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Mother Russia

My mother was born in Russia in 1909; actually in the Ukraine territory, in a little town called Pulin, three or four hours from Kiev. Her parents were of Czech stock, having migrated from Prague hoping to find greater economic security in Tsarist Russia. Regardless of this mixed Slavic heritage, I have always liked to refer to myself as Russian. Growing up during the protracted Cold War when Communism was thought to be the sole axis of evil, I thought confessing such made me a little more intriguing, different from norm. Besides I loved that aspect of my heritage. A Russian Hillbilly, I would add much later, since my father was a poor laborer from western Tennessee who, at 15, left home, falsified his age, and found work in the emerging automobile plants in Lansing, Michigan. There he met Olga Postler, my mother. Olinka is the diminutive name for Olga and Olya the pet name. Russians have many names. I grew up in a full house of eleven, poor but happy. Along with my parents and the seven of us children, one quickly after another, there was Mother's father and Pete, a bachelor friend of Russian Cossack military fame.

It is now 1968 and I, at thirty-five, am sorting out my faith in our troubled world from my pulpit in a Presbyterian Church in Baldwin Park, a Los Angeles suburb. The cultural fabric of the U.S. is being challenged and changed in many ways. Abroad, the repressive Brezhnev doctrine has solidified the Iron Curtain and Russia's atomic weaponry continue to point at the U.S. Vietnam is in full swing. President Johnson's leadership has evolved from a promising war on poverty to increasing the quagmire in Indo-China. Guns and butter can not be sustained. Over a half a million G I's now in Vietnam, all to make sure the domino theory would not become a reality. The 1000th

U.S. jet fighter is lost over that groaning peninsula. In one week 543 U.S. soldiers are killed and over 2,500 wounded. The year had begun with the Tet offensive by the North Vietnamese. Several hundred civilians are killed in My Lai but it is covered up.

In the states protests spring up everywhere Dr. Benjamin Spock and Rev. William Sloan Coffin, among others, are found guilty of conspiracy against the draft laws. Muhammad Ali is convicted of draft evasion. Columbia University is taken over by the students and they are violently removed.

Dissent and unrest continue beyond the war. Feminists shock the country by storming the Miss American pageant. The fourth edition of Timothy Leary's, *Turn On, Tune In, Drop Out* is published. The civil rights movement, even with major gains in 1964, has not ebbed. Martin Luther King, Jr. is in Memphis to assist the garbage workers in their strike, and is killed on the balcony of the Lorraine Hotel. Months later, black power salutes are raised at the Olympics in Mexico.

Politically, the presidential primaries are in full swing with Nixon and McCarthy seeking their party's nomination. Then Bobby Kennedy steps in the race. Kennedy calls for a meeting with all the clergy in Southern California two days before the California primary. I go along with several hundred others. He arrives late but rushes to the podium unannounced and begins, "You clergy – we could not have passed the civil rights bill of '64 with out your help." We bask in his praise. But he pauses and adds, "And you have not done a damn thing since!" Afterwards I am pleased to shake his and Ethel's hand. She, a ravishing mother of ten and pregnant, but within twenty-four hours she would be embracing the body of her dead husband.

1968 was a soul searching year. I was in my fifth year of this church and I felt fortunate to be its Pastor. Its mission was unified and clear enough – seeking to emulate God's love for the world. But the earth's foundations were shaking; hardly heavenly. As Vietnam continued with its enormous death rate, the church joined in the protest movement. Our youth sold peace crosses, sending the profits to peace agencies. We

brought a decorated Green Beret to the Civic Center as the keynoter for an anti-Vietnam rally. After I introduced him, and as he rose to speak, tear gas came out of nowhere and that particular rally ended. The war would continue for six years.

Other social justice issues demanded a response. Since contraceptives could not be initiated by health clinics in California, the church, in connection with Planned Parenthood, established a clinic in the social hall once a week. We soon became aware of how many women were also facing problem pregnancies. Most all of these women, abandoned by the male, desperately sought abortions elsewhere, but they were expensive, illegal, and risky. Clandestine abortionists existed but they were not safe, and many women who risked seeking them discovered later they weren't even aborted. Unable to help but not willing to leave such women to further exploitation, or self-inducement, we helped form The Clergy Counseling Center for Problem Pregnancies and established a clinic in nearby Mexico where abortions could be done legally, safely and therapeutically. Roe v Wade was also six years away.

When King was killed we held a city wide service. The sermon delivered that day was one King had written.

Culturally, 1968 was a revolutionary year. Mark Kurlansky's book titled it, "The Year That Rocked the World."

This same year I received an invitation to join a group of young professionals organized by Lisle Fellowship, an international educational exchange group. Its itinerary included two weeks in Czechoslovakia and six weeks in the Soviet Union. There were eight of us; lawyers, educators and myself. My motives were mixed. The Cold War was still intractable and dangerous, but I was sure of the dictum that reconciliation could not take place without relationships – the very purpose of the trip. The other motivation was Mother. She was and remains a saint, so I always knew that the Russians could not all be bad. Also I wanted to be the first of her seven children to go back to Mother Russia. The church held a going away party for their pastor – "To Russia With Love."

Go back now exactly fifty years to 1918. World War I has ended but in Russia the civil war continues. All during this chaotic period, Mother is living with her mother and her five siblings in little Pulin. Just before the war had started, her father had gone to the United States in order to establish a sheet metal shop and, when enough money was saved, would bring the family to Lansing. But the years go by with no return to the Motherland. World War I and then the Bolsheviks had sealed off the border. In grandfather's absence and with the outbreak of World War I, Mother and her family are ordered out of their home – exiled to labor camps to aid in the war effort. They travel far East from Pulin, over many weeks, by boat, train and carts. Their journey ends in Siberia. It is a meager life. Everyone old enough is forced to work in the forest supplying lumber for the war effort. Mother at eight is exempted and only has to face her fears, the snows that piles up to the roof, and the menacing howls of the wolves. She could only anxiously wait, hoping for her father's return and idly watch her mother eke out a pittance with her knitting and crocheting.

Finally the war ends and they are told they are free to return home. The same lengthy journey brings them back to Pulin, and their empty ransacked home.

They begin again but soldiers are every where. The revolution is now in full intensity and everyone's loyalty is questioned. Pulin is caught between the Red Army and those fighting for Ukraine's independence – soon to be squashed. The soldiers come looking for anything to forage. Mother's brother Norbert has established a kind of blacksmith metal shop and the soldiers loot it and beat him severely. Again the future looks bleak and still no word from America. Norbert is scared, and also is angry at his father's delay, but he realizes it is responsibility to find help. He escapes seeking to find his father in America.

Poverty continues to be the daily fare in Pulin. Then typhoid breaks out and Olga's mother, my grand mother, dies. Anna, mother's oldest sister, buries her in Pulin and all the responsibility for her dwindling family, which has been reduced from eight to four, now rests on Anna. Nothing changes, hope diminishes, and finally, Anna tells the

family that she, too, must leave to find help. Brother Frank and sister Betty will remain with neighbors, but my Mother, the youngest, insists she will not be separated from Anna. Reluctantly Anna agrees.

Another journey begins, dangerous from the start. Soldiers to be avoided every where, men turned monsters in uniform. Two women, one twenty, the other ten, begin the long walk. How far to the border and Poland? It is nearly four-hundred miles, sleeping in ditches and barns, hiding in the woods. A religious convent gives them a night's bed but they are scared by the nun's questions. Are they runaways? Where is their mother? Why are they fleeing? They leave early the next day ignoring their blistered feet. Miles later, Mother finally gives up in exhaustion, refusing another step. Anna hoists her on her back. They keep moving. Finally they reach the border and, skirting the sentries, enter Poland. There they are able to find a crowded train, Anna hanging on the outside, mother on the inside, and they arrive in Warsaw.

Physically and mentally exhausted, Anna collapses on a main thoroughfare, and, to Mother's surprise, Anna begins to cry in despair. Warsaw is frightfully immense and full of strangers but a lady, a Jew, sees them and does not pass by. She takes them to her home and gives them food and shelter. One wonders if this Good Samaritan will die in Poland twenty years later in the Warsaw ghetto. But obviously she was a great example of the Jewish adage "if you save one person you save the whole universe."

Anna arranged to send a telegram to her father in the United States and he immediately replied, "Stay in Warsaw and I will come to you." During the long wait, Anna leaves mother and risks a return to Pulin and successfully brings back her brother and other sister. Grandfather Frank finally does get to Warsaw and they all move on to Prague, ironically the very place he had left nearly fifteen years before to go to Russia – all to make a new beginning in that land of promise.

The family spent a year in Prague while Grandfather worked to raise passage for the trip back to Lansing, Michigan. Anna and her brother found work and, because of

relationships that would lead to marriage, decided to stay in Prague. Mother and her sister finally sail with grandfather for America and arrive at Ellis Island in 1921. In Lansing they are also reunited with their brother Norbert.

Return now to 1968. My journey “To Russia With Love” had too many life changing experiences to share in this paper, but the Iron Curtain had been crossed. I, of course, was shocked to find that of 300 churches in Kiev, only two were open. Atheism was the official dogma. It became clear that most people I found didn’t know what a Protestant minister was. They had heard of Martin Luther King but that was because he was an American dissident. I had some empathy as to their atheism and I didn’t come to proselyte, but I often shared with them the story about their great cosmonaut, Yuri Gagarin, the first person to orbit the earth, how he claimed that as he entered the heavens he did not find God there. But I would remind them what the second person to orbit the earth, John Glenn, said in response to Gagarin. “The God he worshipped was not that small to be sitting in outer space.” That would always bring a smile. I could go on about many such conversations, but the highlight of the trip took place when we first arrived in Prague. For forty-nine years there had never been any word of Anna or Frank, mother’s left behind siblings. The Iron Curtain prevented it. But I had an old address in my pocket that an immigrant who knew Anna had given us. At the first opportunity I bought a city map, got on a bus, and found my way to a dilapidated apartment. I knocked. Soon an elderly lady stood with her stocky frame in the door way. She looked just like Mother, only larger. As she nervously look at me, all I could say was, “My a Mother Olga, Olinka, Olya.” “Olga Momma?” she asked, her blue eyes brightening. “Da,” I said, “Da.” “Oiyayayaya” she cried and grabbed me to her breast. There would be no direct communication for the next hour for she spoke no English and I could not speak German, Czech or Russian – which she knew well. Later an interpreter would help. Joyously Anna then led me around Prague to meet my uncle and to discover a host of cousins and their families.

I should note here, that beyond our family’s forty-nine year delayed reunion, this year, 1968, was hopeful time in Czechoslovakia. The Prague Spring was in full swing

under the leadership of Alexander Dubcek. Socialism, the Czech lite version, was underway. However, the Soviets felt threatened. Of course, during the next six weeks in Russia I tried to tell all the officials we met not to fear, that the Czech's were still loyal Socialists, but Russian's xenophobia prevailed. Two days after I left Russia, the Russian tanks rolled into Prague's Wenceslas Square along with 200,000 soldiers, all to enforce Brezhnev's oppressive doctrine of socialistic orthodoxy.

I would return to the Soviet Union two more times. In 1984 I spent a month with a group of American Soviet Scholars from The Institute of Peace and Understanding. Again, I was the only clergy. The purpose was the same; no reconciliation without relationships, no peace without mutual understanding.

The Iron Curtain was still drawn. There were again many meaningful meetings but at the conclusion of our program, I decided to stay for a week on my own. I had two reasons. I had carried some private letters and gifts from Cincinnatians to a clandestine Jewish synagogue in Moscow, and I wanted to find Pulin, my mother's birthplace, where her mother laid buried.

After the synagogue rendezvous in Moscow, I headed for Kiev. I hired a driver and we left on a three or four hour journey not knowing exactly where Pulin was. I had an old map from the 1920's, but on all the new maps there was no Pulin. After much searching and asking around, an old timer told me the name had been changed to, of all things, Chervonoarmeisk, which in Russian meant Red Army. I was excited to finally find it, but before I scouted around for memories and Grandmother's grave, the driver and I sought out a restaurant. While there we noticed several police had entered. Immediately after we finished eating they came over, checked our papers, and told us our visa didn't permit being there and we were told to immediately return to Kiev. My angered arguments didn't do any good. I was so distraught, I was willing to be arrested. But the driver was plainly frightened, so I relented. Leaving the small village I persuaded him to stop for a moment and I grabbed some earth and put it in my bag to take to Mom.

A disappointing journey, but I had returned to the Motherland. When I returned to Cincinnati, some of us formed a Soviet – USA forum which eventually evolved into Cincinnati's current Sister Cities program with Kharkiv in the Ukraine.

My last trip to Russia was in 1989 and was just for Mother. Betty, my wife, and I decided to take her back to Czechoslovakia to see her relatives in Prague and then on to the Soviet Union to find Pulin again. We also took, Hilda, Mother's cousin who had once lived in Pulin. This time no city visas were necessary. The Cold War was over. Perestroika, restructuring, and Glasnost, openness, were in full swing. Mikhail Gorbachev had changed everything, but as we would discover, he wasn't in great favor with the Russians for it.

We arrived in Pulin during Holy Week. Mother could not recognize anything in her village. Not surprising, how could she? Pulin had undergone a great war, and then a ruthless revolution, and then when the Germans retreated in 1943, they had scorched it. In addition, it was now 70 years since she walked away from it. But it was Good Friday and the graves were all decorated. We searched in vain for Grandmother's grave. Still, the four of us gathered together for a memorial. Long ago my mother's brother, Norbert, gave me a poem he had written of their mother. I had carried it along for just this moment. After reading it, I dug a hole in the cemetery and buried it. Some of the words were:

In that far off Russian country,
 We left you mother years ago.
 Resting in your grave peaceful,
 Safe from winter's chill and snow.

Now the years are swiftly passing,
 We have nothing more to fear.
 In this land of our adoption
 We have grown contented here.

Could we have you with us Mother,
Then we would not know a care.
But in that cold, far off Russia,
We must leave you sleeping there.

Afterward I turned to Mother and asked, “What now?” Tearful but smiling, she said, “Lets go home.” And we did. But first back to Kiev where we celebrated Orthodox Easter in the massive, now crowded, church. The very next day, due to the Orthodox Julian calendar and its late Easter, happened to be May Day – for the Russians the most festive of occasions. Thousands paraded through the streets of Kiev, and for the first time in decades there was no display of Soviet’s military armaments – only flowers. The four of us joined hands and marched along, feeling a little like the flower children of 1968. We had made our peace with Mother Russia.

And what of Mother? At 95, she happily resides in Lansing where all her children, and her 35 grand children and her 34 great grand children know her as she always has been, Saint Olga – a proud American but even better for us because she fed us great borsch and knedliky (dumplings) and taught us that people everywhere want only to love and be loved in return.

