

For Room and Board

It was in March 1943 that Yulia Khomyk (Chomyk), then sixteen, became an 'ostarbeiter'. This is a German word that means 'worker from the east'. During WWII it referred to the people from Eastern Europe, from Rumania, Poland, Ukraine, all the way to Estonia, whom the Germans rounded up and deported to Germany or Austria for heavy labor to replace the manpower lost to the Nazi war machine. There were thousands of them, just like Yulia, young and healthy, but defenseless and alone. They were taken every month from villages, towns, and cities to fulfill a quota preset by the German authorities.

When Yulia left her village of Sviatkova Velyka in Western Ukraine winter was slowly loosening its grip on the countryside but it was still very cold, and all she had to wear were a linen dress and a linen shawl that she tied around herself. On her feet she wore soft house shoes that her father had made for her but that were not intended for heavy outdoor use.

Her family was too poor and too powerless to help her. Her mother baked two loaves of bread for her journey and, even at that, the family resources would be stretched for there were still four sons and two daughters to take care of at home. Yulia knew the loaves had to last until she reached her destination, wherever that was, and not to expect any food from her captors. She knew that because her older brother, Ivan, had been deported as an ostarbeiter just a year before. The family had learned that he had ended up in a farm in a town called Klagenfurt near Salzburg in Austria. Yulia had looked it up on a map. It was far away.

As she climbed into the back of the truck that was taking her away from her home to a way station, Yulia hoped she might come back to Sviatkova Velyka some day in the not too distant future but it was not until 1966 that she saw her family again, and then only as a visitor. The truck was going to Peremyshl in Ukraine, a border town between Ukraine and Poland and so a major train transportation hub. That town is now part of Poland and its Polish name is 'Przemysl'.

During the ride from village to village and town to town to pick up more 'ostarbeiters', she listened to the conversation of her fellow conscripts. She heard young girls whispering about rape, young men talking of starving conditions, lack of sleep, lack of shelter. Some tales sounded sensational but, she realized from experience, they could not be dismissed. She was familiar with the brutal reprisals on the population for a dead German soldier: the quota was 50 civilians executed for each soldier and 100 for each officer. This brutality was not limited to the military but involved the confiscation of food stuff and the imposition of rules that prevented education, travel, and commerce. Yulia's situation was grim by any standards.

Furthermore, in Peremyshl, as she waited for the contingent of ostarbeiters to grow to a size sufficient to fill the wagons that were to take them away, she had the time to witness the awesome German efficiency at work. She saw the famous German discipline: orders barked at the top of the

voice, salutes executed with rigorous precision, and arms presented with murderous clicks of steel. She saw that the Germans controlled the young and restless crowd by beating them, removing the little food they had brought with them, and occasionally by shooting them and by raping women. Now she could clearly see the so-called 'Master Race' at work. It was all a question of power. The guards carried guns. They wore steel helmets that made them tower over the people they had rounded up. By comparison they looked fed and rested, unlike their captives who, with eyes red from lack of sleep and shivering in paltry clothes, bartered their last possession and offered their services for a little comfort. The guards were well-dressed in warm gray uniforms that looked as though they were made of wool and they were well-shod in ankle-high boots that kept them dry in the mud that seeped through the streets, the famous 'black-earth' of Ukraine. .

Waiting for the second leg of her journey, Yulia could not help but be terrified. Her reserves of courage and fortitude were tested to their limit. In the event, common sense dictated prudence. She did not want to draw attention to herself for one thing was clear to her: no matter what happened to her, there would be no recourse. In Peremyshl she was at the mercy of the guards and, within a few days, she would be at the mercy of some new, as yet unknown, masters.

What awaited her then, she could not imagine. Nor could she imagine how to handle what might come. Her skills were those of her village, cultivating fields and tending the farm animals. She did not speak German, and she worried about that. She thought of her brother Ivan and hoped she might end in a farm like his. But all she could do was wait.

Much to her surprise and relief, on the train from Peremyshl, Yulia learned that she was going to Austria. And that was followed by even better news: she was told that she was going to a farm in Maria Rain and that Maria Rain was in the District of Klagenfurt, only a few kilometers away from the town by the same name where Ivan worked. This news mitigated a little the dreadful discovery she made that one of the loaves of bread had been stolen from her. To survive until Maria Rain she would have to ration herself carefully.

In Maria Rain she met her hosts, a childless couple, who expected her to take care of two cows and a lamb, clean the stable, work in the fields, chop wood for the stove, and sometimes bake bread and help out with other house chores. She had no problem understanding her hosts who spoke 'viendish' to her, a dialect that had German and Slavic roots. She worked steadily from morning to night. Eventually she was permitted to visit her brother. The farmers were fair people, strict but not brutal. She ate with them, slept under their roof, and was allowed to attend church on Sundays. However, there was no question of salary or any sort of compensation.

In 1945 as the war was coming to its end and the clothes on Yulia's back were showing the wear and tear from her hard labor, the farmers decided to reward her with a new dress and a new pair of shoes, of their own choosing. They bought a length of white cotton on which beige threads of two different widths crisscrossed to form small squares. It was a pretty pattern and the seamstress made the most of it, giving it a small open collar and putting in deep pleats in the front. The cobbler also did his best to make the leather shoes fit her. They were black, laced, and had a small sturdy heel. It was a compensation of sorts.

To celebrate the new outfit, Yulia posed for a photograph. It shows her smiling softly in a field of wild flowers by a shed and the picture came to celebrate the end of the war as well as the new outfit. There were other pictures that she cherished, some with her brother, some with friends whose life had taken the same turn, and two of the Ukrainian congregation, mostly Greek Catholics, gathered on the steps of the Church at Klagenfurt. There are also a few photographs with a man who was to take a significant place in her life. That man was Yurii Fedechko and he became her husband. There is a picture of him perched high on beams erecting a roof. He had a commanding presence. Yulia got engaged to him and they were married in 1947. They left Maria Rain, and all that it represented in terms of fear and isolation, behind them. Instead they became DPs.

In the aftermath of the war, the hordes of people who had been taken by force from Eastern Europe or who had fled in advance of the Soviet occupation and found themselves stateless were granted a political reprieve in various camps set up for them as Displaced Persons, or DPs, as they became officially known. As DPs, Yulia and Yurii, now married, moved to a near-by camp still in the District of Klagenfurt. The camp, St Martin, in the town of Villach became home for three years while they applied to emigrate further West and while they waited to receive their acceptance papers.

By that time, there was no question for either Yulia or Yurii to return to their native Ukraine because their country had been overrun by the Soviet Union which was growing in power and in despotism. Yulia had lost all contact with her family in Sviatkova Velyka but, though she worried about them, she determined to continue her emigration. Of all the countries that opened their doors to the refugees of WWII the Fedechkos chose the United States for they had heard that there was a great demand for labor in that country and a willingness to pay for it. In such conditions they could raise a family and have a decent future. That was the sum of their aspirations.

They fully realized that they would be at a great disadvantage no matter what country they would go to. There was a matter of skill but, again and also more significantly, a matter of language. It was with trepidation that, upon receiving their acceptance papers in 1950, they went to New Orleans in Louisiana, arriving fortuitously on the Fourth of July to celebrations that welcomed them into a melting pot with a long history.

They had been told that New Orleans was a large port with a great need for strong and able men. Unfortunately, for them, that did not prove to be the case. Yulia worked again for room and board but Yurii could not find a job. It did not take long for Yurii to realize that he needed friends who knew how to ease his first steps in a their adopted country. He used his contacts among the Ukrainian émigrés from Klagenfurt to inquire about opportunities elsewhere and finally, six weeks after disembarking in New Orleans, the Fedechkos came to Columbus in Ohio. For the first few months Yulia once again worked for room and board but, in Columbus, Yurii found a job in a popular restaurant called Mills for \$15.00 a week.

Those were riches and within a short time Yulia gave up her job. It felt sweet to be in their own place, free of the continuous demands on her time and energies.

It was an immense step forward. Two years after their arrival to Columbus, a son was born to Yulia and Yurii, and then again two years later, another. Eventually Yulia learned sufficient English to get hired at AT&T (American Telephone and Telegraph). It was another step in her quest to secure a solid foundation for her family.

Frequently Yulia asked herself what her life would have been had she not been forced into slave labor at the age of sixteen. She stopped speculating on such an eventuality when she visited her family in 1969. Since the end of WWII, Yulia had been familiar with the reports coming in from the Soviet Union of executions, reprisals, and deportations coupled with extraordinarily harsh living conditions. Though she had lost contact with her family after the war she hoped through the years that they had survived but just how she only learned in her 1969 visit. What she found was that they would have been happy to work for room and board. The Chomyks had been sent to Moscow where there was no shelter or food or work for them. Those were extremely harsh conditions. In desperation, Yulia's father went to Lviv and found a disused shack whose doors and windows had been blown out by bombs but that was the only place to which the authorities would permit him to bring his family from Moscow. When asked about their diet in those dreadful years after the war, the Chomyks would only shrug their shoulders. They were grateful to have been spared with their lives and wanted nothing more than to forget the past and move on.

In the West people saw things differently. With the passage of time, voices rose to protest the great injustices and damages done in WWII to millions of people and finally a schedule of reparations and restitutions was hammered out between Germany and its victims. To her great surprise, Yulia found herself at the receiving end of these reparations in 2000, more than half a century after the war.

All she had to do to get them was to provide proof to the Polish Institute of National Memory in Przemysl, who was administering the funds allocated for this purpose, to confirm that she was the young woman conscripted to forced labor in 1943. Thanks to impeccable record keeping by the Germans, the administrators knew her age and the date of her departure from Svitkova Velyka. They earmarked \$1,800 to her and provided her with a small pension that is just under \$10.00 a month which she still gets on a quarterly basis.

In the context of what she had gone through, the lump sum and the pension from the Polish government does not seem to be of any great weight. The amounts make no material contribution to Yulia's standard of living, yet, when all is said and done, it does seem to be a fitting closure to the journey she undertook against her will in March 1943, not in terms of money but in terms of what the money symbolizes: the acknowledgment of wrong-doing. That acknowledgment never came to the family she had left behind in Ukraine, or to thousands like them, not even as a purely formal recognition without any compensation in money or in kind for the extraordinary losses and hardships they endured. Yulia says she was one of the lucky ones.