

A Story of Family

Werner Fast

I was seven years old when one night my parents were roused by that ominous knock on the door which they knew was bound to come sooner or later. Indeed, it was the dreaded KGB who had come to take my Dad away. I remember very little of that fateful night, except for my Dad putting one hand on my shoulder and, with the other hand, lifting my chin to look at my tear-stained face. He said, “Werner, be good and behave yourself. You’re the oldest, so it will be up to you to take good care of Mother while I’m gone.” I don’t think he realized the heavy burden of responsibility those words placed upon the tender heart of a seven-year-old.

My mother impressed upon my mind that I should pray every night that God would keep Dad in his protective care and that we might someday be reunited with him. For years this remained the key petition of my nightly prayer. At the time of evacuation from our homeland in Ukraine in 1943 and on the refugee trek for the next five years, the prayers for our own immediate needs – protection, food, shelter – always included a plea for Dad’s safety and return.

When the war finally ended, we found ourselves in Soviet-occupied territory in East Germany. Mother, with her two sisters and several other families from our home village, desperately looked for an opportunity to flee from the east zone to the western, Allied-occupied, zone. Eventually this escape became a reality; whether by sheer human connivance or by God’s miraculous guidance remains a moot point. After a while we became aware of the Mennonite Central Committee and its efforts at relocating Mennonite refugees to either North or South America. We were fortunate to have relatives in Canada and succeeded in emigrating to this strange new country in 1948. I recall praying, “God, if you bring us to Canada, I will serve you in whatever way you choose.”

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Having seen so many of our prayers answered, I was sure God would also answer the most fervent and most frequent prayer of my life, that of asking him to keep Dad safely in his care and to bring him back to us. But I was ill-prepared for the way he chose to answer this prayer.

During our first years in this country Mother had a large portrait of Dad drawn from a small photograph. This picture adorned one side of our living room wall. One day after I came home from school, I noticed that the wall where the picture had hung was bare. When Mother came home from work, I asked her what had happened to it. After a moment's silence, tears came to her eyes and in a quivering voice she said, "He is not worthy to occupy that place any more. He remarried in Russia." I was thunderstruck. The emotional turmoil left me speechless. I withdrew to my bedroom and in mute despair buried my head in the pillow.

After supper that night, Mother said a little more about Dad's situation. He married a woman who worked in the hospital where he had been a patient and where he later worked as a book keeper. He had been sickly a lot, and she had shown compassion and kindness when he most desperately needed it. Besides, through other men who had located their families in Germany he learned that his wife, like many other women, had emigrated to Canada. As far as he was concerned, reunification was never going to happen. So he decided to start a new life. When Mother found out about it, the couple already had several children together. That evening I had a hard time concentrating on my homework. I finally gave up and turned to writing a letter to Dad. While I don't recall the exact contents, I do remember the angry and accusatory tone. Later my mother confronted me and reproved me for the harshness of the letter. She begged me not to send it, but rather to adopt a non-judgmental and forgiving attitude as she was trying to do. When I was finally able to cry, I felt a tremendous sense of relief. I found I was able to pray again, first for forgiveness for my self-righteous attitude and for Dad's violation of the marriage covenant; then, for grace to remain connected with each other and to know how to relate from here on.

I then took up correspondence with my father, and we stayed in touch until he passed away in 1988. I had the opportunity to visit Dad while on a tour in the Soviet Union in 1987. One of the stops was the city of Frunze, which was only an hour's drive from where Dad lived in Kirgizskaja. He was going to meet

me at the hotel where our group was staying for a few nights. One can imagine the excitement as well as the apprehension that I felt as the bus pulled to a stop in front of the hotel. A mass of people was awaiting us, as most of those on the tour were anticipating reunions with relatives and acquaintances. My eyes eagerly scanned the crowd for some familiar face. But I had not seen my Dad for forty-six years. No one in the crowd seemed to resemble the person I knew only from a photograph. I approached an old man at the edge of the crowd who looked wistfully at the scene of hugging and crying and laughing as long lost relatives discovered each other. Since most of them spoke the Mennonite dialect of Low German, I asked the old man in Low German, "*Tjanne see enen Johann Faust?*" (Do you know a Johann Fast?) He looked quizzically at me and said, "*Werner, best du dit wirklich?*" (Werner, is it really you?) The next minute we were embracing each other and crying on each other's shoulders. After a while, two younger men came reluctantly towards us and Dad introduced me to two of his sons. Hesitantly they came towards me, but when I approached them with outstretched arms, they gladly and warmly embraced me.

Each of the three days that we were in Frunze, my brothers and Dad came to pick me up in the morning and returned me to the hotel in the evening. We had a lot to talk about as we tried to fill each other in on the happenings in our lives during the past forty-six years. But the most significant conversation occurred on the last day. My Dad and his wife took me aside and poured their hearts out over the burden of guilt they had suffered throughout their marriage. And I had to confess my initial anger and lack of empathy for the difficult situation in which they found themselves. We knelt down and made our confession to God, asking him to purge us of any residue of resentment and unforgiving spirit. Then we got up, embraced each other, and through tear-stained eyes assured each other of total forgiveness. Absolution granted and received gave a new sense of freedom and joy to the remainder of our time together. I was able to accept their three sons as brothers, and they became excited at the thought of having more siblings in Canada.

Before the tour group left the area, we did some shopping. Among other things, I wanted to buy Dad a new suit. He resisted, claiming the one pair of pants and shirt and jacket he had worn for years to church were still good enough for Sunday apparel. But my mother had given me money for this

purchase, so I insisted that he choose a suit he liked. Eventually his wife and sons had to make the selection for him.

Our good-byes were painful, but not as uncertain and apprehensive as forty-six years ago. We both felt that we probably would not see each other again, but we parted with a sense of gratitude and peace. Dad died a year later, just after receiving permission to emigrate to Germany. Dad never made it. His wife and three sons with their families did emigrate. My wife and I had a good visit with them in the summer of 1998. I asked my brothers whether or how often Dad wore the suit we bought him. The answer was, Never! But they put it on him for burial. God bless our memory of him.