The Cows That Saved My Great-Grandfather

When he was 7 years old, my great-grandfather was forcibly resettled to northern Kazakhstan. According to family lore-and as documents later confirmed-he had an older sister who did not survive the deportation. He never spoke about her, nor about his childhood-we only learned this story later from my great-grandmother.

The train rode for a very long time and finally stopped in the middle of the steppe. Seven-year-old Viktor and his mother were simply left behind under the open Kazakh sky. His father, Alexander-August, was already in the "Trudarmia" at that time. Two years later, he joined them, already sick and broken, and lived with them for only three more months before he was laid to rest in the cemetery of a village that no longer exists today.

TI1eir first task was to dig an earthen cave where they would spend the winter. Two sleeping areas were built along the edges of the pit. Opposite the entrance was the stove, and right next to it was the "kitchen" with shelves that had simply been dug into the ground. For the roof, they used whatever boards, rags, and straw they could find.

At the age of 7, Viktor experienced hunger for the first time. He carried this experience with him throughout his life, along with a respect for every meal and for the "dacha," from which he expected above all a good harvest and not a comfortable retreat. The culmination of his response to this sense of unease was his enrollment in an agricultural university and his entire subsequent career, which led him to become the director of the Institute of Animal Feed at the Siberian Academy of Sciences of the USSR.

Even as a scientist, he surprised colleagues from the GDR during meetings with his impeccable German-featuring 18th-century phrases that his ancestors had brought with them. "It's like something out of a fairy tale," they said.

And in the meantime-cows saved the 7-year-old boy. By a stroke of luck, he became a shepherd's assistant. The farmers in the surrounding villages entrusted their cows to him because the men had gone to the front and there was a shortage of labor. He later told his wife, my great-grandmother, that without this work he would surely have starved to death or frozen to death. When no one was looking, he drank milk straight from the udder and kept warm by hiding between the backs of the lying cows-there he made himself a

a warm bed and a stove in which bread was baked. Bread, harvests, and various still lifes later became a constant theme in the pictures, posters, and magazine clippings in our family. A reproduction of Shishkin's painting "Rye Field" hung in their apartment. Now it hangs in our home.

Well, he raised two children and brought up grandchildren, including my dad, with whom he often spoke. He had a successful career as the director of an institute and wrote several books on how to grow peas and soybeans under Siberian conditions. When he gave lectures on livestock breeding to farmers in Mongolia and Kazakhstan--did he remember the cows that had saved him?

In 2018, we moved to Germany. My great-grandfather died in 1999, my great-grandmother in 2015; they remained there, and I'm sure they wouldn't approve of what's happening in Russia right now. Viktor never wanted to leave; any change in life made him uncomfortable. As a true intellectual, he believed only in human reason and in work; he paid no attention to nationality.

Viktor valued the comfort of home and the warmth of family; he didn't like arguments or hurt feelings. I see that my dad has taken after him a lot, and I believe that it is precisely this ability to compromise with those close to us that holds our family together and keeps us united. It's a bit rustic, but when you think about it: every member of my family, from our distant colonist ancestors all the way to my grandpa, was connected to fanning-they either learned these trades or worked in the fields.

In 2018, we moved to Germany-the very place from which another, distant ancestor of mine, Johann, set out for Russia with his family in 1769. And so the long journey has come to an end; the circle has closed. Or has it?