would tie her up but somehow, she always got loose and devoured the grain in the grain box.

"Sometimes Meeshka would pull the loop of her reins open with her teeth. Or if my brothers forgot to leave a loop in the reins, she would rub the halter straps against the crib until she had worked the halter free." He shook his head.

“That horse was smarter than all of us.

“One morning, I came to the barn and Meeshka was gone! Stolen. Our neighbors came to help look for the thieves, but nobody could find them. Weeks and weeks went by, and I really began to miss our sneaky horse. Then, one day, I walked into the barn, and do you know what I found?”

Kolja smiled and Abi’s eyes were wide.

“Meeshka!” The boys yelled out in unison, Abi clapping his hands together in delight.

“Our gelding had outwitted her captors and traveled a long way. Somehow she remembered how to get back to the farm. She was free and came all the way home.”

“I want to go home, Daddy,” Kolja blurted out.

Lena’s eyes met Nikolai’s. She did, too.

“We are just travelers here, boys. We won’t stay long. We’ll have a new home.”

Everything within Lena wanted to believe that, and yet they had been trapped in Moscow for months with only “nyet” as an answer to their pleas. And even if they could get out, where was this new homeland? Would it ever be like their *heimat*? So many questions that couldn’t be answered.

“I see two little boys who need a nap,” Lena said, scooping Abi up in her arms as Kolja rose tiredly.

When Lena returned, she joined her husband, sitting on the front steps. From their window she could hear the boys talking softly, winding down their afternoon. She closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath.

Nikolai clasped his hands together and stretched his arms forward, a move he did when he was anxious.

“Our passports were denied. Nikolai’s voice was low, tired. “Again.”

“What about the German Embassy?”

“They are not getting involved.” Nikolai shrugged. “I think it puts them in a difficult situation. Politically.”

“Who are we? Are we Germans? Are we Russians?” Where did *Plaudietsch*, borscht, zwieback, farming, her flower garden, pacifism, their Mennonite church and village fit? Lena’s question was rhetorical but she knew their identity lay at the heart of their situation.

Nikolai’s face grew solemn.

“We are stateless refugees.”

Lena took her husband’s hands.

“Why do they hate us so?” Her question was on the lips of anyone with a soul. So simple. So pure. So honest. Mother Russia had turned her back on the people she had welcomed over a century before.

“We don’t believe as they do. We don’t want collectivization.” Nikolai stated the obvious. “They want an industrialized nation at the expense of the farmer. And these senseless dictates drive productive farmers into a ground that could have fed a nation.

“We make them look bad. We make it obvious there’s a problem with the Five-Year Plan.” Nikolai continued in his preacher voice. “Who leaves Paradise?” He added with an unfamiliar sarcasm.

“It just doesn’t make sense that they won’t let us out.” Lena answered. “They don’t want us to farm our way. They don’t want us to live our way. Why wouldn’t they just get rid of us?” Lena asked.

“They’ve already done that with arrest and deportation. Returned families to their homes. That’s one way to clear the villages.”

“Maybe they need no reason to hate us.” Lena’s voice was barely a whisper. “Except for the pleasure in bringing pain.”

Perhaps cruelty needed no explanation.