

A Home in America

A VOLGA GERMAN STORY

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This story begins in the Volga River region of Russia, first settled in the mid 1760s, by Germany's people made destitute in their own country by wars and the ruling class. By grim determination, they carved a life out of the wild untamed land, but, as the years passed, and Russia begin to make demands, among them the threat of forced military service, many left the country. This is a fictional story based on oral and written accounts of those Volga Germans who immigrated to America.

CHAPTER ONE

GREAT-GRANDMOTHER'S
CHILD

In a way I am my Great-Grandmother's child, more than Father's and, of course, more than my mother's, for she died when I was born twelve years ago, August 28 of 1880. Peter and Michael were just little boys then. Although Michael was too young to remember our mother, Peter remembers her a little and we envy him, even those few small memories.

Still I know we were lucky to have Great-Grandmother, for she was a good mother to us, and especially good for me. She has taught me all the ways of keeping house, while Peter and Michael, being boys, were soon trailing after Father. Then, two years ago, Leah and Father were married and she now manages our household. It is good we have her, because Great-Grandmother is now blind and too old and feeble to do the work needed to keep a house in order, and I'm too young.

My name is Eva Maria, the same as my mother's, but I'm called just Eva—except by Great-Grandmother.

“Come, Eva Maria,” she says, now, “Let me see if you have that braid tight, so it won't fall out before bedtime.”

“Yes Great-Grandmother,” I say, smiling. Since she can no longer manage to braid the three thick strands of my hair into the fat braid that hangs down my back, her fingers misshapen and stiff, I do my own. But she always examines it when I’m finished. Now, near summer’s end, my hair is nearly white, bleached out by long days in the sun. Great-Grandmother calls my hair flaxen.

“My hair was flaxen when I was a girl,” she says, “my eyes as blue as yours.”

I kneel on the floor beside her feather bed, my head bent so her gentle hands, old and thick-veined, can examine my braid.

“It is good,” she says, and I raise my head to see her smile, slow and gentle, lips closed over toothless gums. Her sightless eyes, faded to a bluish-white, look at me as if she can see me.

I mention this to Leah, as we gather up the milk pails and step out into the early morning darkness. She looks at me and says, “She sees you, Eva, but it is with her heart and the eyes of memory.”

Although darkness shadows her face, I hear the softness in her voice and I know she is smiling.

Father and Leah married after her husband died of a long sickness. Leah is ten years younger than Father and has no children. We like her very much, for she is kind and gentle and fits into our family as if she has always been here. Father says our mother would have liked her too.

“We all change on the outside as time passes,” Leah says now, “but we are still us inside—even Great-Grandmother. Although she is ninety-two, blind, and no longer able to do the work we now do, she is still Maria Mueller—still herself inside.”

I think of my friend Mia whose grandmother is not nearly as old as Great-Grandmother, but doesn’t know anyone anymore, not Mia, or even Mia’s father, her own son. “Is Mia’s grandmother still herself inside?” I ask.

“Perhaps it is like sleeping and dreaming,” Leah says. “We do not know ourselves then.”

She sighs. “I think she will wake to her true self when she passes from this world.”

At the cow shed, Leah picks up a milking stool and says, “We are blessed that Great-Grandmother knows us still, even if she cannot see us. She knows our voices, and her memory is still very good.”

I like that Leah says just Great-Grandmother, not your Great-Grandmother. I remember at the wedding, she looked at all of us, including Great-Grandmother, and quoted from the Bible, a passage from the Book of Ruth, the part that says, *Thy people shall be my people. Where thou goest, I will go. Where thou lodgest, I will lodge.*

“Mai says her family hopes to leave for America next summer. She says her grandmother will go live with Mai’s uncle, the oldest son who is too old for Russia to take into the military. Mia says it makes her sad to think of never seeing them again.”

I think of Great-Grandmother—of leaving her, and I say to Leah, “I’m glad we are not going to America.”

Leah says nothing.

The cows are eager to be milked for they want to go with old Heinrich and the rest of the village cows to pasture. He stays with them all day and brings them back to the village for the evening milking, and where they will be safe through the night from hungry wolves.

Leah finishes milking her cow first. She leaves the pail for me to bring to the house with mine, and hurries back to get Great-Grandmother up and breakfast ready.

Father and my brothers are also out in this quiet darkness before dawn. They send our horses with Alex Herrman who takes all the villagers’ horses to pasture each day. Alex is young, only fourteen, but a capable boy and his horse is well-trained. Father speaks highly of him.

Father and Peter clean the barn and the cow shed each morning. They add the manure, dropped by our horses and cows in the night, to the growing pile beside the barn. Later we will mix it with water and straw and spread it out to dry. When it is dry and odorless, it is cut it into blocks and stacked for use in our cooking and heating fires.

Michael is bringing up water from the pond the early day villagers made by making a dam in the

creek. He carries two buckets hanging on either side from the yoke across his shoulders.

The creek runs clear and cold past the village and empties into the great Volga River where the waters mingle and run on to the sea. I think of all who have left our village this year, and in years past, most to America. Uncle Johann, my mother's brother, has been in America five years, almost half of my life, so I barely remember him, or his wife, our Aunt Anna.

I hope we never go to America, at least not until I'm grown up and Great-Grandmother has gone to be with my mother.