

# **The Cossacks Are Coming!**

**(second place, 2017 AHSGR Storytelling Contest)**

**By Cynthia Struven**

## **Cossacks in the Front Yard**

It was not just the chill air that sent shivers along my spine, but a sense of descending darkness. Winter threatened to smother the land with a blanket of snow but the sun put up a good fight. Fog crept along the field, through the trees, and into my bones. Mr. Rooster crowed in the henhouse, the horses whinnied in the barn, and the goats bleated.

Mother and I gathered eggs in the hen house. She held the basket and supervised me while I lifted the complaining hens. I was twelve years old then, and felt confident I could manage the farm.

Horses' hooves clapped against stones, disturbing the quiet. Muttie peered outside to see who could be visiting so early. Her body stiffened and a vein pulsed in her jaw. I peeked over her shoulder while taking the basket from her before we lose the few eggs we had collected. She whispered to me through praying hands.

“Stay here, Rosamunda.”

When she tromped outside, I followed.

Within our gate, six soldiers slumped over their ponies' necks. They looked the same age as my seventeen-year-old brother, but a cold lump dropped into my stomach at the sight of them. The rifle slung over their right shoulder was common enough. However, a nine-foot wooden lance hung from their left shoulder and a curved saber as high as my waist swayed in their sword-belt.

“We hear that you are hiding German soldiers,” one said in our German dialect.

“Nein,” Muttie replied, moving only her lips. Mother was always so formal.

“Frau, we won’t pretend to trust you. While Germany wars with Russia, you are the enemy. One day soon we will force you to return to your homeland.”

I felt my face flush but I said. “*This* is our home,” I jabbed towards the ground we stood on.

“Hush, Rosa,” Muttie said. Then to the soldier she said, “The Tsar promised that if we could improve this land we could keep it. Can you deny that we have?” She stretched out her arms to the surrounding land.

The man snorted. With one hand, he scratched the white tunic blouse that peeked out from under his greatcoat. His other hand sneaked down the red stripe of his blue-grey trousers and yanked on the whip stuffed into the top of his knee-high boot. He slapped it across the rear of his small horse and reeled the animal round. Despite her muscled back and firm hoof, she submitted to her master. He barked something in Russian to the other soldiers and they scattered around the farm like horseflies.

I ran after them.

“Rosamunda, get back here!”

“Muttie,” I called over my shoulder, “someone needs to watch those thieves!”

She wouldn’t be able to catch and stop me if she tried.

The soldiers searched the mill, the smokehouse, the hayloft, and even our pantries. When a soldier tore into a bag of grain with his saber, I cried, “Stop!” and sprang forward to hit him. Another grabbed my wrists, laughed, and said something in Russian to the first. They lit torches and looked down the well. One of the men was going to set fire to the wheat in the silo, but the leader held him back.

“We’ll come back another day and take it for ourselves,” he said, looking at me with a smirk.

When the hunt ended, the intruders left in a dusty storm – without any German soldiers.

Vater had joined Muttie in the yard. She leaned against his chest and he held her up in his muscled arms. He said, “Someday the Cossacks will beat their sabers into ploughshares and their lances into pruning hooks.”

Muttie clucked her tongue and sniffed. “Humph. These Cossacks will steal all we have worked for!”

“Will we really have to leave?” I asked. I was born on that farm. I had worked there and played there. Where would we go? Russia was the only country I knew.

“Rosa,” Vater replied patiently, “we will be strangers and pilgrims wherever we live. We seek a better country in heaven where we will be welcomed and have all we need.”

I could not argue with that.

### **Cossacks in the Churchyard**

One early winter morning, Vater woke me before the sun had peeked over the hill. “Rise and get dressed. I need you to go with me watch after the horse while I meet with the pastor.”

Vater and I both rode Nellie. When we arrived, Vater stiffly dismounted. and handed me the reins.

“Rosa, make sure Nellie does not run away home to her warm stall.” He smiled and patted my hands. I nodded grim-faced, then dismounted to keep warm by dancing around.

Then I sighted the Cossacks. I thought my heart would break out of my chest. One wearing a tall, white, sheepskin cap approached me.

“Fraulein, you look like a generous girl. Wouldn’t you like to donate your horse for service to our Tsar?”

Nellie answered for me by snorting and clomping impatiently on the ground.

I almost laughed but pursed my lips and said, “You have many horses but we have only one. We will keep her!” The Cossack laughed up at the sleepy sun. Then as quick as a striking snake, he raised his riding whip and struck Nellie on the rear. She bolted. I cried out. The reins leapt from my hand. The soldier spun around on his horse to chase after her. I was glad when he spent a long time trying to catch her, but tears streamed down my face.

### **Cossacks on the Road**

One day Vater gathered the family together and said,

“We must leave the farm. The Russians are sending us back to Germany.”

We womenfolk worked through our tears and the men worked out their anger to get ready. We snuck out at night to bury the silver in hopes of returning after the war. We were going to sell all grain and farm animals to our Russian neighbors but we would bring the cow for milk. I helped pack food and bedding on the wagon.

Two days later the Cossacks showed up to make sure the entire German colony left.

After we had traveled only half way to the Black Sea, they took our cow. They slaughtered her right there on the road and had a feast. I was too weary to cry or be angry. I trudged on like a mourner in a funeral procession.

Walking along, Vater took my hand and said, “God owns cattle on a thousand hills. He will provide one when we really need it.”

How could Vater be so patient? Now I was angry.

“They took my horse! They took my land! Now they take my cow! What more will they take, Vater?”

Our colony stopped to rest before dusk and Muttie said, “Rosa, come help us dig for potatoes.” We dug with spoons in the hard ground under the snow. When we found enough we boiled them in pots on log fires beside the road. It was all in vain! The Cossacks came laughing and kicked over the pots.

“No!” I cried and sprang forward to save the pots. Vater held me back so I would not fall into the fire—or get a boot kick.

“I forgot that they could take our food!” I cried. “Why couldn’t they take our hunger and cold instead? Why are they so cruel, Vater?”

“Little Rosa, we must disarm evil with good or we will lose the real battle.”

“It is too hard for me to be good Vater,” I confessed.

The Cossacks continued up the road and Muttie salvaged what potatoes she could and gathered them in her apron. The colony gnawed at the half-cooked potatoes, but our stomachs still growled after that slim meal.

The Soldiers drove us to the Black Sea.

*It looks so endless, and unfriendly, and boring,* I thought as I stared out over the dark-gray, wind-swept water.

After the Cossacks herded us onto the barge, I could not help but cry with some of the women. The Cossacks cut the ropes thinking the barge would drift aimlessly and that we would die of hunger and thirst. We did not see land for three days. The biting cold chapped my lips. My stomach felt no pangs of hunger. I felt dizzy and too tired to think. We all gave up hope of arriving to any shore. Papa would soon see his better country.

The wind blew harder.

The waves got bigger.

Then the barge found a welcoming shore where German soldiers picked us up.

I walked by Vater's side, gripping his hand to keep steady. I looked up at him with a slight grin.

“Vater, the Cossacks didn't take everything from us did they?”

Vater gave me a questioning look.

“We still have each other—and that is home.”