

# Hannah

The True Story of a Spirited Oklahoma Girl's  
Struggle for Life, Love, and Peace With God

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## Preface

Only reluctantly, after many friends repeatedly urged Hannah Yanke Hagstotz to tell her story, did she acquiesce.

Hannah is a cautious, modest person. The decision to allow someone to write her story was fraught with understandable apprehension on her part—also on my part.

How could I convey the trials, triumphs, joys, and sorrows of a truly monumental life?

Hannah and I first met when she was dean of women at Forest Lake Academy and I was principal. Our association and mutual respect has endured for twenty years.

I have listened to her experiences, admired her indomitable determination, and measured her zest and zeal for life. I've seen her bear up under tragedy with a courage and faith that would rival Job's.

I have tried faithfully to reveal the life about whom this book is written. This book is my sincere attempt to convey the emotions I have felt and the lessons I have learned as I confronted a real heroine.

Robert L. Osmunson  
Riverside, California

## Chapter 1

### “You’ll Marry Him, or Else—”

Determination hardened the lines in her father’s face. His tight fist held the lash poised and threatening. His angry eyes flashed like the tip of an acetylene torch. Gottlieb Winter moved menacingly toward his daughter, Katherine Margaret. Every step said plainly, “You will marry him, or else—”

That Russian winter morning in the mid-1800s had started routinely enough. The usual household chores had been done. After breakfast Father Winter had gone to his tailor shop at the back of the house.

Mother Winter and daughter, Katherine, noticed a horse-drawn sled stopping beside the house. Two men climbed out and crunched their way over the snow into the tailor’s shop. One man was young, the other old enough to be his father.

They were in the shop about an hour. Then they came out, accompanied by Father Winter. He saw them into their sled, waved good-bye as they drove off, and then came into the house.

“Wife, daughter, I’ve got good news. There is going to be a wedding. Please start getting all those things ready that you women need for such an occasion.”

Suspicious and fears began filling Katherine’s mind. Trying to be casual she asked, “Who’s getting married, Papa?”

“You are, my daughter! I have an agreement with John Rexius and his father. It’s all set.”

“But, Papa, I don’t even know him. Shouldn’t I have a choice? Shouldn’t I love the man I’m going to marry? How can I love someone I’ve never even met?”

Katherine’s father glared at her, red color rising in his face. Then he turned, strode out the door, and marched into the tailor shop. In a moment he burst back into the house with a doubled up lariat rope in his hand.

“Will you marry the one I choose for you and at the time I select, or not?” The words came out steel hard and final.

Hot tears burst from Katherine’s eyes. She was trapped. What could she do? What were the alternatives? He could even kill her if she refused.

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Her voice, but a decibel above a whisper, answered, "I'll do as you say, Papa."

The wedding festivities took place with all the joy, gala atmosphere, and feasting that the little Russian community could muster. Any suspicions about the future prospects of two young people, strangers to each other, starting life out together were not mentioned.

Four boys and three girls were born to this union. The fourth child born was named Mary Rexus.

Mary married Alexander Kraft. Their fifth child was Hannah Rachel.

Hannah loved to hear her grandmother tell stories about her life in the old country of Russia, how the family lived, and how she was forced to marry John. John died in Russia. Hannah's grandmother then came to the United States and married a Mr. Friesen.

Hannah would ask her grandmother about John. In amazement she would exclaim, "You mean, you really didn't know him until you married him?"

"No, not at all."

"Over here, we pick our own husbands, and we think it's wonderful if our parents agree. If they don't, we might go ahead and get married anyway!"

"You look like the type," Grandma would respond, with a twinkle of love and admiration in her eye.

"You had no say at all in who was to be your husband. He was picked for you. How, tell me, Grandma, how did you get along?" Hannah was anxious.

"He was the kindest, most thoughtful husband and father for which anyone could wish." A misty, faraway look would then creep over Grandmother's eyes, as she told of his death to illustrate his tenderheartedness.

"Once, during your Grandfather John's absence, due to business, our two youngest boys became deathly ill with diphtheria. I did everything I could, but first Ivon and then Vitali died. In our village anyone dying of that plague had to be buried at once. So Ivon and Vitali had to be buried before their father returned. When he returned a few days later, I had to tell him."

"That must have been very hard."

"It was. I didn't know how to say it. Finally, I managed to say that the plague had hit and Ivon and Vitali were gone."

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Though Hannah well knew the story, she invariably would whisper, “Then what?”

“John staggered, sat down heavily at the table, his head buried in his hands, his body shaking with sobs, but without a sound coming from his lips. He sat there for a long time. I tried to comfort him, but there was no response.

“When he finally raised his head, he just looked at me with a blank, unseeing stare. Then he got up, went to his bed, undressed, and slipped in. That night he, too, became ill.

“Ten days later he died. It was a case of heartbreak. He never spoke one word after hearing of the death of our two boys.”