

Reindeer Nights

by Jerry Ratch

It all started a long time ago. September 1, 1939, Hitler invaded Poland. His army was moving fast. We lived not far from the city of Krakow. On the third day of invasion a lot of men (civilian) walked through our city, running away from the German Army. There were rumors that men were being run over by the tanks. I still remember how tired these men were. They rested up in our house, drank some water and left. The door was always open, so a new group could come in.

September 5, 1939, we decided to leave. We saw the Polish Army retreating and the German airplanes flying around. I guess they were investigating the situation. My grandfather had a business — a wholesale and retail store with tobacco and cigarettes, and my mother helped to run these stores. The day we were leaving, we packed just a few dresses, and I took my album with pictures. We always had a sleep-in maid and a pretty dog, a Samoyed (his name was Mirusz.) My mother told our maid to take whatever she wants from the house, and the dog, and go to the village where her parents lived.

We went to the Eastern part of Poland, to the city of Lvov. I said we, that means our grandfather, my mother, my sister, my aunt and her daughter. There were so many refugees in Lvov that it was hard to find an apartment. So, after staying a few days at the railway station, our family split, and my mother, sister and I moved to a nearby small town. After two weeks, the war was over. The Polish soldiers were killed or taken prisoner of war. Only the soldiers protecting the capitol Warsaw were fighting with heroism for two more weeks. They didn't know what's going on in the other parts of Poland. The Polish government fled to Romania, and as we found out later, from there to England. Hitler made an agreement with Stalin, that Germany will take most of Poland and Russia should take the Eastern part. It was called the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact (they were

Russian and German ministers.) So our family found ourselves in the part under Russian occupation.

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Across the street, where we rented a small apartment, was a grocery store, and the owners had two sons, much older than my sister or I. Because everything was rationed, so those two sons were dealing with what they could. They were buying in a nearby village, eggs and butter, and selling in the city. Once they brought some military sweaters and asked if we can make them for pullovers. My sister was good in knitting and still is, and I knew also how to knit, so we made pullovers and they paid us for it. They recommended to us other people, and that's how we were making a living.

After a few months, the Russians posted big Bulletins, asking whoever wants to return home, should come and register. By that time people were getting word from "the other side," like we would call it, that the Jews have to wear a yellow arm band with a Jewish Star. Also they are not allowed to go to movies or restaurants. Otherwise it is quiet. Almost everybody went to register, including us. Everybody or almost everybody wanted to return home.

Then on June 29, 1940, at midnight there was a knock on our door and when we opened, there were a few K.G.B. saying, "Davoy, Davoy," which roughly means, "Come on, come on." It didn't take us long because we lived out of suitcases, and when we got to the front of the building, there was a truck with probably twenty people on it. We put the suitcases there and got on the truck. We were the last ones, and they took us to the railway station. There was a long cattle train and hundreds of people and more trucks were coming and they loaded us up in the box cars.

The loading was going on all night. That morning the door from the car was open, so both my sister and I were standing in the door, and whom did we see? — the two brothers from across the street where we lived temporarily. They looked very surprised.

Maybe they didn't know what happened during the night. They looked sad. We exchanged a few words only, because the soldiers didn't let them come close to the train. They came to the station to take another train and go someplace. Then it was time to board their train, so they just said good-bye. We noticed that they put a can on the platform. They got on the train and forgot to take the can. We asked the soldiers to give us that can, and they did. When we opened it, there was honey, probably a gallon. So we had this for some time to eat with the bread.

Sometime around noon the soldiers closed the doors of the cars. We could hear like an iron bar click against the door, and finally the train started to move. There were two small windows in the upper portion of the car. There were two brothers, young men in the car, so one jumped on the shoulder of the other in order to see what's going on outside and letting us know the names of the stations. The train, of course, didn't stop at any station. Well, we thought we are returning home. All of a sudden one brother said, "People, we are not going home, we just passed a station and the name is written in the Cyrillic alphabet. We are going to Russia."

The train was moving slow. In the middle of the night the train stopped, the soldiers opened the door and ask that two men should come and get soup and bread for everybody. They brought soup in two pails, and that's how it was every night. I guess they didn't want the natives to see that they were taking people to Siberia.

Once I also looked through that window, I saw peasants, women and children and cows, we in the windows waving to them, but they did not respond and they looked very sad. Sometime in the morning the soldiers opened the door at a station where there was a well, so we took some water and washed our hands and face.

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It took us two months to get to the end of the railroad, that was the city of Irkutsk. It was the end of August, 1940. From the train we

got on trucks and were told that we will go by boats on the big river. We waited on the shore of that river for two days and two nights, and it was very cold already. Finally a boat came and something over 100 people got on that boat. I saw another boat coming, probably they distributed people to other places. The name of the river was I think Angara, or Witim, pronounced Vitim. We got off at a certain place, and went by trucks to another river (Lena) and by boat we went to a city, it was called maybe Bodaybo? Not sure.

After we got off, we crossed that river on a small boat. There were waiting some Russians with horses. We put our belongings on horses and we walked behind, it was just a trail in the forest. There was the first barracks. They left some people in this barracks and the rest walked three miles further to the next barracks.

There were people in Siberia called "Yakuty." They were maybe related to Eskimos. Maybe it was "Booraty" they were called. And of course, there were Russians. I remember the director's wife bought a nightgown from one of the Jewish women. She wouldn't wear it until we left because we all knew it was a nightgown. Then she wore it as a fancy dress.

One of them bought my mother's girdle for a bucket of potatoes. The Russians wanted to buy everything. They saw a meat grinder and one man said, "I'm turning it, but I don't hear any music."

So, there we were for the rest of the War. We were unpaid laborers. They put us there to cut down trees. The forest was all around, everywhere you could see.

The Yakuty had reindeer instead of horses to pull the sleds through the snow. Snow was more than half the year. I remember the rivers froze up solid in November, and would break up always on the same day in May, every year, May 17, exact same day. We heard the ice cracking like long rolling thunder, always we marked our calendar. That was the beginning of summer in Siberia. The Yakuty used reindeer even when there was no snow, they didn't have

horses. That was how everything went there, reindeer pulling the sleds, and some wagons, mostly it was sleds.

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Now I have to tell you about the beautiful reindeer at night. The Yakuty let them forage for themselves after they pulled the sleds all day. They came and stood around the door to our barracks. They became very friendly and seemed sad. We fed them, we gave them names. I remember there was one we called Lena, after the River. She gave birth one especially cold night, and we had to help get the calf out of her, but it was already dead and stiffening as she struggled to get it out. It was too cold out for life that night.

The Yakuty put the logs we cut on their sleds in the morning. They hooked up the reindeer to the sleds and off they went. We didn't see them for days. We knew when they were back because the reindeer appeared at the barracks door, looking for food. They always looked tired. We were glad they came, put our arms around their necks and hugged them and gave them food. We were told by the Russians not to do this. But we decided: What could they do, fire us?

My sister Rifka fell in love with a Yakuty sled driver, he was a short, dark man with a long drooping mustache. He looked like a tiny version of Joseph Stalin, but without any uniform to make him important. I poked fun of her man. I said: You better look out for him, Rifka. You know what that man wants.

Rifka took to feeding the reindeer. When they showed up at the door to our barracks, Rifka's face started right away growing flushed. That was how we knew. It meant her little dark man was back. We had red in our hair, we were fair-skinned, so the Yakuty thought we were wonderful and strange. But I started getting snippy, and cruel, don't ask me why.

"You think the reindeer mate for life, Rifka."

"No, I do not," my sister said.

"Yes, you do. That's what you like to think. But life isn't so kind. You will see. Besides, where would be the fun, in their way of living? I ask you that. That is not living. That would be being stupid like a Russian."

"Don't talk like that!" she hissed. She looked around behind her, looked all around, everywhere before we took up speaking again.

"Oh, little Rifka wants her Russian!" I sang.

"Don't talk like that!" She looked distressed. "He's not Russian," she whispered. There were dark circles under her eyes, because she was out until God knows when. Well, I'm sure God knew. She'd leave saying she was going to the outhouse as soon as the reindeer appeared at the door. I knew where she was going. I followed her once and watched them. She doesn't know about that to this day.

"You want your little Boris," I kept on.

"No. No."

"I'll bet you still have the hats — did I say hats? — for that Pollack back in Krakow, don't you? What was his name? Still pining away for him. Feh! Nasty, Jew-hating people, the whole lot! I'll bet he sure misses his little Jewess!"

"You stop talking that way about him, or else I'm going..."

"You're going? You're going? To where? To do what?"

She hid her face in her hands.

"You'd marry him in a minute, Rifka."

"No, I wouldn't."

"No? I bet! But he wouldn't marry you, Rifka, not once he got his pig paws on his little Jewess. That's all he ever wanted, with that sour singing under the window all night. That's all he ever wanted, so it's better to forget about him, with his pig snout. Don't worry about him. He's already dropped you like a Russian potato and goes running around with his nunnery girls, with their flaxen hair wrapped up in tight braids. Any of them, all of them the same."

"Stop it, stop it!" she pleaded, holding her hands up to her ears. "Why are you doing this to me? You're just the same as any of

us! You were the same — with your army lieutenant!" She came close with that one. I held my breath. I bit the back of my lip.

Then I wouldn't let up on her. She was my younger sister, someone had to say these things.

"I'd stop thinking after that Pollack if I were you, Rifka. That part of life is over. They're all dead back there. That's what the rumor is. The Poles too, they're hunted by the Germans, mowed down just like the Jews."

Rifka screamed. She made a tight face and refused to open her eyes. Then she bolted out the door, sobbing. I made her tears come out that night. It was an unusual sight around our camp.

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But it didn't end there. One night when I came back from counting the fallen trees, our mother and our grandmother cut off all her hair. Rifka looked like a boy. They had her stripped down bare and sitting in a makeshift tub. They were heating water, bringing in buckets full of hot water and pouring them into the small round tub. She was sitting cross-legged in the tub, wailing and sobbing, trying to hide herself. Then I saw what she was hiding. It wasn't her skinny breasts, but a belly.

She had a real belly going. It was a strange sight. That was when I remembered: she'd no longer take off her clothes when the light bulb was burning, only after it was switched off. We had to unscrew the bulb to turn it out. She became the one to do that every night, saying: Ow! Ow! Then she undressed. Now I saw why.

Momma and Bubby brought in a real old Yakuty man. It was said he practiced the old ways, not Christian, not Communist, but real old ways of a shaman. He brought roots and they put them in a pot and boiled them and he stirred, saying strange words in their own tongue the Yakuty have. They applied a balm to Rifka's belly. They made her drink this concoction he boiled up. They made her drink it all, even though she kept sobbing and moaning. Then they did something to her I never witnessed before or again, even

though I gave birth myself once, which was a pure horror, barely I'm able to remember that pain.

Then the old Yakuty, who was dressed in clothing made from reindeer hides and wearing short reindeer antlers, began slowly to turn in a dance. He danced and danced. Up and down slowly he rose and fell with his back so straight it was a wonder he didn't fall over backwards. Slowly and slowly he was turning in a circle, he went up, and back down into a full squatting position. Then suddenly he kicked out, first one leg, then the other, and before we knew it, it turned into a Cossack dance. And he began humming something that at first sounded foreign, then slowly it became something familiar. Then we knew it for what it was. We all knew what this dance was now.

It was Jewish. Who invented this dance, no one knows.

Later I caught the terror in Rifka's eyes. That's when I understood what she was in for. It was the same look we witnessed in the eyes of Lena the reindeer, struggling to get her still-born calf out of her. That same overwhelming bigness of reality, same in life as in death.

