

Oma, Tell Me a Story ...

By
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One of the highlights of my young life was when my grandmother came to visit and told me stories. Oma didn't just make up stories. Her stories

were true, right out of her own

childhood in the Soviet Union. Except she never called it *the Soviet Union*. (That's something I found out later.) She always called it *Russia*. And my perennial favorite was the sad story about her doll, Rosie.



A Doll Named Rosie

When Oma was about four years old, her father invited two cold, weary travelers to spend the night: a man and his son. In the excitement of having unexpected visitors, Oma forgot to take the unfortunate doll to bed with her. The next morning, the two strangers were gone. And so was Rosie.

As a child, this story mesmerized me. I didn't understand all the dynamics of growing up under Soviet rule, but it fascinated me to no end that my Oma had lived in a place where a man would steal a doll, not because it was of any great value, but because he probably had a little girl who didn't have a doll.

What kind of place was this? And why would God allow such a thing to happen?

It's Enough to Make You Bitter

As I grew older, the stories became more detailed, more grounded in history. Not only was this society a place where a man could steal your doll, it was a place where the secret police could take away members of your family.

Wow! That's enough to make you bitter about life.

But, here's the thing. I don't ever think of my Oma as a bitter person. She has been one of the most forgiving people I have met. I think that the groundwork for that came from her own family history, especially relating to the story of her grandfather.

Bitterness can be a struggle, even for mature believers. Oma's grandfather, Jakob, knew this struggle. Once the respected teacher and pastor of the Lutheran congregation in his village, by

the 1930s, Jakob was forced into an "early retirement" to make room for communism. Frustration ensued. Coupled with fear of what the authorities could do to you, Jakob felt paralyzed.

And then, one day, a neighbor came to Jakob with a simple request. Would he speak the words of the Lord's Prayer at a funeral? Praying publicly was downright dangerous, especially if it came to the attention of spies who would report you to the authorities. For that reason, Jakob spent the early years under Soviet rule being cautious.

But Jakob was no coward. He decided to take the risk and, as a result, he was arrested. He would spend the rest of his days in a Soviet detention camp.

Growing up, I always marveled at these stories. This was the stuff of movies ...

The Stuff of Movies

God can take us in directions we never expect. As a kid, I never pictured myself as involved in the business of movie making — it sounded too glamorous. (Well, I can now tell you it's not quite so glamorous as it sounds.) But in 2009, after having the experience of making an independent feature film (*Dear J*) under our family's belts, God was opening doors for us to make another movie, *Under Jakob's Ladder*.

The movie comes directly out of Oma's stories. The "Jakob" of the title is, of course, her grandfather. The film tells the story of how he overcame bitterness by taking a stand for his faith and by trusting God to the point of imprisonment.

After the night of Jakob's arrest, there was no further communication about his imprisonment.



Nevertheless, it seems that God wanted us to know the rest of the story. Shortly before Oma — and what remained of her family — left the Soviet Union (during World War II), they received word from a survivor of that

camp. He told of the amazing “freedom” Jakob found behind those walls. Whereas outside the prison walls he’d been forbidden to talk about God, inside the prison Jakob could speak freely to offer hope to men who had no hope.

Outside of our Comfort Zone

I don’t know about you, but prison is not on my top ten list of places to visit before I die, and I suspect Jakob felt the same way. Because of the fear of reprisal, it took Jakob well over a decade before he was able to step outside his comfort zone to say something as simple as the Lord’s Prayer in public.

Jakob’s dilemma reminds me of an episode in the life of the Apostle Paul during his time in the city of Corinth, a place whose corruption parallels that of our 21st Century world. I can only guess that Paul must have felt very discouraged in his ministry, leading the Lord to speak to Paul in a vision,

saying: *Do not be afraid, but speak, and do not keep silent; for I am with you* (Acts 18:9–10a NKJV).

Jakob stayed in his comfort zone for over ten years, but he didn’t find it very fulfilling. It was only when he chose to step outside that God was able to use him, even in prison.

How often do we hide within the walls of our insulated Christian communities — our comfort zone — shutting out the wickedness of the world?

Taking a stand for the sake of the Gospel, that’s what I learned from Oma’s stories about Jakob, my great-great-grandfather, a man I will never meet this side of heaven — a man who discovered that sometimes God uses what we dread the most for the greatest good.

Maria Munoz, a former teacher at St. John’s Lutheran School, College Point, New York, currently takes care of her grandmother, Marta. To find out more about Under Jakob’s Ladder, watch the trailer at www.cubecity.org.



So What’s it Like to Work on a Film Set?

Filmmaking means dealing with the unexpected. One hat that I wore was that of production coordinator, working with the actors’ schedule. For example, I had to deal with an actor who called to say, “Sorry, I can’t make it tomorrow.” What? (Wait, it gets worse. The same actor couldn’t make the next day either.) You’re already tired from lack of sleep, and you just want to sit down and cry. But you can’t. The other actors are waiting. Your fellow crewmembers are depending on you too.

Working on a film wasn’t all strife; we also had our enjoyable times, especially forming bonds with our fellow crewmembers. However, my experience is that filmmaking is a very stressful business that puts you in a vice, then squeezes and squeezes. But as with any opportunity God puts into my life, I knew He was with me at all times, even when I found myself outside my comfort zone. At those times, I was reminded of my favorite Bible verse: *But those who wait on the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint* (Isaiah 40:31 NKJV).