

Onkel Hans and the Mushrooms

Text written by Louise (Regehr) Wiens, Leamington, Ontario, November 2013

The most interesting New Year's Eve that I can remember was December 31st, 1999, now remembered as the infamous "Y2K." I was working the midnight shift as the clock began ticking towards the dreaded hour. There had been some panic as the year was drawing to a close and some people had begun stockpiling food, water, and other non-perishable items. Many had bought generators. There was definitely a cloud of uncertainty hanging in the air. I had done none of the above, as I had a backup plan in the form of my Onkel Hans. Having survived Stalin's gulag, he was the most resourceful man that I had ever met. As the clock kept ticking towards midnight, we again reviewed the hospital's plan in case a problem were to arise. But 2400 came and went, and the hydro didn't go out. The computers didn't crash. The world did not end. My patients were still alive as my co-workers and I toasted the New Year with sparkling water and enjoyed our usual impromptu buffet.

Onkel Hans was the strong silent type. One could be in a room with him for several hours and not hear him utter a single word. Quiet and pensive, content to be alone, he was truly in his element scouring the deep woods and rivers in northern Ontario hunting for wild game. The forests reminded him of Siberia he said, and I never had any doubt that he could certainly survive on wild berries and other vegetation if he ever ran into difficulty. Although he was basically unschooled, I always likened him to a vast reservoir of knowledge as I reasoned that he knew more about plants and animals than any educated naturalist or conservationist. Tall and thin, with a slow methodical gait and impeccable posture, one would never guess that he had suffered great atrocities while in the Russian prison camps during WW 2. Yet I never heard him speak of it. Not even once.

Born into a large Mennonite family in the Ukraine, his parents died during a massive typhus epidemic leaving the children orphaned. Also exiled to Kazakhstan, he met and married my aunt there, being fortunate to then able to leave with her when she was granted permission to go to Germany in 1955. Leaving his numerous siblings behind they arrived in the Lager in Friedland, Germany along with my parents, where they were greeted with freedom, warm food and lodging. The Red Cross and Mennonite Central Committee along with many other relief agencies were working endlessly trying to reunite millions of displaced and fragmented families who had been strewn across several continents like the wind. The newly arrived refugees were unaware that their beloved homeland Germany had now been divided in half, as they were briskly questioned where they would prefer to settle. "They wanted to keep us all in the East," my aunt recently told me, "but the addresses they gave us for my 3 siblings were in the West. They called Onkel Hans and I into the office and told him he could pick out a property in the East block. Any property. Onkel Hans was quiet. He had no words. The people who chose to stay in the East seemed to be settled before those of us who chose to go to the West," she continued. "They told us to stay here in East! It will be very good for you here. Trust us. Pick out a place. Any place. It will be good." The gentleman at the bureau became agitated as Onkel Hans remained silent. The official advised my aunt, "Yes, your mother should definitely go to the West where her other children are, but you two should definitely stay here." Becoming impatient he then chastised my uncle and blurted out, "In a family the man should speak up!" Yet Onkel Hans remained silent. My aunt piped up, "I will speak for us," as she timidly expressed their desire to

also go to the West. The next morning a large bus pulled up and the exasperated officials who were now perceived as no longer being quite so friendly ushered them into the vehicle as the newly arrived refugees departed for West Germany.

There was great anticipation in the air as in the 1990's Onkel Hans first sent money and then received confirmation that one of his sisters had been granted a visa and was coming from Russia to Canada for a visit. Although there had been sporadic contact over the years, they had not seen each other in almost 4 decades, and Mariechen had never left her village since the day she had been exiled there in the 1940's. Short and robust, with grey hair pulled back in a tight rather austere looking bun, she had an infectious toothy smile and loved to laugh as she quickly became amused by all the commercial trappings Canada had to offer. Scanning through some wallpaper sample books I had brought home, she shook her head both in amazement and disbelief. Arriving without any money and with her adult son Wova, quite a likable chap, in tow, I was at the house that first snowy evening as they unpacked their baggage and prepared to settle in for a next few weeks. Several well-worn suitcases were laid out on the living room floor along with several bulging pillow cases which were stitched tightly together at the ends. "Yes," said Mariechen, "we spent many months in the woods last fall gathering them. We heard that there were considered very desirable by Canadians and that we could sell them here for VERY large amounts of money," she informed us, as she proudly retrieved armfuls of enormous dried brown mushrooms from her suitcase. Her eyes began to dance and turned into slits as my eyes practically exploded watching her proudly hold up the long ropes of dried mushrooms which had been expertly woven together and then lovingly packed in their belongings. "Mushrooms?" I exclaimed, "You want to... SELL them? Here? Well...I don't think that's gonna happen any time soon..." She looked dejected as I tried to explain to her the purpose of the Food and Drug Administration Board of Canada as well as the Provincial Health Board. Onkel Hans examined the mushrooms closely, confirming to me quickly that they were indeed an edible variety, but he remained mostly silent as I recall. "But many people in Russia told us they were very valuable and we were all counting on it!" she continued, as I wryly smiled again, staring at the mushrooms in disbelief. A sudden pang of guilt stabbed me as I then tried to soften the blow of disappointment. "Well, I guess I could make a few phone calls and see what happens, if anything," I promised them, half-heartedly. Over the next few weeks I made some casual inquiries trying to get rid of the unfamiliar looking magic mushrooms, but to no avail. My aunt fried them, baked them, stewed them, made soups and casseroles and gave bags away to her friends. As our inventory dwindled my young son continued to wrap the long strands of mushrooms around his neck as he ran around the house and I ran out of ideas on how to unload them. Finally, as their visit was drawing to a close, I phoned the Mushroom Marketing Board in Toronto where the man on the other end of the line expressed an immediate and extraordinary interest in my dilemma. "Yes, describe them to me, again please," he prodded, "Yes, I think I know what they are. Yep, I'll take 'em. All of them. I can sell them in Chinatown in Toronto in a heartbeat for a couple bucks apiece. How soon can you get them here?" "WHAT?! You actually want them? I live 4 hours away!" I gasped. "Put them on the next Greyhound bus. I'll be waiting for their arrival." Sheepishly I confessed to him that we had all been devouring the mushrooms in droves, and that our stockpile had been greatly depleted by now. "That's OK, I want them anyways" he persisted." As I relayed this sudden turn of events to my aunt, she dejectedly concluded that she would just keep what was left. "Just forget it," she concluded, as she shook her head in disbelief and Onkel Hans sat at the kitchen table and remained silent. And so, forget it I did...