

Your Cousins Live Where?

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

A recent day off began at 7:30 as I dressed to go to an early doctor's appointment. On the way there I stopped at Walmart to scan an old faded sepia photo I had found of my father's brother Nick (deceased), perched on his motorbike somewhere in the wilds of Siberia, dated "1952" on the back. Certain that this was the only print in existence, I quickly made 8 copies to send to my cousin Viktor Regehr in Russia, enough for his children and grandchildren, I surmised. At the doctor's office I had a chat with the receptionist, a former co-worker, and on the way out a young woman approached me in the parking lot, and in broken English asked for directions to an eye doctor's office for her mother who was standing beside her squinting in the bright sunlight. I immediately recognized her as the new nail tech at a local nail salon, having recently treated my daughter and myself to pedicures there, after having ripped 6 pairs of expensive support hose and coming to the conclusion that that my heels needed some major attention. While at the salon I had met a high school classmate whom I hadn't seen in at least 25 years and we played catch-up while I couldn't help but stare at 2 women taking pictures of their new nail gels for Facebook. Yet my daughter and I did have some bonding time at the salon, and having forgotten to bring a pair of flip flops along, I wore the pair she had brought out to the car while I delegated her to run out barefoot, which she did. On to the Post Office I went to send off the registered letter to Viktor in Russia, who had recently returned to me a bank money order which I had mailed to him in the summer of 2012. It came back to me uncashed, with a note in Russian stating that he had been informed that it could only be cashed in Toronto! Viktor, now in his early sixties, had also relayed to me that he had now finally retired, as his employer had been unable to pay his employees for some time. In the line behind me at the Post Office was Mayor John Patterson, whom I ushered ahead of me, as I knew that I would be taking a while at the wicket. Where else but in a small town can one say that they attended high school with the Mayor? When it was my turn, the young woman behind the desk cringed as she saw me stuffing some large bills into an envelope, and advised against it. I am sure that I even rolled my eyes. "Oh, just send a MoneyGram," she advised me. "It's SO easy. It's a service offered by Canada Post and we are ALL over the world. Once it arrives there, they call Viktor and he just has to go and pick it up." "Ok," I responded, "even if had had a phone book, or a phone, he doesn't have a car. It won't work. I am sure there is no MoneyGram office near there." "Oh, let's just check," she persisted, as I gave her the name of a nearby city, Ekaterinenburg, with a population of several million. She Googled it, and then with a puzzled look asked me to please respell it for her, which I did. The kind young woman then conceded that, "Yes, there is definitely no office nearby," as I mentally made a note to sometime in the future give her a short lesson on World War II and the lingering effects of Communism. Stuffing the cash into the envelope I registered it, said a quick prayer for its safe arrival, and with a smile the helpful clerk and I parted ways.

In 1992, I was standing in my sunny kitchen watching a handy-man acquaintance from church install a dishwasher in our new home as my then 3 year old son Adam toddled about. I grabbed the phone as it rang to excitedly hear my father on the other end, as with great exhilaration he proclaimed that he had just received a letter from his older brother Nick in Russia! He was alive after all! Neither one of us could contain our joy, and words could not possibly have expressed our elation. Having not seen Nick since 1955 as my parents were

preparing to leave the Siberian steppes behind after spending 10 years of exile in Kazakhstan, there had always been a lurking question in my family re his whereabouts. When Oma Regehr passed away in Canada in 1972, an old black and white cardboard photo of a young stoic Nick in an army uniform stood proudly on her dresser, propped up beside her well-worn Bible. She had long ago come to terms that he was indeed "missing", one of the millions torn from their families during those dark years of the 1940's as Hitler and Stalin ruled with terror. "Oh, if only she could have witnessed this momentous day," I thought to myself as my father and I quickly began to make arrangements for Nick's visit to Canada. A few months later he arrived with two of his adult children, Viktor and Valentina, the spouses of whom had to stay behind due to government regulations in force at that time. Nick appeared much older than his stated age, and the hardships of daily life in the USSR appeared to have had wreaked havoc on slight build. He appeared to have had several chronic medical conditions as well, a chronic cough being one of them. Valentina was a university trained economist for the Ukraine, and although she had received free education, the salary was minimal. The high rise building that she worked in, located in a large city, had no elevator and no running water, but did have an outhouse in the back. I was surprised that Valentina and I appeared to share the same sense of humor, similar body language, and even our respective verbal expressions had a similar "lilt" to them. Considering that we had never met, and were raised continents and cultures apart, I marveled at this. Viktor, named after my father, did some type of factory work and had 3 young girls at home. Communication between us was often difficult as Nick no longer spoke German, having been forbidden to do so for many years, even though his wife was also a Russian German. Yet my parents easily diverted to the Russian tongue and enjoyed many laughs as well as tears. Our guests all enjoyed going to the local grocery stores where they marveled endlessly at the array of merchandise available. Viktor loved to go to the local auto wreckers and admire items and cars that we Canadians felt were no longer salvageable. A highlight for him was when I purchased can of lime green spray paint, as he wanted to "touch up" his aging Lada at home, a car which he shared with several other families. Having arrived with only a small duffel bag and the clothes on their backs, we sent them back laden with clothes and medicines, and with money stuffed into their pockets to boot.

After years sending care packages to Viktor and his siblings, fast forward to the year 2013. Nick has since succumbed to the hardships of life in the wilderness and I am showing my co-workers a photo of Viktor's now adult daughters. It appears to have been taken at Christmas, and they are sitting around an old table with a few small plates of delicacies. Balloons and two paper streamers hang on the multi colored wall behind them. "Wow, she really DOES look like you," they marvel in agreement as I point to the older one named Nina. "You were right after all! And tell us again, how is it that they ended up over there and you ended up here." I glance at my watch knowing that there are not enough hours in the day to adequately do the story justice. "Hey, and why don't you go visit them sometime," they add, with a slight smile on their faces. I sigh deeply and again examine the photo of Nina, with similar build and facial structure. Her hair is short, styled similarly, and also blonde. And she is even wearing my favorite color, light blue. I tuck the photo back in the envelope and return to my work, and wonder if indeed a visit will ever come to pass...