Finding Heimat

An excerpt from

Heart of the Home

LENA stood on the windmill's ladder, bracing herself against the harsh North Dakota winds. A howling gust chased the snow along the fields and roads, mixing it with the fine, uncovered dirt and packing it into hard drifts. Though she could see all the way down to the Sawyer schoolhouse a mile and a half away, she couldn't spot her two little boys, Kolja and Abe, making their way home.

It had been cold in Russia, but never like this.

She wished she could walk to the schoolhouse, but what if she didn't make it back home? She couldn't abandon her three young daughters waiting in the farmhouse. Four-year-old Leni was watching two-year-old Frieda, and Lena hoped baby Erna was napping. If only Nikolai were here instead of teaching a semester in Harvey.

Then from the speckled distance, two headlights of a slow-moving vehicle. She held her breath. Then two boys jumped out of the truck.

"I found them walking home from school." Mr. Jaskowski's face was lost in his cloudy breath. She struggled to decipher his English, weighted by an unfamiliar accent. "They would not have made it home. Their fingers are frostbitten. Better warm them up."

Once inside the farmhouse where a tin cup of water froze in the first-floor room, they huddled by the coal stove. Lena rubbed Kolja's and Abe's frostbitten hands and feet. Their ears, noses, and faces were discolored, their red hair and freckles a strange contrast, but they would

heal. The greater problem was that she was down to a few chunks and broken-down coal dust, how would she feed the main and upper stoves?

She longed for warmth. For *home*. In Russia, a *backofen* in the center of their home heated the entire house, making the hearth the heart of her home. Her Kolja would sleep on the warm bricks above the oven. *T'huss es T'huss, Enn hinjj' rem Owe es tweemol T'huss.* Home is home and behind the stove is twice at home.

She missed her homeland. At the heart of their village was the well, school, and church. Front doors lined the one wide lane. All the villagers spoke Plautdietsch. All the villagers were Mennonite. She was never lonely. She knew her children would never understand *Heimat* and no English could envelop what it meant.

Nothing here felt familiar. Simple tasks so much more dangerous.

"I have to go outside and milk the cow." She bit her lip, then whispered so only Kolja could hear. "Listen carefully, Nick." Her eldest was learning English and becoming less and less German. Now he went by Nick. Had he given up his Russian nickname of Kolja because they had left him behind in Crimea? Though reunited, could he ever forgive her?

"If I do not come back, run out to the barn."

"It's very cold, Mama. Be careful." Kolja shook his head as he picked up the tin pail.

The hundred foot journey to the barn blurred before her, the wind and snow stinging her eyes, each step difficult in the deep snow drifts. In Russia, where the barn was connected to the house, she enjoyed milking the cows even in cold weather. But with the icy expanse and a cow half frozen, the chore became dangerous.

Opening the gate to the stall, she pulled the milking stool beside the beast. The cow's breath plumed from its nostrils, ice crystals caking her black nose. Lena reached for the cow's bag, usually soft and warm but now firm, and slid her hands down to the teats.

The cow kicked and stepped right and left, banging its sides against the narrow stall. Lena's three-legged stool tipped sideways, and she caught the edge of the stall to keep upright. The normally docile cow could pin her to the wall, throw her body to the ground, and trample her. No one would know.

Lena rubbed the side of the cow, the friction of her hands warming them both. Clenching and unclenching her bare hands, she cupped her fingers, now red and stinging and blew warm air into them.

After repeated attempts, the cow accepted her and the tin pail began to fill with warm milk which she carried back to the house, Kolja keeping watch at the window.

For dinner she cooked borscht on the coal stove and they enjoyed zwieback dipped in warm milk. She then guided the children upstairs and to bed, and she collapsed near the stove, exhausted.

Her sleep was abruptly cut short. The fire was out, the coal was gone and it was freezing. The remaining coal had disintegrated into dust. Dust would burn, but dust could explode. Could she take the risk? But without heat, they would all freeze to death.

Lena roused the children, coaxed her shivering and sleepy family downstairs to the main level and hauled a mattress near the first-floor stove. She covered her children snugly with all the blankets from the house. Then Lena fed the stove with the fine coal dust. She had no choice.

What would happen if she fell asleep again? If the stove died out? Like the tin cup of ice on the other side of the room, there would be six frozen bodies.

When the coal dust took fire, Lena quickly closed the vents in fear and the fire died down and smoldered. When she reopened the stove door, the fire roared back to life and thick black smoke and sparks blew out. She slammed the door shut but not before the stovepipe joints had separated. Ashes like blackened butterflies settled on her children.

“Mama! Fire!” Abe screamed.

Lena swatted the ashes with a blanket and then swept away any debris from her children’s blankets, their faces, their hair. When all the embers were out, she fastened the stove pipe with a leather strap.

Then she added more fine coal. A little at a time. The children whimpered in fear and cold.

“Come close, children.” She waved them under her arms.

“Tell us a story, Mama! Tell us about when you were a little girl.” Leni begged.

Lena looked at her children, red hair peeking from under their hats, pale faces dotted with freckles, blue eyes looking up at her with longing.

“Pease, Mama, story,” Frieda begged.

But Nikolai was always the storyteller. How could she compete with his sermon voice? Then again, if she didn’t tell the stories of her past, who would?

“I lived a long way from here,” she began.

“Was it cold there too?”

“Oh yes. In Rodnitschnoje #10 snow covers the ground from October to April..”

“Is that where I was born?” Abe asked.

“No, you were born in Moscow.” He had been only a week old when they fled. He would never remember.

"But I thought we were *German*," Leni asked.

"We're Germans from Russia. That's a *longer* story." Lena paused.

"Then tell us the shorter one." Leni patted her mother's lap.

So many stories came to mind, at last Lena settled on a winter tale.

"Sometimes the snowstorms are so bad you can't see anything in front or behind you. So each villager goes to the mayor for sunflower stalks. We poke them in along all the roads. If we are caught in a storm, we can find our way by the poles."

"We should get sticks to get to the barn, Mama," Nick said.

Lena nodded to Nick and continued.

"In the summer we walk to choir practice, but when it snows, we can't walk the four and a half miles to Klubnikowa. The only horse my father would allow me to take was a wild . . . spotted . . . one." How could I possibly catch him?"

Her children all shrugged, their eyes wide. Little Frieda raised her palms in imitation.

"But the horse surprised me and let me slip the bridle over its head. Then I surprised all my friends when I picked them up by horse and sleigh, the bells on the horses ringing!"

"'You've come to get us!' they cried, jumping aboard and snuggling in with blankets just like we are right now." She pulled the quilts around her four and Frieda climbed on Lena's lap as if wanting to ride.

"But getting the horse wasn't the *most* dangerous part. The roads were so icy that I wondered if the sleigh would tip over.

"And then one night as we crossed the bridge, the sleigh started to tilt over on one side." Lena tipped to the left as her children leaned with her. "I was certain we'd hit the icy water below." Lena lowered her voice to a whisper, holding her rapt audience in suspense. "But instead, the sleigh

overturned into a ditch just fifteen feet beyond the river."

Leni slid closer. "Mama, that must have been scary."

"You could have died!" Abe said.

"No more choir practice," Nick declared, shaking his head.

"No, Kolja. I drove to choir every Wednesday after that!"

"You are brave, Mama," said Abe and Leni nodded in agreement. Lena felt Nick's hand on her shoulder.

Her breath caught. They believed in her when she could hardly believe in herself.

"I guess I am," she said at last, blinking back the tears.

After she tucked them back into bed, she whispered a prayer and reminded them they were "Mama's *kleine Lieblinge,*" her little loved ones. When she thought they were all asleep, Nick joined her by the stove.

"This is for you, Mama." He pulled a piece of red paper from his pocket. The heart she recognized, but not the words. "It says 'I love you.'" He translated, then pointed out, "Your Kolja." Nick wrapped his arms around her and didn't let go. "Happy Valentine's Day, Mama." In Plautdietsch he added, "Your hugs are best because you're soft like a pillow."

All that mattered about this American Valentine's Day were Kolja's words and his touch and the unforgotten language. And most of all, trying to keep her children alive through the rest of the night.

The next morning, Lena awakened to the sound of a truck and yanked open the front door. After their neighbor Mr. Lindstrom burst in, he slammed the door shut against the wind, his back securing it closed.

"Do you have enough food and kerosene?"

"We do." She answered.

"I was so restless. All night." Mr. Lindstrom's Swedish accent lilted like a melody. "I kept thinking of the Siemens family. So I got up early and tried driving through the snow. The drifts were too high, so I turned back."

Lena caught her breath as if that were the sad end of their story.

"So I filled the truck bed with cow manure for more traction." Mr. Lindstrom rubbed his arms and stomped his feet and looked about the room. "Mrs. Siemens, it's *very* cold in here."

"We need coal. I've been burning dust," she confessed in halting English.

He closed his eyes and shook his head. "I guess there was a reason I couldn't sleep."

When Mr. Lindstrom returned with a team of horses hitched to a sleigh loaded with coal, he pitched the big chunks of lignite through the basement window and then came inside to pack the two stoves.

Lena exhaled in relief. The children were padded from head to toe with layers of clothing. The coal fires were blazing, the rooms—even the upstairs—would warm, and the ice in the cup would melt.

Maybe this wasn't *heimat*, but it might one day be home.

Lindstrom removed his hat and, clutching it to his chest, murmured, "*Mamma gör hemmet varmt*."

Lena could almost decipher the Swedish words, but his quick translation confirmed what she already knew in her heart. "Mama makes the home warm."

The winter of 1936 was one of the coldest on record for North Dakota. People froze to death in their beds. Houses burned down from overheated stoves. One teacher attempted to walk to her country school but was later found frozen to death at the schoolhouse door. The Siemens family miraculously survived with the help of their neighbors and the grace of God.