

[This report was written by Josh Yank in 1999 as part of a class assignment to interview someone who had experienced oppression on her concept of freedom.]

Tatiana was already nearly 90 when I asked her to share her story. She was a faithful member of Holy Trinity Orthodox Church in St. Paul, a hardy woman with a Russian accent whose smiling face was photographed by a local news reporter as she shoveled her sidewalk last winter. After a life that included ocean voyages, revolution, war, the siege of Leningrad, detention at Auschwitz, and assignment to displaced persons camps after World War II, she and her mother found a peaceful life for themselves in St. Paul.

Tatiana began her long story by telling me that she had been born in St. Petersburg under the reign of Czar Nicholas II. At the age of 6, her father, a priest, was asked to come to America to serve immigrant Russians in the newly formed Russian Orthodox churches springing up on the East Coast. From 1910 - 1913, she and her family lived in New Jersey, New York, and Connecticut. They left America for an extended vacation in to Russia in 1914 to visit her grandfather, but their return to the United States was prevented by the outbreak of World War I, which made it impossible for them to leave the country.

Tatiana's father became a teacher in a seminary in Russia and was prominent in the town, helping establish services for alcoholics. For a while, life continued as before, until the Russian Revolution erupted in 1917. The first wave of the revolution, as Tatiana recalls, occurred in February of that year, and was propelled by moderates who forced the abdication of the Czar. The second revolution, led in October 1917 by Lenin, caused widespread civil war and the eventual domination of country by the Bolsheviks and their military force, the Red Army. As the Bolshevik Party seized power across the country, churches were destroyed, clergy were killed and imprisoned, educators and professionals were stripped of their livelihoods, and many people were sent to gulags or killed. Landowners were forced to turn their farms over to the state to be reorganized as collective farms.

By 1920, hostility toward religion had become harsh official policy. Like many other priests, theologians, and religious individuals, Tatiana's father was arrested and put in prison. Inmates reported that the soldiers would routinely take him and his roommate late at night for interrogation and beatings. The roommate sent a note with a visitor to Tatiana's mother to inform her that on Christmas Eve, 1920 (January 6, according to the old calendar), her father had been taken from the cell but had not returned. The roommate sadly concluded that Tatiana's father had probably been executed that night.

Despite the trauma of these times, Tatiana reported that she did well in grade school and lived as quietly as possible with her mother. When her years in grade school were over, the party officials, who were trying to modernize the country as quickly as possible, decided that she could contribute best to her country by attending a technical high school. While she could propose a particular field, the school administration and party officials had the final say about the training she would receive, and selected a program in architectural and mechanical drawing for her. Upon completing her training, she worked in a factory, developing plans for building sea vessels. (During our conversation, she eagerly explained the design flaw that doomed the *Titanic*.)

After enduring the Russian revolution, more suffering followed with the assault of Russia by Nazi Germany in 1941. Along with her mother, Tatiana survived the siege of Leningrad, only to be selected for forced labor in a factory within Auschwitz ("but we were not prisoners - we did not have to wear the uniform"). Later, she was reunited with her mother and lived in displaced persons camps in Germany after Hitler was defeated. Despite all these adversities, she was faithful to her prayers and Orthodox faith, as much as she was able, without placing herself or her mother at risk.

Eventually, through one set of fortunate circumstances after another, her own cleverness, physical strength (and the grace of God, she was quick to add), she and her aging mother came to America in 1952 and were resettled in St. Paul by a sponsor.

Tatiana explained that she found her first job in St. Paul at a drapery sewing factory on University Avenue. One of the workers asked her the date of her birthday and that of her mother. At the time, Tatiana thought those were unusual questions. When the day of her mother's birthday arrived, Tatiana was invited into the lunchroom where the employees had prepared a decorated birthday cake for Tatiana's mother, who was present as the guest of honor.

Tatiana's eyes filled with tears that rolled down her wrinkled cheek. "Who would think of such a thing? Yes, the Americans are good people - soft, I think." Since her faith was not dominated by sophisticated theology, but measured by "softness", she accepted all people of good will without exclusion.

For Tatiana, whose life was dominated for so long by the challenge of survival, a simple, uncomplicated lifestyle with a small space to garden, work in a friendly environment, enjoy simple pleasures, and worship in a "feeling-good place," defined freedom for her, and motivated her to share the blessings of freedom with all who were privileged to know her.

[*Note: Tatiana fell asleep in the Lord in 2002 and has been missed greatly, not only by those who knew her but those who have heard of her great devotion, sharp wit, unfailing warmth, and abiding hope.*]