

## Singing in the Dark

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My Zacher grandparents were very special to me. During the years that I knew them, they showed both leadership and charm. I was fortunate to spend a great deal of time with them during my growing-up years. What made them what they were was the love they had for each other. Their love story was not an ordinary one.

Grandma often told me that she was full grown by the time she was confirmed. From her pictures, it is clear that Regina Mueller was a pretty young lady. She caught the eye of a strapping young man in town, Simon Zacher. They started to see each other, off and on, when she was 16. Then in 1905 Simon was called up for duty in the Russian military. During his time in combat he sent letters to Regina on a regular basis. Given the war-time conditions in the Russian military, this was in itself an achievement and left an impression on Regina. Not only did he write with style, but he was also able to express what was in his heart. Even the stationery was extraordinary.

In 1906, Simon came back from the war and later that year my grandparents were married - Simon was 27 years of age and Regina was 18. Through the years, grandma saved every one of those letters, storing them carefully away. When her girls got older, she told them not to look at them, but to place them in her coffin the day she is buried. The letters survived all the hard times during the war, and when grandma died in 1971 my aunt did exactly what she was asked to do. Before my aunt placed the letters in grandma's casket, she went through them looking for pictures. She didn't find any pictures, but what she noticed was how some of the letters had been written, keeping her word not to read the contents. Some of the pages had writing on them written left to right as normal, and then the sheet of paper had been turned sideways and other lines written across the first lines. While I never saw the original letters, I have tried this myself on a sheet of paper and it works! I can only guess that grandpa was allowed only one sheet of paper per envelope, and to be able to write a longer letter, he used that system. One sheet of paper could hold twice the writing!

When grandpa again was conscripted into the Russian army and went to war in 1914, he sent letters home, but these grandma did not save. What she did save, and what I have today in my possession, are picture postcards that Grandpa sent to his girls with nice messages on them - to be good to their mother and not forget to pray for dad - such beautiful sentiments. Every time my mother spoke about receiving those postcards, she had a sparkle in her eyes. There was so much love in that family.

At the end of their property in Teplitz, my grandparents built a bench overlook an area with lots of reeds bordering the creek. Beyond the creek was a garden area they called Neuer Garten - New Garden. As did many of their neighbors, this is where they planted fruit trees. My grandparents spent many evenings sitting on that bench, listening to the frogs. It was especially nice on warm summer nights when the sky was clear and the town was so quiet. There was no noise to be heard anywhere. For my grandparents, this was their favorite place to be together and talk things over with each other. The times I spent with them included many evenings down by the bench, and it is there that many precious memories center. On a clear evening, Grandma would draw my

attention to the sky, pointing out a big star and another group of stars, saying that if I lined them up, I would see a picture. That I never got. My focus was on the reeds, to see if I could spot a fox, of which we had many. The area was so interesting for a boy, because there was so much life in those reeds, especially at night. I was too fearful to go there at night alone, but with my grandparents present I felt perfectly safe. Even grandma got excited the night we heard a Nightengale sing.

Grandpa told me the story about how he caught a weasel, and Grandma told how she learned to swim on that creek. Many times my grandparents said their night prayers to close out the evening down by the reeds. An especially outstanding memory for me are those nights when Grandpa and Grandma sang. My grandma liked to sing, and what a nice voice she had. Grandma would start a song, and Grandpa would tune in and both would sing together. I remember Grandma calling Grandpa, Papale, like Papa but in a more charming way. It felt so good to walk back to the house between my grandparents, each one holding one of my hands. On the way back to the house, Grandpa would check on his horses; and then Grandma would go into the kitchen to fix a bedtime snack before we called it a night.

Now that I'm old and not well, just thinking back to those times gives me happiness and a feeling of love. Times were different then from what they are now. When I look back and think about those moments, it is like being a participant in the closing act of a wonderful opera. The music comes to a close, and with the end of the opera the audience offers up a well-deserved applause. If I could close my eyes now and be gone, that would be my closing act in this life and the beginning of a new life in heavenly peace.