

A Window to the Past
by Krista Adamovich

Untouched by man, the snow lay still and smooth, cloaked in white purity. Guilt filled my every step as piles of snow crumbled helplessly under my heavy feet. At the door I paused to look upon the path my footsteps had made only to become discouraged at the beauty I had destroyed.

Silently, she sat by the drafty window in her dimly lit apartment. Her long, silver hair fell in frantic, unruly curls about her face, yet she made no attempt to brush them aside. When she spoke, it was not as if she was directing her words toward me, or anyone else in the room. Instead she spoke to the window and the winter winds blowing feverishly outside. She asks if I ever noticed how one could feel and smell a snowstorm hours before the first flakes begin to fall. The harsh Russian winters of her youth had left her with a sixth sense in predicting oncoming blizzards. Slowly she lets out a shallow sigh as she remembers how her family could feel the oncoming revolution months before 1917. The Bolsheviks' climb to power was a slow and involved process, much like the time it takes for a few snowflakes to turn into a blizzard. She tells how the smell of revolution was powerful enough to encourage the majority of her family to escape Russia before it was too late. Her father, however, was a Cossack, a royal officer to the Tsar and a servant to Russia. Despite the Bolsheviks' increasing power and the threat of revolution, her father remained close to the Tsar, putting himself in constant danger. For the first time, tears fill her eyes, and she tells me the sad horror that the Revolution inflicted upon her family. Like an unstoppable force of nature, the Russian communist party not only tore apart the government of 1917, but also divided families and destroyed the lives of many Russians.

The woman sitting in the chair revealing her life story to me is my grandmother. Although the memories are painful for her to recall, she states how important it is to know one's heritage. As a child, I was weaned on the stories of my Russian ancestors, and in school I had read textbooks discussing the Russian Revolution of 1917. She does not believe me when I tell her I am familiar with Lenin and Stalin and all the aspects of the Russian communist government. As always, the mention of communism makes her shiver. Textbooks do not give accurate personal accounts of those who lived through the traumas of Russian Communism. Although the Russian economy was suffering under Tsar Nicholas II, the Bolsheviks' violent rise to power did little to ease the suffering of the Russian peasants. Instead of offering people political freedom and economic stability, communism instilled them with constant fear. They were afraid to protest against communism and afraid to dream of democracy. If their secret desires were discovered they were labeled as Bellerus, or White Russians, and seen solely as an enemy of the state. All those guilty of communist opposition were destroyed, because, as Stalin himself once said, "How can you make a revolution without making executions?" (Freedom and Revolution).

The white air hides the rolling hills and woods, the river, and even the heavens. A veil is pulled over the country and all is silent, and waiting

Even before my grandmother was conceived, Russia was in turmoil. My great-grandfather, Mattius, was aware of the hardships of the proletariat and peasant classes because every day he protected the man who did little to ease their burdens. He was a Cossack soldier, a personal guard to

Nicholas II, Tsar of Russia. An independent and adventurous boy of eighteen years, Mattius said goodbye to his family, left the remote little farm he called home, and set off to join the Cossacks. He managed to provide his own horse, uniform, and weapons, in exchange for the number of economic privileges that came with being a Cossack. Although the Cossacks did not openly support the state bureaucracy, they respected the authority of the Russian Tsar and Russian Patriarch. While vigorously defending the Romanov dynasty, the Cossacks were aware that the Tsars weren't always just and often committed wrongs against the citizens. Starting in January of 1905 with the Bloody Sunday rebellion, restlessness filled the air in St. Petersburg. This uneasiness was postponed when Tsar Nicholas II promised a constitution to his people in that same year. In the following years, Mattius worked loyally at protecting the Tsar while simultaneously falling in love with and marrying Catherine, a servant at one of the Tsar's Ukrainian palaces. While my grandmother lay growing in her mother's womb, acts of revolution caused by the unrest of the Russian working class were temporarily interrupted by the outbreak of World War I. However, Mattius knew that it was only a matter of time before the people rose up again in a stronger protest.

My grandmother squints as if desperately trying to grasp an image of her late father. She tells me how her father loved Russia more than his own life, which is why he later stayed in the country while the rest of his family fled. Mattius, a true patriot, served Russia to the fullest of his abilities, fulfilling every wish of the Tsar. However, the Romanov dynasty was a crumbling enterprise under the weak and inadequate leadership of Nicholas II, and often the commands of this leader were unjust to the citizens of Russia. The peasants were hungry, and the proletariats were overworked and severely underpaid. The country was in turmoil as the people of Russia began to rise up and demand the aid of Nicholas II. Fearing any hints of revolution, the Tsar called upon his military to suppress any rioting Russian citizens by opening fire on them. Mattius felt torn between his duties to the Tsar and the sympathy he felt for the burdens of fellow Russians. All of the Russian people were of a common culture, language, religion, and no matter how hard he tried, Mattius could not become a rival of the people he considered his own brothers and sisters. The Tsarist government used Cossack troops to suppress the Russian Revolution of 1905; they refused to be used for the same purpose in the Revolution of 1917, which allowed the Bolsheviks to overtake the country with ease (Kochukov).

The ship awaits its travelers, but they are stopped and delayed. Their friends shout out, and their family members weep, for they doubt they will ever be reunited. On their final night, the housemates sit around the radiant fireplace, enclosed in tumultuous emotions of storm.

Months before the revolution my family left the threat of Communism and moved towards the freedom America had to offer. After a series of strikes broke out in the capital city of Petrograd (formerly St. Petersburg), and with the abdication of Nicholas II on March 15, 1917, Mattius arranged a home for his wife Catherine and his two children with a distant relative in America. Over the months of 1917 the Cossacks worked closely with the Tsar and the new Provisional Government; however, WWI only magnified Russia's problems. Russia was unprepared both militarily and technologically for the total war taking place on its borders. Russia's inability to produce sufficient weapons and a lack of military leadership led to the death of over 2 million soldiers between 1914-1916, while another 5 million were wounded or captured (Spielvogel and Duiker). By 1917, the

Russian will to fight had vanished. The Provisional Government's decision to continue WWI was an attempt to boost Russian morale but ended in a major blunder because it satisfied neither the workers nor the peasants. The incompetence of the Provisional Government led to the rise of a small faction of Marxist Social Democrats in the Bolshevik Party. As my grandmother departed from her Russian home without her beloved father in April of 1917, V.I. Lenin was released from exile in Switzerland and traveled to Russia to lead the Bolsheviks (Spielvogel and Duiker).

Under Lenin's direction, the Bolsheviks became a party dedicated to violent revolution. Lenin believed that only a violent revolution could destroy the capitalist system. When the Provisional Government was formed, Lenin saw this as his chance to overthrow them and seize power. Bolshevik propaganda sought mass support through false guarantees geared towards the people, such as the promise to end war, the redistribution of all land to the peasants, and the transfer of all factories and industries from capitalists to the committees of workers (Spielvogel and Duiker). The people of Russia were so desperate for leadership, they did not stop to realize Lenin was promising them the impossible. On the nights of November 6th and 7th, Bolshevik forces seized the Winter Palace, the seat of the Provisional Government, with little bloodshed. Mattius and the Cossacks watched helplessly as the government they were willing to forfeit their lives for became powerless. The Bolsheviks soon renamed themselves the Communists, and the Council of People's Commissars, headed by Lenin, held its power. Lenin had promised the people of Russia peace and so signed the Treaty of Brest-Litvosk in order to withdraw from WWI. However, the Treaty meant a humiliating loss of Russian territory, the forfeiting of Poland, the Ukraine, Finland, and the Baltic Provinces to Germany (Freedom and Revolution). At the Communist Party's first attempt at governing, they humiliated their country and lost the lands previously promised to the peasants for redistribution. Lenin promised peace to the Russian people, but it was an illusion that never came, for the country where my great-grandfather remained with the majority of my family soon sunk into civil war.

He wonders when his hours are numbered, yet he battles on. Despite the coldness of the air, and the wetness that saturates the ground, he battles on, and in the whiteness of the night, the world is all his own, offering him no hope of retiring.

During the Russian Civil War between the years 1918-1920, Cossack lands became a cradle of the White Movement and the main center of resistance to the Bolsheviks. Mattius separated from his family in order to protect the Tsar and fight for the Russia he loved. When the Romanov family was captured, no one knew for sure if Nicholas II had survived. Eagerly, Mattius and fellow Cossacks hid out awaiting the return of the Tsar. The once fearless soldiers now ventured out of hiding only at night, and dressed heavily in thick cloaks to protect themselves from the harshness of the winter weather. In reality, they became outlaws, the hated Bellerus, the White Russians who dared to oppose the Communists. The majority of the Cossack soldiers began to form White armies to fight against the Bolsheviks. Mattius became part of a force that attacked the Communists from the Siberian front. The battles were endless and cruel, and the snow of the land turned from glistening white to a haunting crimson hue. Slowly some Cossacks, out of fear and cowardice, began to drift over to Lenin's side and fight for the Red Army. The remaining Cossacks fought heavily on three fronts and experienced the majority of losses in the bloody war. Discouraged by the traitors who joined the Red

Army and affected by the deaths of dozens of close friends killed in battle, Mattius joined the tens of thousands of Cossacks and their families who left Russia and the Ukraine for the United States. By mid-1919, two years after the initial departure, Mattius rejoined Catherine and their two children in New York. However, the ongoing civil war in Russia was leading to the annihilation of the Cossack people. Lenin saw the organized and armed Cossacks as a threat to the communist state. Their land and property was confiscated, millions of Cossacks were repressed, and over 1.5 million were killed (Kochukov). Cossack traditions and unions were associated with the pre-communist Russia and were abolished. The Bolsheviks desperately attempted to eradicate the Cossacks from existence; however, one never loses one's love for one's homeland.

A sigh of relief escapes the old woman's cracked and aged mouth. She closes her eyes, and I imagine she is once again reliving the blissful day when her father was finally able to rejoin his family in America. The United States offered freedom and shelter to many refugees of Communism. Russians, who immigrated to America in order to escape Lenin and the Red Army, deserted their families back home and started new lives from nothing. When Mattius was reunited with his wife and children, he found that years of the lives of the people he loved the most were gone forever. Mattius' absence from his family prevented him from witnessing his son's first steps, my grandmother's first days of school, and countless birthdays and anniversaries of those he cherished. Communism had destroyed their attempt to be a normal, loving, and supportive family. Mattius was now a stranger to his own kin, and alone in a new country. He felt guilt for abandoning his parents and siblings still stranded in Red Russia. Eagerly at first, my grandmother, Catherine, and Mattius kept up a correspondence with their relatives still troubled in Russia; however, over time their lives became too different, and they began to lose touch. The Communist society began to influence the structure of families in Russia. Relationships between the sexes began to transform as women were withheld from Russian communities. Private property was confiscated, and children were educated on a communal basis: "This removed the basis for traditional marriages out of Russian Society--the dependence rooted in private property, of the women on the man, and of the children on the parents" (Engels). The close-knit families once found in Russia slowly diminished, including those of my ancestors.

In the beginning, Communism seemed to the people of Russia like a utopian ideal, promising the elimination of classes, guaranteeing employment, "The creation of a comprehensive social security and welfare system for all citizens that would end the misery of workers once and for all." Lenin did have some successes during his rule, such as the radical changes in the Soviet Union's economic doctrines, which adopted a mixed economy. Lenin established the New Economic Policy also referred to as NEP, which called for some private ownership of the means of production, but the majority of industry was made the property of the people, which meant the majority of the means of production was controlled by the government (Farah 582). Lenin's government during this period of Communist rule believed in the censorship and subordination of the people.

Lenin died in 1924, and was quickly followed by Joseph Stalin as head of the Soviet Communist Party. The oppressive reforms started by Lenin were continued by Stalin, and Russia became a state of complete totalitarianism. Stalin became the most powerful man in Russia, controlling the bulk of all the political power and starting a ruthless campaign to remove all opposition to Communist rule. During this period called the "Great Purge," Stalin systemically executed anyone who stood in his path. Millions of people were arrested and either harassed or killed.

More people died during these Red purges than all during the Holocaust (Spielvogel and Duiker). Countless numbers of my White Russian cousins were among those who disappeared during this period of severe human rights violations. Children quickly became orphans, as Russia's fate lay in the hands of the merciless communists.

When the sun appears, the world seems like a piece of astonished art. The snow-covered structures mimic those of trees and stones. Nothing built by the hands of man could compare with the night work of the blizzard's mad winds and the magnificent architecture of the snow.

During this period, the citizens of Russia endured great hardships. Agricultural production output diminished, resulting in food shortages; these shortages were enhanced by the mass exportation of food to pay for the country's industrial imports. Stalin called for the production of goods like machines and weapons over the production of basic consumer goods like clothes and other staples. During this period the Second World War broke out and drained most of what was left of the already impoverished state (Farah 586).

Although my grandmother should be growing tired, she forges on in her story, as if the power of her words is providing her with strength. Her colorless cheeks become flushed in excitement, despite the obvious lack of heat in the room. She is concerned now only with the Russians in America, those who, like herself, became victims of their own heritage. In the years after World War II, the United States government, along with the majority of Western European countries, began to fear Russia's Communist society and its government that threatened the power of democracies. With this Cold War came the Red Scare in the United States. My grandmother and her family lived in fear of being falsely identified as anarchists. Every day during the McCarthy Era they prayed that society would let them pass by unnoticed. My father, now in high school, was constantly ridiculed and harassed by fellow students. My grandmother was mysteriously dismissed from her factory job, and it became hard for her to support her growing family. Mattius too was victimized by the ignorance of the neighbors he once considered his friends. Often as he passed they would whisper lies about his contempt for democracy, and, at times, they would even accuse him of being an international spy. As hard as life in America was for Russian immigrants, my family still avidly worked to maintain relations with our Russian ancestors who were suffering under Stalin's reign. When my grandmother was laid off, we could no longer send them the money and objects they so desperately needed. Once support from America stopped coming, my Russian family began to lose hope in democracy. All ties were severed between our communist relatives and my independent family in America.

Relations among the different ethnic groups that lived within the Soviet Union were very tense and sometimes openly hostile when the Communist Government attempted to make a single Soviet culture of its diverse citizens. The educational system in the Soviet Union caused tension because it was based on communist ideals of obedience to the Communist Party and atheism, among other things. Students were forced into assigned jobs upon graduation, whether they desired them or not. Failure to perform well in their occupation ruined their chances for future advancement. Not surprisingly, graduates often committed suicide. Among those who took their lives because of the conformity enforced by Communism was Sergei, the twenty-four-year-old son of Mattius's brother, a nephew Mattius had never met and would never know. In addition, the health care system was under-

funded and medical supplies were scarce. Most hospitals were under-staffed and contained outdated equipment. This led to the gradual decrease in the life expectancy of a Russian citizen. Poor standards of sanitation and public hygiene led to an increased annual death rate and a drop in the birth rate. The years of social problems and mismanagement of the country's resources led to the disintegration of the Communist Regime as the economy slowed and citizen support for the government diminished (Spielvogel and Duiker).

The day the Soviet Union fell, my family wept. To this day, I am still unsure if they were tears of joy or sadness. Undoubtedly, my family felt relief because they no longer had to live in fear of a Communist Regime. I am sorry my great-grandfather Mattius was not alive to see the fall of the government that had destroyed his once prominent and thriving family. His personal battle with Communism lasted nearly a century and shaped the history of my family. Had Lenin never come to Russia, the nation might still be under the Romanov Dynasty. My family, like countless others, would never have had to flee their homeland and would be united today.

Once again my grandmother stares out the window as new flakes begin to fall on the already snow-covered ground. A storm is coming; she tells me to start hurrying home. At first, when I remember my home is oceans away from hers, I find her comment ironic. However, as I step outside into the brisk twilight, it occurs to me that one's home exists, not in a single location, but, instead, everywhere one is with family.

The flurry begins in a desperate attempt to blanket the ground once again in the fine powder. The new flakes swirl in the wind before they rapidly fall to the ground, desperately trying to fill the holes that my footsteps had made earlier that crisp evening. Tomorrow the world will awake to a magnificent brightness, but the damage from my footsteps will still taint the path.

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