

# Katie

## and the American Dream

Based on the True Story of  
Marie Catherine Roh (Ringler)  
Katie

Born: May 17, 1898

Died: December 13, 1969



By Julie Roh Holovach

My name is Marie Catherine Ringler. I lived in Katharinental, Russia, a German colony, from my birth. Most people called me Katie, but my father, Henry, called me the Red Headed Devil. I have to admit I deserved that nickname. I had carrot red hair and could be fiery with a scorching tongue and fierce determination. Many words could describe our lives, arduous, exhausting, laborious, demanding, but the simple word "hard" hits the nail on the head. Henry was not a model father, but did manage to do one major thing in his lifetime, he immigrated our family to the United States of America.

My Ma, Sophie, sister Elsie (11), brother John (9), twin girls Millie, Pauline (5 months), and I (13), boarded the passenger steamship SS Kursk, in Libau, Russia. It departed for New York on November 5, 1911. We left the places and people that offered comfort behind in a small village on the Russian Steppes. I would never see any of them again; we were headed into the unknown.

Prior to this adventure, I had only seen the Steppes of Russia and the Volga River. Any water I encountered had visual land on the other side. I had never seen the sea before. This new sight was massive and yet absolutely amazing. It was vibrant with blue, green, gray, and white all swirling together. It lapped at the beaches and shorelines kissing the coastline as we sailed along. We saw cities, farmlands, mountains, and plains. We sailed by Denmark and Sweden into the North Sea, past Norway and England, and finally into the North Atlantic.

Our journey through the Baltic and North Seas remained relatively calm. It was cold, but the waves were fairly calm. We entered the North Atlantic to a raging monster. I could not comprehend the power of the water. I was visiting hell, only it was not fire and brimstone, but the ice and cold of November. We were tossed about like dolls. Most of the passengers stayed in their beds and only ventured forth when absolutely necessary. Others tried to keep their loved ones comfortable, but that was a never ending task.

It took fourteen days to cross the Atlantic and I spent those days caring for Ma and my siblings. I was responsible for their care. Little room was available for activities but we did the

best we could. There were stories to be told and songs to sing. It was comforting to sing the old hymns and we learned new ones from the other passengers. The melodies were sweet and rhythmic to my ears. The music brought a level of comfort at least for a few minutes. We were accustomed to hardship but not boredom, being patient on this long voyage was tough on us all.

Ma was not strong and had suffered since the twins were born, but the sea conditions made it worse. She had trouble keeping food down which made it difficult to keep the babies nursed. She was dehydrated and weakened. We mashed up what we could to supplement the babies' sustenance.

Our state of affairs was horrific; I washed everyone's clothes, the much needed diapers, and our hair daily, but lice and other bugs were everywhere. Food was poor and there was never enough. I loved the taste of fresh fish that had been floured and fried in a little bit of lard, but the brined fish that we were usually offered was tiresome. I quickly lost the desire to eat that particular delicacy.

The air was stale and smelled of dirty bodies and spoiled food. We felt cramped with so many travelers packed together. People couldn't find the bathrooms so they relieved themselves in any spot that offered a little privacy. The ship rocked continually, gently at first while in the sea, almost like a baby's cradle. The rocking became more violent when we got into the open ocean. We lurched about like dolls upsetting many stomachs. I think we all had some of the sickness but there were some that it incapacitated. The smell of vomit added to the putrid conditions. You never get used to those smells. We may have been poor, but we were not dirty. I struggled constantly telling myself it would be over soon.

We stayed in the steerage most of the time because I hated to leave Ma alone with the little ones. I waited until they were sleeping and took John and Elsie up to the deck to stretch our legs. We all felt slightly better when the sun happened to shine even if only for a few moments. The gentle warmth could relax our tightly strung spirits. It was a strange experience to stagger and stumble about because the boards beneath your feet felt fluid.

We were assigned bunks packed close together, yet they were more comfortable than the straw ticks we had used in our home. The owners of the shipping lines knew that their profit was in the sheer number of bodies that could be crammed into the steerage. We could hear the voices of the upper class passengers as they talked and laughed with each other, sometimes smelling their delicious food from the dining room. My mouth watered even though my mind knew we would not be offered anything. We were not that fortunate, but instead were engulfed with a sea of smelly bodies in the belly of the ship.

Among the crowd, we noticed a small woman snuggling with a newborn baby; it was fussy and unhealthy looking. I had seen her worried looks as she lovingly gazed at the poor little one. It passed away while we were far out to sea; any illness it had must have been magnified by the circumstances. She was grieving and hid the body so that she could bury it in the new homeland with her husband at her side. Ma and I prayed for her each night before going to sleep.

A few days later a cry came up from the sailors that sharks were circling and becoming agitated. They could smell death aboard. They rammed the ship and even broke one of the portholes. The captain ordered the ship searched. We watched the sailors scurry about, spending hours in turmoil while they hunted for the cause of the shark's behavior. It was horrifying and the chaos was maddening. I went to the deck to try and get some fresh air. It was cold and windy yet lacked the oppressive stench of the steerage. The baby's tiny body was eventually found tightly wrapped in a beautiful quilted blanket probably hand crafted lovingly by a family member left behind. I turned away as the captain ordered the tiny body cast overboard. The mother screamed and clutched for the bundle. All the passengers gasped, eyes misty with tears, hearts breaking with the mother's agony. Sharks quickly and savagely devoured the infant in seconds thrashing about in the waves then disappearing into the darkness below. The thought of the unseen horrors that lurk in the depths of the water filled me with terror. The sights I had recently thought were so lovely were now disturbing and filled with horror. I have hated

open water ever since. The steerage was oppressive but the deck struck me with terror. There was nowhere to go for a little peace. My hell had become even more intense.

I spent days in that hell as the ship surged on. I tried to keep myself busy with laundry, the babies, and my younger siblings, but there were still many hours of empty time. Staying in the belly of the ship was depressing. Tempers flared and words were flung in anger and frustration. Many went to the deck with their blankets for a few minutes of fresh air and to reinvigorate their dreams. The deck filled me with fear. I couldn't get the nightmare off my mind. I prayed and waited, hibernating in the hold, for the frozen torment to end.

Several days later we heard the cry, "Land Ho." One of the seamen who spoke German ran into the hold and shouted, "the land is near, you can see it from the railing." Many people raced up the stairs to see for themselves; I was not interested. I wanted to be close to land before I headed up to the deck. I waited below in anticipation and kept myself busy putting our things together while making sure nothing was left behind. I checked it over and over not knowing what else to do. It took several hours before I worked up the courage to make the dreaded climb. At first, I saw only green mounds. Soon the land came closer and we could see buildings. We were traveling right into the heart of New York City.

Getting on the boat had been hard, but the thought of getting off was terrifying. I had seen the lady with the torch an hour before. She was very small, only a speck on the horizon, I couldn't move away. I stood mesmerized with emotion welling up inside my brain. I felt she was encouraging me with promises of liberty, freedom and a future. I held tightly to the hands of my little brother and sister. They were so little and did not understand the true meaning of the beautiful lady and frankly neither did I...YET. Life had droned on with one day merging into another. The goal back home was simply: to survive day after day after day. We had lived all our lives under the Russian royalties rule. We were peasants with little hope for the future. The butterflies in my stomach grew. My nervousness kept me focused on the lady. She grew larger

and larger. Little did I know about the joys and tribulations in front of me. The future was just beginning for me. I was formulating a dream and I was determined to fulfill my destiny.

As I reflect on that fateful day, I wonder if the French understood the significance the Statue of Liberty would play in the history of this country and the personal histories of those who were fortunate enough to pass her as they entered a new life. She has maintained her spot as guardian since her dedication on October 28, 1886. She was a gift of friendship from the French people and is recognized as a universal symbol of freedom and democracy. She became a National Monument in 1924, and over the years has become a tourist destination. Her undeniable representation of the American Spirit inspires and reaffirms all who visit. She poses on her pedestal holding her torch high reminding the American people of the courage, determination, and resiliency in us, her adopted population.



Her inscription, “The New Colossus”, by American poet Emma Lazarus includes, *“Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door.”* I didn't read those words. I never even heard them until years later, but I lived them. She invited me into that golden door.

I know how much that beautiful lady meant to me and countless others. I first witnessed her on that fateful day as I entered New York Harbor aboard the insufferable passenger ship. I had heard stories of the grand lady welcoming the newest American hopefuls and future citizens. I had been inspired by her beauty, strength and promise of future possibilities. I never forgot the inspiration I gathered during those moments of reflection. I learned that though this country is nowhere near perfect, it is a place to find a dream and make it come true. I knew had

I remained in Russia, there would have been no dreaming and life certainly would have revolved around survival day after endless day. I learned the true meaning of the American Dream by living it.