

CHAPTER 1

GRANDPA AND THE FIRING SQUAD

Stone walls do not a prisone [sic] make.¹

—George Bernard Shaw

Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

—John 8:32

As told by Lena

MY PARENTS DIDN'T allow my three brothers and me to play with the other children in the neighborhood. They built a wood fence around the yard and installed a gate, which Mama locked every morning after Papa left for work. Then she let us amuse ourselves in the yard while she was cooking or planting potatoes or taking care of the goats. We often stood at the gate, peeking through the bars, stretching our hands into the air, rejoicing that our hands were free, even if we were not, waving at the neighbors passing by, neighbors who laughed at us, remarking we were like prisoners in jail.

Maybe the neighbors were joking; maybe they remembered that our grandfather had been imprisoned during the Great Patriotic

War. Many Ukrainians rejoiced when our country was invaded. Some greeted the German army with bread and salt, the traditional symbols of welcome, hoping the Nazis would rule more humanely than the iron-fisted communists. After two years of German occupation, the Soviet Army drove the Nazis out, fighting so fiercely around Zaporozhe that the Dniepr River ran red with the blood of the dead.

The Soviet Army rounded up all the men who survived the occupation to take to the front. My grandfather, Gavril, was among them. He refused to fight. The Baptist church left decisions about participating in war or bearing arms to each person's conscience. For Grandpa, it was clear. "I am a Christian," he said, "and I will not kill anyone."

To the Soviet authorities, this was traitorous. How could any citizen shirk his duty to defend the Motherland from the fascist invaders? The Nazis treacherously attacked our country, plundered wantonly, slaughtered millions of people, and carried off thousands more to slavery in Germany. Maybe my grandfather would have been more willing to help a regime that had not been so cruel to believers. He certainly wasn't going to compromise his principles to help the Communist Party complete its Five Year Plan. He would remain true to his faith and convictions no matter what.

For many years the authorities sought reasons to arrest Grandpa for his faith; now they had grounds to execute him. He was tried, sentenced to death by firing squad, and thrown into the death cell with others condemned to die. There he sat for an entire month. The guards distributed almost no food and offered no medical care of any kind to these prisoners, reasoning that the inmates were going to die anyway. Why waste good food or medicine on traitors and criminals?

Every morning, as the pale winter sun peaked through the tiny window high up in the wall of the unheated cell, the cell's door grated open and a guard appeared. As he probed the faces of the

condemned with his flashlight, the prisoners waited, resigned, knowing what was about to happen—one of their number would be called out never to return, and each one hoped to be spared one more day. But the guard's light would finally settle on one weary face. "You. Let's go."

One morning the light drilled into Grandpa's face. He calmly said good-bye to his cellmates. After a month in the death cell he still wasn't sure why he had been arrested. Was it for refusing to fight in the army, refusing to kill another human being? Or was it simply for his faith? Now his sentence was about to be fulfilled; it didn't matter why he was to die. He staggered to his feet, lightheaded from hunger, stiff from inactivity.

The weak light of the winter sun pierced Grandpa's eyes when he left the cell. Each step was a struggle, every muscle protesting, pain shooting through his feet as he walked to certain death, his heart at peace. He knew that in a few minutes he would be rewarded for his faith and enjoy eternal life with God. The guards marched Grandpa along the muddy streets of the camp. As they passed the headquarters, an officer came out. "Where are you taking this man?" he asked.

"To the firing squad."

"What has he done?"

"He's a Baptist leech who won't fight."

"My mother was a Baptist," said the officer. "I can't allow you to kill him. Give him another trial."

At the second trial they sentenced Grandpa to ten years hard labor in a concentration camp in Siberia. Grandpa's suffering was only beginning.

