The Cattle Car: A Refugee Journey

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

Living near the busiest border crossing between Canada and the USA, we are amongst the thousands who cross regularly for shopping, entertainment, or travel purposes. Recently we were driving down an impeccable busy boulevard in an upscale suburb of Detroit, Michigan looking for a particular address, when I spotted it, a seemingly generic looking, rather large elongated red brick building. "Zekelman Holocaust Memorial Center" proclaimed the sign, and upon noticing it, I immediately implored my husband to pull over for a few minutes so that I could at least run in to check the hours of operation and maybe plan a visit in the near future, which he did. It was an overcast summer's day as I entered the lofty front lobby where an elderly woman was manning the reception desk as a young man beside her appeared immersed with his computer. As I heard the shuffling of feet behind me I turned to see a group of well-behaved and pensive school children being escorted on an organized tour of the center, as my eyes continued to roam the expansive space around me. The woman recited her rehearsed yet informative speech to me about the center, and I, in response, divulged a few details of my family history to her, which I felt appeared to take her by great surprise. Then, out of my left periphery, I saw it, in the far side of the lobby. Without my glasses, I blinked. Then blinked again. A cattle car! Parked on wooden railway ties, a sign declared its authenticity and stated that it was a featured exhibit for the month. There with my own eyes, I saw the chipped wooden painted sides with the tiny slats between them. There were the large rusted bolts on the outside which ensured escape was not possible, and which I had heard enclosed both those living and those already dead. As the woman continued her rehearsed rhetoric, my tears began to flow and I quickly exited the building.

It was in the fall of 1945 when my mother and her siblings were told that they would now have to leave Germany since "they were not born there." They had already been resettled more than once since being expelled from Bessarabia in the early l940's, and now once again they found themselves on the move. They were assimilated into creaky wooden cattle cars which appeared to no longer even be fit enough to hold even the animals that they had been built to contain. Yet this was human cargo, and along with 10 other families, who were also from her home village of Leipzig, the group made a pact to try to stay together, as they once again faced an uncertain future. As the cattle cars departed, the Leipzigers initially held out high hopes that they were returning to Romania, and they were already sensing the anticipation of the grape harvest and tasting the sweet fruit and the succulent wine. It was not long into the journey however, as the train made a sudden unexpected turn, that some of the older men on the trek with them, who were familiar with the rail system in place at that time, shared the shocking revelation with their fellow passengers that the train was indeed heading into another direction, and that it was not to their beloved homeland.

Roll call was held unexpectedly every few days as the train groaned to squeaky halt and the masses of people were abruptly ordered to hap-hazardly jump out of the rail cars and risk injury by lunging onto the rocky steppe beneath to break their fall. The terrain appeared to show no signs of civilization, past or present. The gruff uniformed Russian officer bellowed orders, seemingly oblivious to the shrieks of the frightened children who were clinging to the arms of their frightened mothers. With his starched cap perched impeccably on his head and his polished rifle by his side he used intimidation tactics to try to calm down his newly recruited group of

prisoners. Cold and disheveled they were starting to succumb to malnutrition and exhaustion as they tried to pull themselves together for the sake of their children. As my mother and her 3 year old son Egon took their allotted place in line she began to mumble under her breath to the woman beside her about this surreal scene in which they had found themselves once again being involuntary participants in. Upon becoming aware that someone would incredulously have the stamina to speak at the same time that he was barking instructions, the officer pivoted, and pointing his rifle at my mother and her son he let loose a string of syllables of Russian profanity. My mother was quickly silenced as the woman next to her, who understood Russian, translated that he threatened to send my mother to a place where she would never see the light of day again. "That quieted me and I knew then that I was in Russia," my other had relayed to me many times over the years.

Anxiety and panic increased daily amongst the people and scrimmages between them became common, when on rare occasions the car doors would slowly creak open and a few handfuls of food would be thrown in as if one was feeding a flock of birds. The stench of human body odor of those living and of those already dead, mixed with excretions, was not easily absorbed by the mounds of dirty straw on which the deportees not only rested their heads but also used to garner some warmth. Sometimes the train was left abandoned on the tracks for days at a time, doors bolted from the outside, until days later the muffled distant chugs of the ancient and battered locomotive were the only indicator that the train was now on the move again. Fleeting glimpses of meager filtered streams of light peeking through the slits on the sides of the cattle car illuminating the dust and the filth were the only indicators of the time of day or light, as people crowded near them to inhale some fresh air.

Weeks later the train had reached its destination of Martuk, Kazakhstan, where the exiled villagers were quickly pushed off and instructed to line up as officials from several local collective farms gathered to fill their work quotas by choosing from this new group of recruits. Women with children were considered a liability and usually not considered a popular pick, which resulted in my mother being separated from several of her siblings. The local nomadic groups of Kazaks were seemingly nonchalant to these newcomers, having apparently having seen the pattern of forcibly relocated folks coming and going for many decades.

In l955, after 10 long years of exile, (which will be detailed at a later date), my mother, her new husband, their 3 year old son Arthur, and several other family members were given permission from Moscow to return to Germany. At the 11th hour, my mother was suddenly informed by the powers that be that a small complication had arisen, in the form of her almost 9 month pregnancy. She would not be able to leave after all, she was informed, as Russia was responsible not only for her well-being, but also for that of her soon to born child. "No one ever cared if we lived or died all those years," she often told me, "yet now, they suddenly acted as if they actually cared!" On a cold December day as the Siberian winds whipped fiercely, she was commanded to lie down wrapped in blankets in the back of an ox cart, while a driver took her to a local doctor for an examination to ensure she would be able to withstand the journey home. "Unsuitable to travel," came the quick verdict, from the intoxicated doctor, much to my mother's dismay.

Yet, undeterred, at the appointed time of day of the planned departure, she gathered with the others, determined not to be left behind again. Her family shoved her onto the train and hid her under a coat, as angry officials stormed the rail cars looking for the fully pregnant defiant woman. As the train slowly started to move away from the station, the perception amongst the officials was that she was not present after all in the midst of this throng so very anxious to leave this Siberian wilderness behind, as they then dejectedly exited the train. Several weeks later the joyous homecomers arrived in Friedland, Germany, where safety, warm food and

lodging awaited them. After eating a banana, including part of the peeling, and drinking fresh coffee for the first time in ten years, my mother promptly went into labor, and delivered a full term healthy baby girl at the hospital in Gottingen.

So it was that on that recent overcast June day as I stood in awe in that Holocaust Museum in front of that battered cattle car, words could never adequately describe the emotions that rocked my innermost being to the core. It was as if my two worlds had suddenly collided in front of me. You see, I was that baby, born so many years ago…