

Op

by Jerry Ratch

My name is Op. That is what they call me, because everything anyone says, right away I think the opposite and head that way. So I am Op.

I spent the War in Georgia, a section of southern Russia near the Black Sea, which is how I survived that whole mess. They took us out of Poland by train. We were loaded into boxcars. I was a tailor, so when they unloaded us in Georgia they said: "You make uniforms for the Army." That was the Russian Army, not German. The Poles I knew are mostly dead, I think. They didn't last long under Hitler. They got run over, or were killed, or they ran away. Anyone I knew, they're all gone now. But you know what, I went back to my village in Poland one time, right in the middle of that War. And I sold my house to the Pollacks who were living there. Right under the noses of the Russians, and Hitler.

That is what I did. So let me tell you how that happened.

First thing, they unloaded our box car. It was a warm climate, in Georgia. I was always sweating there. I got sunburned right away. It was like a sweat lodge. I never went out in the sun in Sukolov, where I came from. "What sun?" we used to say. "Who has such time?"

In Georgia we had no choice, but worked outside all the time. Some would call it a damned vacation spot, Georgia. Yeah. We used to laugh our asses off sometimes at the luck. Some luck! we would say. Not like others back in Poland. They were not so lucky there.

Then one day a visitor came to our work camp, a short man with a thick black moustache. Everybody was bowing to him. They called him Mr. Joseph. One time I heard: "Yes, Mr. Stalin." No one dared question what he said. He gave directions and everyone jumped. He was a very short man, like Napoleon. I saw him on

posters, so I thought I know who this man was. But what do I know? Maybe I was responsible, a little bit, for spreading that rumor.

I made more uniforms for the Red Army than anyone. I was very fast. So this Mr. Joseph Stalin — he was a look-alike, not the only one either. There were many, we were told later. So Mr. Joseph said I won a trip, anywhere I wanted to go, so long as it was by train, and in the motherland, that was Russia. Right off I said I'm going back to Sukolov to sell my house. Everyone was laughing all around me. They kept saying: You can't do that, are you, nuts? But don't tell me I can't do something — I would do it just to prove I could, because I am Op.

Mr. Joseph laughed loud and long, too loud and too long, if you ask me. But he got me a railway pass to go back to my home town in Poland. This was my luck. It takes chutzpah, as we say. He liked that, I think. But the sheer volume of uniforms he liked even better.

So, I got on the train, and we crossed the border into Poland. They gave me Russian I.D. papers, I look Russian anyway, because of intermarriages in our family with Russians, near the border with Poland. Who knew this would be such a good idea! God has plans! When man makes plans, God laughs! Well, my name means Laughter, my Jewish name. That is Isaac.

So, I got off at the train station at Sukolov. Everything seemed the same. It didn't even look like there was a war going on. I guess the Poles didn't put up much of a fight. Hitler just ran right over everybody, or they fled. Nobody was at the train station. It seemed like a ghost town. It used to be pretty bustling, every day but Saturday. There used to be lots of Jews in that area back before the War, so nobody worked on the Sabbath. It was dead like now, when I got off train. Steam from the engine was swirling all around me. The whistle echoed, bouncing off the buildings. It was a little bit eerie. I thought: Is somebody watching me? There were no smells like there used to be. Bread baking. Sugar in the air from cakes all the time, pies. It used to always be that way. Not now. Life was gone,

drained out of the land. Did I even really live here before? I began to wonder.

But I moved off, walking down familiar roads. All lonely and solemn. I noticed a curtain rustle in a window as I walked along. No dogs even came out to bark, asking who was there. A couple of birds. Not so many of those. But all the houses and stores were the same as before. Just, no people.

I turned down my lane. I was really getting homesick. My stomach started churning inside my shirt. I hadn't eaten for some time, and felt dizzy. I put my hand on my front gate and gave it a good familiar push against the weight. It swung away, then the curtains moved. They saw me. I felt them looking. These weren't real curtains, just sheets, gray and wrinkled, nailed up over the windows. They lifted them up a little to peer at whoever was out in the world. Not much to look at out there.

I went right up and knocked on my door, their door. Well, my door. It took them a minute, then it swung open. A fat Polish woman was standing there with fat sweaty arms. A skinny man stood at a table in next room, under a bare bulb hanging down. He was eating potatoes, with no shirt, only a sleeveless undershirt like I used to wear in the overwhelming heat they had there. It looked like that van Gogh painting of the Potato Eaters I saw one time at a museum.

"I am Op," I said. "You're in my house. This is my house. I own this."

The fat kept woman staring at me, as if she might know me. Maybe not.

"I used to live here, before the Germans came. This is my house. I'd like to be paid for it."

"Oh," the fat lady said. "He says this is his house. His name's Op."

I looked past her to the skinny man.

"I heard him," the man said.

"I know where the bread box is," I told them. "In the kitchen, right under the windowsill. Look behind it for a sack of silver. I forgot to take it with me, because I had to leave too fast."

They both looked at me, dumbfounded. The skinny man wiped his forehead with the back of his arm. It was real hot out.

"Ask him how much he wants," he said to her.

"Why don't you come over here and ask him yourself?"

"Because I'm not sure he's not dead."

"Artest wants to know if you're dead."

"Maybe," I said.

"Oh, the Lord Jesus Christ." She crossed herself.

"I can see he's not dead, Edna," the man said. He was shaking his head.

"Then why can't you talk to him yourself?"

"I'm not sure."

"How much do you want, to go away?" the fat woman asked.

"Two thousand, it was worth, before."

"Two thousand? How much is that in rubles?"

They already forgot the exchange. Polish money didn't even exist now. Everybody stared at each other. Nobody spoke. The man dropped his potato.

"Go to the cupboard. Give it to him," he said.

"Holy Jesus, Mary and Joseph."

"Give the Jew his money, or we'll never get to sleep."

"Rubles," I said.

"Sure," said the man. "Give it to him."

"Holy Jesus, Mary, and Joseph," said the woman. She wiped away the sweat that was running right down beside her wide nose. Then she went to the kitchen.

The skinny man held out a potato. "Want one?"

"I'm famished," I said, "but no thank you. It's not kosher."

"It's a potato, not a pig."

I nodded. "No rabbis here anymore, I bet."

He nodded. "Hitler. You want a glass of water?"

I nodded.

"It gets kind of lonely around here," the man said. "I used to have this Jewish woman." He looked sad, and hung his head.

"Now..." He gestured.

The fat woman came back in the room, carrying a fistful of money.

I stood in the opened doorway and counted it.

"Well, it's all here."

"Good," the man said.

"Good," I said. "We're all settled. I'm Isaac. I thought you should know. Well, good-bye. I won't be by here anymore."

They watched me turning around to leave.

"Zei gesund," he said.

I stopped squarely, to look back.

"Aufwiedersehn," I said.

See: www.jerryratch.com

