

## Freedom and Exile

Galen Wilson

Mud squished softly beneath Ludmilla's cloth-shoed feet as she shifted her slender frame from one foot to the next, trying to catch a glimpse of the camp from between the hundreds of other prisoners standing between her and the gates. She could just barely make out the shape of the tall American officer who had liberated her camp speaking with four soldiers guarding the gates of Ohrdruf.

"It's ok, Millie," Fanya's tiny voice shouted over the pouring rain. "We'll be going home soon." She placed a bony hand on Ludmilla's arm and smiled, her scraggly brown hair hanging down her face in thick wet strands. Ludmilla could see Tasha standing a short distance away, her dirt smudged face grinning as she looked at the girls who had been her closest, often times her only, friends for the past three years.

*When the Germans had first occupied Ludmilla's small town in the Ukraine, they had thought they were being liberated. Life in Stalinist Russia had been cruel and harsh; most people considered themselves fortunate if they managed to obtain a small piece of food for themselves every day. So, when the Germans replaced the flag bearing the Hammer and Sickle with one bearing the Swastika, they thought they had been freed.*

However, it took only a short time to realize that life under Hitler was even worse than it had been under Stalin. Eventually the order came for able-bodied girls in Russia to be brought to Germany to work for the war effort as slave labor; Ludmilla, Fanya, and Tasha were among them. While the Germans had originally claimed that the girls would return home after six months, it was over three years before the United States Army liberated them.

After entering Ohrdruff, Ludmilla, Fanya, and Tasha got directions to the Russian headquarters and began to walk through the crowded streets. Everywhere they turned they could see people who looked as though they were walking corpses wandering around in clothes that were little better than rags. Over 40,000 displaced persons were currently in Ohrdruf and the three girls could barely move through the streets without being pushed aside or knocked over. The fact that the rain had turned the camp into a glorified mud pit didn't improve the situation one bit. Tasha grabbed Ludmilla and Fanya and held them close to her large frame to keep them from falling in the mud. While she was no longer as large as she had been before leaving Russia, she was still by far larger than the other two girls who had been reduced to little more than living skeletons over the past three years. Also, Tasha was 19 years old, making her two years older than the others, and therefore their protector.

Finally, after fighting their way through the masses of people, the girls made it to the Russian office, a large building that appeared as though it was going to collapse at any moment. Rubble was strewn about the foundation and several chunks of stone were chipped off of the wall. A tall Russian officer stood proudly just outside the office. He brushed a hand through his jet-black hair and smiled at the three girls. "Are you Russian citizens?" he asked them.

"Yes," the three girls replied almost at the same time.

"Good," he smiled. "We'll just have you fill out some information and then we can find a place for you to stay tonight. But you'll be able to go home soon." Then he added, almost as an after-thought, "Oh, and don't worry, all is forgiven."

*Towards the end of the war, when it had become clear that the Germans were going to lose, rumors concerning how the Russians were treating the freed prisoners who were returning home began to fill the work camp. The stories said that the Russian government considered anyone who had worked in a forced labor camp for the Germans to be an enemy of the Russian people. As such, they were being sentenced to 10 years of hard labor to help*

*rebuild the cities destroyed by the Nazis during the war. Those who refused were to be executed.*

The girls were taken to a barn to spend the night. They were forced to sleep on the straw, or try to; it took them a few hours to get used to the overwhelming stench of manure that permeated the building. Eventually, however, their complete exhaustion caused them to fall asleep.

The next morning Ludmilla was awakened by a boot softly kicking her in the ribs. After wiping the sleep from her large brown eyes, she looked up to see a hulking Russian soldier standing above her. "Get up, pig," he said, looking down on her with cold, indifferent eyes. She got up slowly and noticed that Fanya and Tasha were already up. Fanya held the long brown robe that the Americans had given her tightly around her frail body as she trembled with fear, but Tasha's dark eyes flashed with a fierce anger. After Ludmilla got up, the soldier waved his rifle to the door and told them to move; they did so with him marching behind them.

The soldier pushed the girls through the streets of Ohrdruf, escorting them at gunpoint as he took them for breakfast. During their meal, which consisted of something cold and gray that Ludmilla nearly refused to eat despite her hunger, the guard stood nearby, holding his rifle across his chest and looking on at the girls with a glare of contempt. After the meal he took them to the Russian office to register for their return to Russia, and informed them that they should be grateful that they were being allowed to return home at all. The same charismatic young soldier who had greeted them the day before was standing outside the office, but rather than smiling, this time he only gave them the same cold stare as their guard. The soldier then returned them to the barn, and ordered them to stay where they were until the next day.

Fanya collapsed onto the straw and began to sob softly while Ludmilla and Tasha spoke quietly to one another. "Did you hear what he called us!?" Tasha whispered harshly, "PIGS! That's what the Germans called us!"

"I know," Ludmilla replied quietly. "I don't think we should go back to Russia." The three whispered about what they should do for much of the night. Eventually it was decided that they would go to see the Americans the following day to ask for help.

It was just after noon the next day and the three girls were standing outside the small building that was being used as the French headquarters in Ohrdruf. The three had left the barn before dawn and managed to sneak off before the Russian soldier came to wake them. The streets were still filled with disheveled, lost human beings waiting to go home, so it wasn't too difficult for the three to reach the American headquarters unnoticed. They had told the American officer that they didn't want to return to Russia. The officer, while not unsympathetic, told them that there was nothing he could do to get them out. However, he did suggest they speak with someone from the French office. The French were frequently running supplies in and out of the camps on covered trucks, and he said that if they were to be smuggled out of the camp, that would be the best way to do it. So, after thanking the officer for his help, the girls went to the French headquarters.

The girls stepped carefully into the cramped building and saw a very young French officer sitting behind a desk in front of them. "Hello," he smiled politely. "Is there something I can do for you young ladies?"

The girls looked at each other, still nervous about what they were about to do. Although Ludmilla was so worried that she couldn't even lift her head to look the officer in the eyes, since she was the only one of the three who spoke French she was the one to respond. While staring at her mud covered feet and the bottom of her sooty brown dress, she told the French officer about their problem and asked for his help.

The officer was quiet for a long moment, Ludmilla managed to look up and saw him looking at them, clearly thinking things through. Eventually he let out a sympathetic sigh and asked, "Are there just the three of you?"

"Yes," Ludmilla replied, tears beginning to glisten in her eyes.

The officer grabbed a piece of paper and began to write something down. "Report to this building at 10:00 tomorrow morning," he said as he handed her the paper. "Be at the first floor window facing the street, we'll pick you up there."

After Ludmilla told them what the officer had said, Fanya and Tasha leapt at her and they held each other tightly. The tears finally began to stream down Ludmilla's cheeks; partly for the joy of being free, and partly for the home and family that she knew she would never see again.

After a sleepless night the girls left the tiny lean-to they had hidden in for the night and headed down the slop-covered streets to the building the French officer had told them to be at. The room that they were told to wait in was empty except for a few boxes stacked in the corner. Cobwebs hung from the ceiling and dust covered the floor as well as the single window facing the street. It was clear that the building had been abandoned as a living place for some time.

Fanya and Ludmilla sat on the boxes in the corner as Tasha paced nervously, her short black hair waving as she walked back and forth across the room. Several times there was a sound that made the girls jump and look at the door, waiting for someone to come in. However, when they saw that it was only a mouse scurrying across the floor they let out a collective sigh of disappointment and continued to wait.

After an hour, the girls jumped up as they saw the back of a large truck approaching the window. The truck continued to back up slowly until it nearly touched the window. Ludmilla and the other girls walked slowly over to the window, curious to see what was happening. Suddenly, a young man in a French uniform opened the cloth flap covering the back of the truck and knocked on the window.

The three girls looked at each other as Ludmilla carefully slid the window open. The man waved his arm rapidly and shouted, "Get in! Get in!" The girls looked for a moment in disbelief and then proceeded to leap into the truck one at a time. The French soldier steadied them as they landed to keep them from falling. After he had made sure they were safely inside and seated, the soldier yelled to the driver to get moving.

As the truck lurched through the streets, jostling the passengers about as it hit every bump and mud hole on the street, the three girls looked at each other, still afraid to say anything. The Frenchman looked at them and smiled half-heartedly. They all knew that they still had to get past the guards who were inspecting the vehicles as they came and left Ohrdruf.

Eventually the truck came to a stop and Ludmilla could hear the muffled sounds of the guards speaking with the driver. While she could not make out what was being said, she could tell that the conversation was lighthearted and could even hear the guards chuckling softly, as though the driver had told them a joke. As the conversation came to a stop the three girls held their breath. After what seemed like an eternity, the truck began to move again. Slowly, it left the destination camp of Ohrdruf behind it as it drove off. The girls embraced each other, laughing and crying, as they left the camp. Uncertain of where they were going or what they would do, but glad to finally be free.

*After working in the kitchens for the French Army for a few months, the girls ended up on a US military base in Kassel, Germany. It was there that Ludmilla met a young American soldier, Bill Wilson, who would one day become my grandfather. After a relatively short courtship they were married and came to the United States to live. After living in this country for over fifty years my grandmother has still never managed to return to her homeland of Russia.*