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How Stalin Turned Russian Patriots Into Enemies

By Marilyn Murray

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Time to live

They arrived early. My hand was nervous as I unlocked my small Moscow apartment. As I opened the door, it framed two elderly men with their daughters. The men's straight backs stood in contrast to their age and their past. One was tall with a gaunt face whose thick glasses made his eyes more hollow and haunting. The other was smaller with larger ears and a face that broke into a familiar smile as he held out a large jar of amber honey. I was startled that he looked so much like my father.

As a child, my father refused to speak of his childhood. When he died in 1984, I only knew that his parents had been born in Russia and lived in villages near Saratov. After the Soviet collapse, a cousin in Oklahoma contacted me with information regarding the family members who had remained in Russia. Fortunately, he was finally able to find one of our cousins named Johannes, who now lives in Osinniki in the Kemerovo region, and he began corresponding with him.

When I moved to Moscow in 2002, I had a strong desire to meet Johannes. His daughter, Mina, and a nephew, Vladimir, lived near Moscow, and after meeting with them, arrangements were made for Johannes to visit me. My nephew, Tim, would come from Krasnodar to serve as our interpreter.

Vladimir had arranged an additional surprise for this momentous day: He was able to locate another cousin, Ivan, in Izhevsk, the capital of Udmurtia. Vladimir learned that Ivan and Johannes were first cousins, lived next door to each other and were basically raised as brothers, but both had been sent to gulags in Siberia in 1941 and had no contact since that time.

Vladimir arranged for Ivan and his daughter to visit Moscow at the same time as Johannes and Mina, but this would be a surprise for both men. They met for the first time in 63 years just moments before they entered my apartment.

The men were stunned to know the other was still alive. They each had assumed the other had died in the gulag camps. Russian flew across the room for the next 12 hours as we crowded around a make-shift table with an endless supply of food and stories.

There were many tears that day as the history of what our family endured under the Soviet system was laid before us. At first Johannes and Ivan were eager to share about their wives and children and their present-day lives. But as the day progressed and shadows slipped through the windows, the mood shifted. Perhaps the cover of darkness made it safer to mention painful memories.

They began asking each other about various family members and to reminisce regarding the last time they saw each other at ages 17 and 20.

They wept as they remembered those tragic years and how frightening and confusing it was. It was early September when the Soviet police came to their village and told them they could only take a few things with them — some clothes, a few cooking utensils and a little food. Everything else had to be abandoned: homes, livestock and precious belongings representing generations of our family, who were among the first settlers of this village in 1767.

They were placed onto carts and taken to a railway station, where they were forced into box cars for a two-week journey to Siberia. There was little water and no sanitation facilities. Some villagers died along the way.

After arriving in Siberia, families were separated knowing they probably would never see each other again. Johannes and his 15-year-old brother, Peter, were sent to work in a lumber camp where the conditions were abominable. The guards were cruel and shot anyone who tried to escape or slacked off in their work.

They slept on four-level plank-beds without a mattress. Their two changes of clothes quickly became infected with lice. Once or twice a month they were deloused and allowed to wash their clothes. Their clothing and bedding were completely inadequate for Siberian winters. There was never enough food — only a small piece of bread and watery soup.

Tim whispered to me, "The word they are using to describe themselves is 'slaves.'"

Then Johannes stood up and began to share what happened to his younger brother. He grabbed the back of his thigh and said, "Every day a guard came up and grabbed us here. If there was any flesh at all between your skin and your bones, you had to work even though you were so weak you were like the walking dead. One day, the guard found no flesh at all on Peter. My brother begged to go where our mother and sister, Anna, lived in a village outside the camp."

His tears were a mirror of that horrific time as he said, "It was very cold and snowing. Peter died that night. My father had been sent to a different camp and we presumed he was dead. My youngest sister had died in Anna's arms a few months before. There was no medical treatment available. It is a miracle that any of us survived."

Ivan's story was the same, with death, starvation and brutal conditions. When World War II ended in 1945, they were not allowed to return to their village near Saratov. Johannes was forced to work underground in a mine for 25 years where the conditions were oppressive and dangerous.

The evening was already long when I asked what it was like in the village before they were sent to Siberia. My cousins answered with two words: "We starved."

The conversation then included the exceedingly traumatic times in the 1920s-30s when family members died of starvation and were executed, beaten to death and even buried alive by Soviet henchmen simply because they were hard-working farmers declared as kulaks and thus "enemies of the people."

Our family originally settled in Russia at the invitation of Catherine the Great from an area in Europe that is now Germany. Even though they had been loyal Russian citizens for 174 years, when the Nazis invaded Russia, Stalin declared them "enemies of the people." They were shipped to Siberia with an edict stating they could never again return to the village they had inhabited for almost two centuries.

Touching the survivors and learning of the extermination of my family became one of the most momentous days of my life.

Today we hear talk of "Russia for Russians," but Josef Stalin was Georgian, and Vladimir Lenin's ancestors were Chuvash, Kalmyk, Jewish, Swedish and German. So who is genuinely a Russian in this eclectic land that has more than 100 ethnic groups?

I believe citizenship is paid for by generations of people who love their land — and who pay in blood and sacrificed lives.

Marilyn Murray is an educator specializing in the treatment of trauma, abuse and deprivation, with more than 2,000 people attending her classes in Russia and other countries from the Commonwealth of Independent States over the past 10 years. Her second book, "The Murray Method," was recently released in English and Russian.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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