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A Place in the Sun and a Place in the Shadow

Marlena Aeschliman

My grandparents, Gustav and Margarethe Wolle, were very wealthy people; they owned the enormous country estate of Biesenbrow, acres after acres of rolling fields, meadows, trees and lakes. It was a lush and beautiful area in east Germany. The harvest from the fields and fruit gardens was plentiful, and the life stock provided a variety of food as well. Life was good and comfortable without too many frills. My grandfather, Opapa, was a frugal man who did not believe in unnecessary luxuries other than on special occasions, holidays and when traveling.

During the war years Biesenbrow was a safe haven for my aunts who had come back to the country with their children whilst their husbands went to war. I, too, lived with my grandparents, and so did my grandmother, Granny, who had come from Berlin to escape the endless bombing. Several other friends of my grandparents joined us as the war went on.. It was one big happy family.

The leaf of fortune turned as the war was lost, and the Russian troops defeated the last remainder of the German army and crossed over the river, Oder, in the east. It was a catastrophic day for us; we were ordered to evacuate as soon as possible to save our lives. Fortunately, preparations had been made for such a case. Horse drawn, planned wagons were quickly packed with food, valuables and a few belongings for every body: three grandmothers, various aunts with their children and our faithful Polish "Kutscher", drivers, who had decided to come with us to keep us safe. Leaving everything behind, we drove off into the night, fearful for our lives only. It was an immensely sad moment. Fortunately, my grandfather had died the year before.

The next weeks we traveled by night and hid in any forest area we could find by day to escape from the bombing and shooting planes that persecuted the retreating German army and hordes of civilians fleeing from the Russians. After a horrendous time on the road, we arrived in Hulseburg, Mecklenburg, a little village with a beautiful, dainty castle. The owners had fled, also, leaving the castle empty for the invading American forces to occupy. To our great relief, the Americans were very civil to us, particularly, since Granny spoke fluent English and Russian which would turn out to our advantage later. There was, however, no room for our family; nobody in the village offered to take us in; the only place available was a stable with a mean bull on one side who would rattle his chains at night and give us nightmares. We lived in that stable as best we could, every trace of privilege that we were so accustomed to gone, isolated from the world we used to know, but grateful to be alive and safe.

This, too, came to an end; the American army left, being replaced by the British forces for a short while, and then the Russians took over East Germany and marched into Hulseburg. It was a most terrifying moment for my aunts, who were very pretty women, all of them, particularly my Aunt Molli.

A big bonfire raged all night in front of the castle only a short distance from where we were hiding in the stable. The drinking and dancing in front of the fire lasted all night until one by one they passed out. Our situation could not have been worse. The shadow of fear had invaded our hearts and minds. No one can imagine our horror as we prepared to meet our fate. Here we were, "Capitalists" who had fled from the Russians; defenseless women and children living in the stable next to the castle.

All would not have ended "well" without Granny, my tough little grandmother who had gone through some rough times in her life and seemed to have no fear, or at least a lot of courage for a woman of her age and faded beauty. She went to see the Russian commander, and in her perfect Russian demanded a place for us to live in the village, that we should be treated with respect and accorded safety. He must have been impressed, for he did what she asked for; we were moved out of the stable into rooms of different families in the village who were not happy, but tolerated our invasion with aloofness. For a while all seemed to be satisfactory to some degree; rape was still a threat for my aunts and never out of sight; my Aunt Molli was attacked twice, but Granny saved her. It was a struggle to be invisible.

All that ended rather abruptly, the day we were ordered to leave Hulseburg and return to our own home in Biesenbrow, the worst we could have hoped for; and so the nightmare began; our Polish drivers were taken away from us and so were our best horses; only a remnant, barely enough to pull the wagons, were left. We left Hulseburg with a sinking heart, knowing we were outcasts among our own people. Safety was non-existing, every prisoner was set free at the end of the war, and the roads were treacherous for any one, let alone women and children. My Aunt Giesela's diamond ring went first, stolen right off her finger, whilst she was sleeping, and many other things followed. Our horses were a constant worry- without them we were helpless. The situation was grim, but never hopeless. Omama Wolle, my "big" grandmother, kept us safe by her fervent prayers; she never lost faith in the wisdom of the Almighty God and trusted Him to keep us from all physical harm, and the Lord heard her prayers. We finally arrived home safely only to find that we had no home to call our own. We had been disowned of everything.

To the day I ask myself what happened; was I asleep, or am I blocking the memory from my mind? I cannot remember what it was like to drive through the village to the Estate House in Biesenbrow, but one thing I do know, there were no well-wishers or friendly people greeting us. Nobody could have imagined how we would find our beautiful, beloved Biesenbrow and what disfiguration had taken place in our absence. It was like a scene from a horror movie: the house was run down and empty, the shutters flapping in the wind, making an eerie sound. The stables were empty too, the doors swinging from its hinges, devoid of all life. The light was slowly fading, and we had no place to call our own. In disbelief we took in what our minds did not want to accept; that we did not belong here anymore; we were outcasts - former capitalists among Bolsheviks. The thought was threatening in itself.

As we were walking through the almost dark house, we found it void of everything: no electricity, no water, no toilets that worked and not anything left at all, except for the once lovely, big crystal chandeliers and the floor to ceiling gold mirrors in the ballroom that had been willfully destroyed by force and by the hatred of the people in the village who had worked for my grandparents, yet had always been treated fairly.

It did not take long for the new "mayor," once a foreman of my grandparents, and several Russian "officers" to show up and inform us that everything was confiscated and we should sleep on the manure. Without Granny this would have been the end. However, through her efforts with the Russian "officers," we were granted three bare rooms in our house to live in and, eventually, by order of the Russian Commander, got back a few pieces of our furniture that the village people had plundered from our house and feathered their nests with. They were very proud of it, and they could not let us know often enough that we got everything we deserved. Their hatred was fueled by their greed. They had become communists, sharing in the land that once was ours. As a public denouncement and to disgrace our name, my grandmother Granny and my aunts were sent to work in the fields; because of her size and bad legs, Omama was spared. Granny lasted hardly one day; the most she had lifted in her life at the estate was a teacup, and she knew how to faint in the heat of the day. Her clothing was hardly made for thrashing; with her pitch fork she was more of a thread than the flying bundles of straw. Realizing it was hopeless, she was sent home; the damage, however, was done, and the "peasants" loved to see us dragged down into their ordinary existence enjoying the shame and loss of face, they thought, it brought on us. They could not have been further from the truth. Omama's faith never wavered or waned, she never complained and always hoped for a better tomorrow. She stayed true to herself and set the example for us all to follow.

All this degradation took no end, until a big typhus epidemic, brought on by famine and rats, swept the area, and people died one out of every two. It was a great leveler of humanity. By the grace of God, our whole family survived; two aunts and two cousins were near death for several days, and so was I with scarlet fever. There were no doctors and no medicine - you either lived or died. We all Lived. My hearing impairment is a reminder of how lucky I was.

In the end, nobody bothered us anymore. My family made it through the shadow back into the light. Omama, to the day, remains my model for living in good times and in bad times. Her faith was the strength of her life, and her trust was her fortune. She lost it all, yet she never lost her faith or trust. Until the end of her days, she was a woman of great fortune; her fortune was love, not worldly possessions of any kind. Her memory will never tarnish. The few people left from the old generation in Biesenbrow now talk of the "good old days" when my grandparents were there to care for them, and they welcome us with open arms.