

## A Matter of Family

1803 Words

Much as the sunset lays a crimson light path across the calm surface of the ocean, the rising sun sent twin sheets of fire along the steel rails of the Trans-Siberian Railway; looking as though it might ignite the sea of grass stretching to the horizon outside the village of Yonevsibirsk. Atop a stone wall, a goshawk surveilled his fiefdom in the slowly strengthening light. Searching the rolling tableland for any sign of movement, the aerial hunter preened its feathers and haughtily ignored the elderly woman in the enclosure behind him. When the sun was clearly above the junction of earth and sky, the raptor gave a mighty flap of wing and sinew; rising rapidly into the air and soaring toward the western horizon.

Perhaps it was the stark contrast between the ordered formations of weathered headstones in the small section of the cemetery (the military grave sites holding their occupants in taunt embrace) and the freedom of the goshawk soaring in the clear spring morning that struck a poetic chord in Valentina Ayemarsenko Harrison. In any event, she found the flight of the goshawk in the boundless sky above the sweeping plain of wildflowers and grasses a hauntingly beautiful sight. Turning her attention once more to a specific headstone, she spoke softly to the young adult standing near her.

“Do you think they’ll get here soon, Nicholas?”

“I can’t say for sure, Grandmother. I only paid them a third of the agreed upon price so they wouldn’t forget about us; but who can tell. We’re foreigners here. Easy enough to rip us off, I suppose. But with Dad escorting them back and the lure of the remaining cash, I think it’s enough--if they aren’t too drunk or hung-over to function.”

“I can’t believe we really found it, Nicholas. When I was a child and your great-grandmother would tell me those stories, it seemed like a fairy tale to me...like it should have started ‘once upon a time in a land far away’ ”. I used to picture Yonevsibersk in my head as a fairy castle complete with a fire-breathing dragon and trench-coated guards on the battlements. It’s hard to believe there really is a Yonevsibersk, and that we actually found it.”

“I admit I never really thought we could do it, Grandmother. Few Americans even know we had soldiers in Siberia during the Russian Civil War, much less that there are American Military Cemeteries in Russia. I never for a moment thought we could actually get into Siberia. Even my history professor thought it a masterful achievement when I told him you had the Russian entry permits. Nothing we do in class seems to make an impression on him, so it is a very impressive achievement indeed.”

“Perhaps. But it was your great-grandmother who was truly impressive...and him,” she said, nodding toward the headstone.

“Its not much of a place, us it? Just a village like thousands of others in Siberia. It hardly seems worth fighting a battle over.”

“It’s the railroad, Nicholas. This river is the last significant natural obstacle before Chita. Take Yonevsibirsk and the way is open through Chita and the Chinese Eastern Railroad, all the way to Harbin and Vladivostok. Chita was always the prize in this part of Siberia.”

When in March, 1918, the Bolsheviks signed a treaty at Brest-Litovsk that unilaterally pulled Russia out of the First World War; Britain, France, Italy and America were left to face the entire German military machine alone. In May, 1918, however, with the Czech Legion openly rebelling and the Bolsheviks enmeshed in a bloody civil war; the Allies saw an opportunity to relieve pressure on the Western Front by re-establishing an Eastern Front with Czech and anti-Bolshevik White Russian Forces; supplying them from the seaport at Vladivostok via the Trans-Siberian Railroad. In support of this, in August, 1918; British, French, Japanese and American military personnel arrived at Vladivostok and deployed into Siberia; guarding the strategically important railroad supply line. With the collapse of German military power in November 1918, the great plain stretching from Central Hungary to the western borders of China once again became a highway of conquest, as the Red Army drove the Whites eastward, spreading Bolshevik power into Siberia. And with the retreating White Russian forces came an army of destitute refugees fleeing the Bolsheviks.

“Your great-grandmother’s stories were so vivid, Nicholas! I can close my eyes and almost see an armored train pulling onto the siding over there--sergeants barking orders--refugees fleeing in horror from the troops on the train. Your great-grandmother always told me what terrified her most was that the armored trains brought only salvation or death when they arrived--nothing in between; and she was never certain which it was going to be. That she survived to have me is a miracle, Nicholas, let alone to escape from the Bolsheviks through China!” Startled, she abruptly turned her head toward the gateway, saying, “Do you hear that?”

“It sounds like a wagon, Grandmother. I think they’re finally here. With luck they’ll be done in a few hours at most. Should be no trouble getting the train to Chita tonight. Is the chair comfortable enough, Grandmother?”

“Its’s fine, Nicholas. Just fine.”

With her plans progressing satisfactorily, Valentina allowed her thoughts to drift across the years to the stories her mother repeatedly told her as a little girl. Stories about a young White Army nurse forced to cross the Angarsk River and flee on foot when Red agitators seized Irkutsk and cut the rail ties to Vladivostok. Of how this nurse arrived at Yonevsibersk starving, exhausted, and utterly dispirited; without hope and convinced she had no future. And of how an American Sgt. named Richard Nicholas Harrison turned her life around; convincing her that love was not reserved for a lucky few and that where there is love; there remains hope for the future. It was here she was married, as the battles for control of Yonevsibersk raged, and the Red Army was repelled time after time. Yonevsibersk was critical to the defense of Chita where the Chinese Eastern Railroad originated from the Trans-Siberian rail-bed. With the Reds holding Khabarovsk, it was the last remaining escape route to the east. It was here, at Yonevsibirsk she realized she was pregnant. And it was here Sgt. Harrison was killed in one of the final battles for control of the village. At his funeral, she had vowed to him to tell their child his story and someday, somehow, to bring him home. She had left Yonevsibersk on one of the final trains to Chita; but with the advance of the Red Army, it proceeded on to Harbin in Manchuria. While side-tracked at Harbin, she learned the British, French, and American military personnel, far from regrouping to retake Chita, were being ordered to withdraw from Siberia. Arriving at Vladivostok at the end of July, 1920; she was one of the last civilians evacuated from the port.

“Mother. Mother, it’s Richard. Mother, wake up.”

“Oh Richard, I’m sorry. I must have dozed off. Is everything OK?”

“It’s fine, Mother. We’re done now and we need to get going. Nicholas is already on the wagon. Wolves roam in these parts by night, so we need to reach the rail depot before dark.”

At the cemetery gate, Valentina asked for a halt. With a final look toward the gravesite, she turned to the west, watching the wind ripple the grasses that stretched to the horizon. How peaceful and pretty the plains were, she thought.

Placing her hand on her son’s arm, she said simply, “We can go now, Richard.”

It was nearly dark when they arrived at the Yonevsibersk train depot. So much about this trip to the East was different from the journey made by her mother! Unlike the steam locomotive which carried her mother to Chita and Harbin; the shiny diesel-electric engine of the modern Trans-Siberian Railway was aerodynamically designed. Unlike the hard wooden benches that passed for accommodations on her mother’s train, the sleeping cars were modern and comfortable, even for a woman in her mid seventies. And this time, the train took the northern route from Chita, following the parabolic arc that carried the rail-bed along the Russian side of the Amur River to Khabarovsk. As she rode the steel rails across the Asian landmass, Valentina stared out the window far into the night; the thoughts and feelings upwelling in her far too intense for sleep. Finally, shortly before dawn, she dozed.

In the late evening of the second day on the train, they arrived at Khabarovsk, where the railroad turned south to follow the Ussuri River to Vladivostok. Here they left the train for Khabarovsk airport. With all their papers in order, they boarded their flight without incident; passing across the moonlit Bering Straights like an apparition in the mist. Landing on American

soil at Anchorage, Alaska, they processed customs and made their connections to the Lower 48. On the 4th day after leaving Yonevsibersk, they arrived at Gallatin Field Airport near Belgrade, Montana. And a few hours later, they were home.

### Epilogue

On an overcast day in May, 1993, a military funeral was held at a small cemetery outside Elkhorn Mountain, Montana. In the watery daylight, the wind created ripples in the buffalo grass, which stretched to the horizon; dotted throughout with wildflowers. When the ceremony was completed and the carefully folded American Flag was given to the elderly woman seated at the graveside, another American soldier had finally come home. However, as the mourners disbursed the elderly woman remained, seemingly content to watch the wind ruffle the grasslands and a hawk circle in the sky searching his domain for prey. She was accompanied by two men (one young enough to have been the son of the other) who patiently waited upon her. As the sun approached the horizon and the wind died away to a gentle breeze, the woman slowly moved to the graveside and knelt; her voice consistent with the solemnity of the sacred ground.

“ You can rest now, Mother. I kept your vow...I brought him home. And You were right. Where there is love, there is always hope for the future.”

With that she slowly rose, her aging joints stiff and painful. Steadying herself with her cain, she wiped away a tear; then smiled at her son and grandson as they came to her side. Slowly, with an immense amount of dignity, she walked toward the waiting car.

I attest to the truth of these events, for I witnessed them myself. I am Nicholas Ayemarsenko Harrison, and this is a history forever seared upon my soul.