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A New Czar

Beginning in 1763, a great migration of German settlers found a new life full of promise and reward in the expanding lands controlled by Russia. Catherine the Great was looking for a way to settle the areas that her country had recently conquered. Her admiration for the German people's work ethic and ability to make their land productive gave her an idea that led to a bold move. She sent word to the oppressed people in Germany and Poland, offering land, freedom of religion, and exemption from taxes and military service, along with a stipend to help them become established in her country.

The bravest ones who took a chance on this more-than-you-could-ask-for offer sent word back to others, who soon flocked to the Ukraine, southwest of Russia—at that time a country about the size of New Hampshire. These migrations continued into the mid-1800s until new Russian leadership gradually brought them to a halt. The Schwartz family was among the immigrants.

The Schwartzes lived in the village of Volhynia, between Chernobyl and Kiev, at the time of Czar Alexander II's death. The population of most villages at this time numbered about five hundred to a thousand, including children. The farm plots, between forty and eighty acres, were outside the villages. Some were a half-day's ride away. Those who held rights to plots closer to the village had usually been in the area the longest. It was common during planting and harvesting season for a family to spend the week out at the plot working from dawn until dusk, returning to their homes on Friday to bake, do other chores, and go to church on Sunday.

Eleven-year-old Karl picked up another large, potato-sized rock and placed it with the others in his upturned leather apron. He had enough to make a trip to the pile. His younger brother, Julius Jr., met him there with a smaller load. The rocks tumbled down the growing pile with a clatter. Piles of these “plow-wreckers” could be seen at the end of every few rows, as high as the tallest boy could toss them.

Karl and Julius walked back to follow their father and the oxen. Their younger brother, John, was more interested in throwing dirt clods. “Come on, John! You’re big enough to help with the rocks. We need to get this field plowed before dark today,” Herr Julius Schwartz Sr. called.

The long winter season had finally given way to the warmer days of spring. The gradual disappearance of the low winter mist that continually hugged the flat hills brought a renewed sense of hope to the German immigrants—hope for a long growing season and subsequent abundant harvest.

Karl took off his *hut* (pronounced *hoot*, meaning “cap”) to wipe the sweat from his forehead. “Look!” he yelled. “Someone’s coming to see us.” Everyone stopped in his tracks to gaze at a horse and rider cantering from the direction of town. They seldom had visitors when out in the field, a mile from town.

“Look, Father! Who could it be?” cried John, the seven-year-old.

Father clicked his tongue at the oxen and brought them to a stop. Shielding his eyes from the sun, he saw the rider approaching at a comfortable pace. This was a good sign that there was no emergency, but it was still a rare sight.

Tying the oxen to the plow, Father said, “Well, well. Let’s go see who is coming. We needed a little break anyway.”

Needing no more convincing, Karl, Julius, and John took off running in the direction of their campsite, stopping more than once to help John back to his feet after he tripped in the freshly

turned earth. Father Julius soon caught up with them and beat them to the edge of the field. 13

They recognized the rider, Edvard, the son of their local schoolmaster. He waved as he turned into the gate of the Schwartz farm plot. He rode bareback, his legs flopping out at the sides with each trot.

"Greetings, Edvard! To what do we owe this honor?" Julius Schwartz Sr. took the reins of the young man's horse as he dismounted.

"*Danke*, Herr Schwartz. Father sent me to tell you the latest news from the capital since you won't be home for a few more days. This morning we heard from a villager who just returned from Kiev—the czar was assassinated a week ago!" Edvard, twelve years old, seemed pleased to be trusted with such important news.

"*Ach*, how did this happen? Who did such a thing?"

"They say some revolutionaries hid a bomb in an Easter cake and gave it to Alexander one morning as he left the palace. The bomb went off as the carriage rolled down the street. The czar bled to death after his leg was blown off!"

Shaking his head in disbelief, Julius Sr. muttered, "Will the bloodshed never end? They have tried many times to kill this man and have finally accomplished their goal. True, the Romanov czars aren't always the best rulers, but at least Alexander seemed to have the common man in his thoughts."

"So, is his son the czar now?" asked Julius Sr.

"Yes. Alexander the Third is now the czar."

"What does this mean, Father?" Karl asked, trying to sound grown up. "Will things be better for the people?"

"My father says it can only mean we have more hard years ahead of us," interrupted Edvard. "He says we need to pray for the new czar and his men."

"Your father is wise, Edvard. We appreciate very much your coming all the way out here to bring us the news. Now, won't you

- 14 come and have lunch with us and rest a bit before you ride back to the village?”

“Thank you, sir. I’d like that very much.” Edvard walked his horse over to the corral fashioned out of an array of sticks woven through larger posts driven into the ground. It looked somewhat like a large basket sitting next to the small living quarters on one corner of the property. Removing the bridle, Edvard led the mare inside.

“Karl, run out and untether the oxen and hobble them,” directed Herr Schwartz.

“Yes, Father. Edvard, don’t tell anything until I get back,” Karl called over his shoulder.

They walked toward the smell of lunch wafting in the breeze while Herr Schwartz pondered the news and the czar’s role in their lives. It was hard to understand the implications of what Edvard had shared. Life had been fairly predictable for the last twenty years.

Frau Juliana Schwartz looked up from her lunch preparations of potato soup and *brot* (meaning “bread”) to see her men arriving. They lived in a tent during the planting and harvesting seasons.

“Welcome, Edvard. So good to see you,” she said. “You must be hungry.”

“Yes, Frau Schwartz.”

“Come—have a seat.”

Karl returned from the field huffing and puffing, but happy that Edvard’s timing might mean an extra-long lunch break and an early meal. As Karl brushed dirt off his brown wool pants, he stomped his boots.

Their five-year-old sister, Emma, helped her mother by setting the makeshift table of planks for her parents, three older brothers, and her younger sister, Mathilda, who was three. Two-year-old Pauline sat on her mother’s lap, and Frau Juliana hoped baby Henry would sleep through the commotion of people eating and visiting outside the tent.

As everyone settled down to enjoy the food on their plates, Herr Schwartz asked, "So, what do people think of this change in czars? What will it do to our already slow economy?" He passed the bowl of potato soup with his big hands.

Edvard quickly swallowed the soup in his mouth and replied, "No one's quite sure what to think yet. My father says he is a good husband and father to his wife and children, but we must wait and see what kind of leader he is for his people."

"Does anyone know the new czar's perspective on land and religion?"

"I don't know, sir," Edvard shrugged.

"Well, our status in this country since the colonial law was revoked ten years ago certainly couldn't get any worse. As long as they don't take our land and our religion away from us, we'll be fine."

"Father, would they really take our land?" Julius asked, looking worried.

"Not if I have any say in things. But I am just a man. We must pray for God's protection. He can change a czar's mind."

Mother handed Edvard more *brot*. "Edvard, tell me, how are your mother and sister?"

"Very well. Mother said to say Hello to you. She looks forward to your coming back to town."

"Well, that should be within the week," the elder Julius said as he pushed away from the table. Placing his *hut* firmly on his head, he stood up, resting his hand on Karl's shoulder.

"We mustn't let the sun go down before we get that field finished, boys. So, Karl, you and Julius clean up your places and go on ahead to hook up the oxen. We will be along shortly."

"Oh, Father, can't Edvard stay a little longer?" Karl pleaded.

"I have to get back to do my chores, Karl." Edvard's tone reminded Karl of his own father's firm directions.

"Oh, OK. Then I'll see you at church Sunday."

16 Karl and Julius headed for the stream to rinse off their dishes. Mother would heat water and wash them better later.

“Thank you for the delicious meal, Frau Schwartz! I always like to come at mealtime to get some of your cooking!”

“You can come every day if I get to hear compliments like that, young man! You tell your mother Hello for me too. Oh, and come by when we get home in a few days and get some apples, won’t you?”

“I’ll do that. See you Sunday!”

As Edvard walked toward the corral, Julius quietly pondered to his wife, “I wonder how much longer we will be able to meet together on Sunday with this news of the czar, *meine* Frau.”

She nodded. “Oh, Julius, I hate to think of what could happen.”

“I didn’t want to worry the children, but I do fear for the future,” he replied, frowning.

They clasped hands for a moment as they watched the boys walk back out to the field.