

Prologue
Sparrow's Song



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Most people think that the trip from our home near the Volga River in Russia to our new home in America was the trip of a lifetime. For me, the trip of a lifetime was my third trip to the Nebraska beet fields. It was during that trip I knew, for certain, I would make a different life for myself. It was a hot July day back in the old country when I first heard talk of a move to America. I had helped *Großmutter* put up jam that morning with wild *himbeeren* Anna and I had gathered from the thorny stands near the river. We'd carried home an apron-full each of the small purple berries. By the time we'd thrown away the rotting ones and cut out the damaged spots, we had six pint jars to show for our work.

The vegetable garden, where Mother was busy working with the beans, was next to the summer kitchen. Something had changed between Mother and *Großmutter*; I just couldn't tell for certain what it was. I wiped the tips of my fingers on the edge of the cloth that *Großmutter* used to cover the *himbeere* jars, picked up a bucket, and walked out into the warm dirt. While Anna preferred to spend her time indoors with *Großmutter*—baking, sewing, and tending to her fancywork—I preferred working with Mother. When I was finished helping in the garden, I was free to wander about the countryside with Anton Korte.

There was a time, when our people first arrived in Russia and were located in this untamed area and forced to farm, that robber bands made their homes in our canyons. They terrorized our villages and robbed and killed whoever was passing by. Now we just pretended, as we followed the creek along to the community pasture, that we were on the lookout for any brutal band of thieves and murderers that dared to threaten our travels. We wandered at our leisure for a time, exploring here and there, pretending we heard wolves howling on the distant steppes.

When we returned to the village, we stopped at Korte's barn, as we often did, climbed up on a wagon, and looked through the window. It was no surprise to either of us to see a dozen men from our community leaning on barn posts or sitting on hay bales, listening to old Heimlich Mueller's son, Jakob, tell about the opportunities to be had, and the money to be made, in Nebraska.

It was 1907, and there was much talk among our people about the forced Russification that had been underway since the time of my father's birth. Russian was replacing German in our schools, and after years of freedom from military service, boys in our community were being required to register for the Russian army. Wilbur was already seventeen years old, and Mother was desperate to make the trip to America. "What do we know of this America?" *Großmutter* complained. We'd often heard the tale of her grandfather's grandfather, who had fallen under the spell of Empress Catherine's promises and had brought his family to Russia. Here they experienced far greater hardship than had ever befallen them in Germany. I had never heard my parents argue, but many hushed conversations took place nightly behind the heavy curtain that separated my parents' bedroom from the kitchen, and Mother went about her work, on many of the following days, looking grim and anxious.

Once we'd obtained permission to leave Russia, we traveled first to Germany. From there it was a two-week trip across the ocean to America. Most of our days and all of our nights were spent well below the upper deck, deep inside the ship's interior. There was little food, and we drank sparingly from the supply of fresh water. The constant heaving and rocking of the boat was too much for many of the men and for some of the women and children. The smell from so many people relieving themselves in our crowded living space was part of everyday life.

Carl and Sarah Dietrich's two-month-old daughter took sick with a fever on the second day of our voyage and was dead before two more days had passed. The little bit of hair that had grown on her head during two months of life was so fine and light it was almost invisible, but she had the blackest eyelashes of any baby I'd ever seen. When she first took sick, Sarah rocked her without stopping, telling her again and again what a good and precious baby she was. In the final hours, her cheeks were dry and flushed and her eyes were dull and sunken; finally she didn't even cry. After twenty-four hours, Carl and Sarah, together with my mother and Henrietta Gruber, climbed the narrow ladders, past the ship's machinery, to the upper deck and threw her body into the ocean.

Ten days later, we arrived in America.

After landing in America, we traveled by train to Nebraska. We arrived in Nebraska in February, two months after leaving Russia. Our people were settled, among those who had come before us, on small lots adjacent to the railroad tracks on the southwest edge of town. It had been a bitter winter, and the roads were packed with dirty snow. Mother found work almost immediately in Donahue's cigar factory. Because of the winter, the brickyards and the railroads were not in immediate need of workers. *Großmutter* sat in a heavy wrap with her woolen scarf, a babushka, on her head and complained bitterly of the cold. Except for morning and evening prayers, hardly a word was spoken at mealtimes.

"Wait until spring," Clarence Kroger's father told the men who couldn't find work. "A family can make enough in the beet fields to take care of things for the entire year."

Clarence Kroger's family had been in Nebraska already two years when we arrived. Just as Mr. Kroger promised, the beet contractor arrived in the early spring looking for families to work the fields. Father arranged for our family to work in the fields in Western Nebraska. Going to the beet fields meant bringing enough food, clothing, bedding, and household goods to get by for six months. Hogs were slaughtered, and sausage was fried down and packed in lard. Beef was canned, and fruit was dried in preparation for the trip. Yeast, flour, salt, and cooking utensils were packed in trunks. Even *Großmutter* took an interest. Mother brought along cucumber, bean, and tomato seeds for her garden. There wasn't room for anything that wasn't necessary, but baby Millie was able to bring her doll, and we brought our German songbook *Gott Ist Die Liebe*, though Father already knew each of its hymns, and of course we brought our family Bible. Since coming to Nebraska, I had often seen *Großmutter*—though she'd never learned to read—looking over the list of baptisms, confirmations, weddings, and deaths that were the important events in our family's history.

And so our lives continued in this way for our first three years in America: six months in the beet fields and six months back at home in school. It was during the midday dinner hour, at the beginning of our third spring in Nebraska, that I found myself sitting on a painted bench in the schoolyard. I had just finished eating the bread I'd brought from home when Clara ran up behind me.

"Hurry, come quickly, Miss Roberts has some news," she said, grabbing my arm and pulling on me as if I were as immovable as a fence post. But this was just Clara; Father said she was enough to make a bolt of lightning think twice. I liked talking to Miss Roberts, though, so I hurried to my feet.

Many of the girls thought Miss Roberts was strange and frightening. Even in winter, she kept a red and gold fan on her desk that her father had gotten from Cuba during the war with Spain. Sometimes she opened it and fanned herself. This always caused Alice Biel to tap the back of Bertha Groenmeyer's seat with the toe of her shoe; but Miss Roberts was my favorite teacher. She'd been the first at school to smile at me before I learned English. Most teachers just jabbed their finger in whichever direction they wanted me to look and spoke loudly to me when I didn't understand where I was supposed to stand in line, or where we were to go at noon to eat the food we carried with us from home. I learned quickly, though, as I watched and listened, which words I needed most. And I understood almost immediately that teachers were kinder to me if I limited myself to one-word questions and answers, so they didn't have to bother so much. That's how it was in the schoolroom. Outside the schoolroom, though, I was fearless. I talked as much as I wanted, in my broken English, and I didn't care who stood in little groups in the schoolyard and laughed at me.

We reached the door to Miss Roberts's classroom, and I stopped and smoothed my skirt.

"I have some exciting news for you," Miss Roberts said, directing me to a chair beside her desk.

I loved those times when Miss Roberts stopped and talked to me for a few minutes if she saw me in the schoolyard at the end of the day. The way she always asked about my family or complimented my work, and the way she always looked right into my eyes when I was talking—she made me feel important. I could see now that she had one of my papers laid out in front of her.

“Miss Scheibel,” she began, “this paper you wrote, telling in your own words, and with skilled English, what learning means to you—it is outstanding.”

I felt myself lean forward and nod my head, as if I were receiving important instructions.

“The C. and G. Merriam Company is sponsoring a writing contest. State winners will receive a full-bound edition of Webster’s Dictionary.” She picked up my paper and held it out to me. “I believe your paper is good enough to win.”

My mind went blank, and I had to remember to breathe. Miss Roberts knew how I loved the dictionary—the heft of it, the vastness of its smooth cover, the secrets it held, and the possibilities it hinted at. Each Monday, Miss Roberts called on one student to use the dictionary to select a classroom word for the week. When it was my turn, I chose from the middle. The dull thud created as the massive book fell open never failed to excite me.

“Finalists,” Miss Roberts continued, “will travel to Lincoln in May for personal interviews as part of the last round of judging.”

My heart sank.

“I’m sorry, Miss Roberts, I can’t.” I might as well have been speaking my native German, the bewildered way she looked at me. “We go to the beet fields in May,” I said.

Miss Roberts knew about the beet fields. Each May, before school was out, close to sixty students from our school left for the beet fields and didn’t return until late October or early November.

Mealtime was over and students were returning to their classrooms. “Talk to me before you leave for home,” she said. The rest of the afternoon, I couldn’t concentrate. We were supposed to be memorizing the Preamble to the United States Constitution, but the words kept floating away from me. Finally, the end-of-the-day school bell rang and, all around me, students stood up and pushed in their chairs. I remained in my seat, staring at the chalkboard, until everyone was gone. It’s funny how you can look at something and not even see it because your mind is busy trying to understand why some things are the way they are.

Miss Roberts found me before I found her. “Let’s go back to my classroom,” she said. “I have an idea.” I felt a little hopeful as we walked back to her classroom, but I knew deep down there wasn’t an idea of any kind that could change the fact that I couldn’t promise I wouldn’t be in the beet fields before the finalists had to be in Lincoln.

“Talk to your parents tonight,” she said. “Tell them you can stay with me this summer. I have an aunt in Lincoln; she would welcome us.” I knew Miss Roberts’s aunt. I had met her the year before when she came to visit Miss Roberts’s classroom. Miss Roberts’s aunt was the grandest lady I’d ever seen. She’d been a nurse in Chicago, but in Lincoln she worked at the University training other women to serve as nurses. When she was a girl, she’d traveled to China with her parents. Her dad worked for the government, and once, when she was in Chicago, she even met President Roosevelt.

There wasn’t anything left to say, and I imagined Clara was waiting for me in the schoolyard. I smiled at Miss Roberts, hoping it would make her feel better, and I promised to talk to my father.

At home, I waited until we had finished the evening meal and evening prayers were over to speak to my parents. “Will writing pay the bills when we have to eat next winter?” my father said, and I knew I wouldn’t ask again.

We gathered on the platform on the seventh day of May and waited for the Union Pacific to take us halfway across the state to the beet fields in the west. There were over one hundred families waiting, and twice that many who had come to see us off. Clara came to wish me well and to give me a small book that Miss Roberts had sent along. At sixteen, Clara and I had already stayed in school longer than most kids from our community. Clara’s father had year-round work in the brickyards, so she would end and start her school year with the town kids whose parents and grandparents were born in America.

I waited until we’d been on the train at least a few hours before I opened Miss Roberts’s book. “Dear Kathryn,” she had written on the inside cover in her neat, even handwriting, “Strive for success and one day soon you will realize your dreams.” I didn’t want to anger Father, so I allowed myself just another moment to read the message a second time, then I tucked the little book in among some quilts Mother had carried along on the train.

Mother had to leave her books behind when we came to America, but I remembered from the old country how, when her work was done and she had a moment to herself to rest, she loved to read. Mother’s father was an old man by the time she and her sister were born. I never met my mother’s father, but Mother said he was the gentlest man she ever knew. She said she sat beside him at the table every night after the sun was down and, by lamplight, he taught her to read.

Many hours passed on our journey through Nebraska before we reached our destination. The grower, Mr. Chamberlain, met us with the spring wagon and took us to the fields where the tent we’d lived in the previous two years had been replaced by a small wooden shack. Because of his reputation, Father was able to arrange for us to work the same fields each year. Mr. Chamberlain’s wife was a sickly woman who wasn’t much suited to housework. On Mondays, Mother walked to the Chamberlain house in the morning to do up Mrs. Chamberlain’s laundry and didn’t return to the beet fields until late in the day. The Chamberlains had one daughter, Lucy, who sometimes waved to us when we walked into town for church.

The beets had already pushed through the earth when we arrived at the fields. It had been a long trip, so we unpacked our things and went to bed. The next morning we went to work immediately, with our short hoes, thinning the rows by cutting out four-inch sections of growth. After the blocking was completed, and as soon as the plants were four inches tall, we straddled the rows on our hands and knees and thinned each remaining block to a single plant. Children as young as five years old helped with the blocking and thinning. Younger ones were set to play at the ends of the rows, many of them minding each other, their parents keeping watch from a distance while they worked.

Families with eight or ten children could make a considerable wage during a season. Because our family was small—me, Wilbur, Anna, baby Millie, Father, Mother, and *Großmutter*—Father pushed himself, and we worked harder than some of the other families did. The year before, *Großmutter* had put out her back with the hoeing. To honor our contract, Father and Mother worked harder and faster than anyone should ever have to work. It was so hot that summer, and I was so numb with exhaustion, that many nights I couldn't sleep. I lay on a feather tick next to Anna and Millie, in the dark of the night with my eyes closed, willing myself to sleep. It was the first time I ever heard my father cry.

No matter how much work there was to do, Sundays were for God. Sundays were also for rest and for spending time with family and neighbors. Mother said that was the way God intended it. Back home we lived close by each other and neighbors visited daily, but in the beet fields we were miles apart. The only time we saw friends and neighbors was at church. Every Sunday we got up early and walked two hours into town to church.

One particular Sunday, we had the best time we'd had in a long while, relaxing and visiting with friends. The women shared recipes and tips for keeping house in our temporary homes by the fields. Cora and Bernard Betz brought their two-week-old daughter to church for the first time that Sunday, and all of the women held her and patted her and said how perfect she was. By late afternoon, we'd eaten until we couldn't eat any more, and we'd played at least half a dozen games of *Bunnock* with a set of bones Gunter Dunlop had carved from a dead basswood tree. Father was a champion thrower, and his team won nearly every time.

We were telling jokes and singing songs, and feeling quite at peace, as we walked along the dusty road on our way back home. Father was carrying Millie, Wilbur was walking with Father, Anna and I were having fun with our shadows, and even Mother and *Großmutter* were talking. Just as Wilbur took a running leap at our shadows, two horses with riders came up behind us. Anna screamed when she saw Wilbur lunge at her shadow, spooking one of the horses. The horse started to bolt but stumbled in a hole and fell to the side. Neither the horse nor the rider was injured, but the rider was plenty mad.

"What's your kid tryin' to do, get me killed?" he hollered at my father.

“Don’t bother, Earl, they don’t understand you,” the second rider said, bringing his horse in a little closer to Father. “They’re nothin’ but a bunch of dirty Rooshians,” he said, turning his horse to box Father in from one side.

“You’d best go find the sheriff and bring him out here,” the first rider said to the second.

Anna buried her face in *Großmutter*’s skirt. “I didn’t mean to do it. Please, I didn’t mean to do it,” she sobbed.

Mother stepped forward and put her hand on Father’s shoulder.

“Take the children and go home,” my father said.

The muscles in my throat tightened and I felt tears forming low in my eyes.

“But Father,” I pleaded, “they’re bringing the sheriff. He won’t speak our language.”

“Go now,” he ordered, standing with his legs apart, arms at his sides, not taking his eyes off the man who had accused him.

We hurried along the roadside, our hearts pounding.

When we were safely back to the beet fields, *Großmutter* turned to Mother. “This is your fault,” she said, shaking her fists in Mother’s direction. I ran into the shack, stood just inside the doorway with my face to the wall, and wept. *Großmutter* came in and went to her sewing, and Mother came in and stood by the cook stove. I stopped crying then and sat down by the doorway, feeling nothing.

Sometime later, Father arrived home unharmed. He didn’t say a word, but looked at each of us, then went out and stood beside the nearest field. Suddenly he looked, not so much like my father, but like a slightly younger version of *Großmutter*.

I took my book from its hiding place, not caring who saw me. Mother came and sat with me and I showed her my book and translated Miss Roberts’s message for her.

“I’m going back to school when I get home,” I said, “and I’m going to make a different life for myself.”

We sat for a long time, not saying anything. Looking back at nothing, only looking ahead.