

Two Are Better Than One (third place, 2017 AHSGR Storytelling Contest)

By Cynthia Struven

(As reported by the author's grandmother-in-law who was born in 1911 in Olganuvka, Russia and migrated to North America in 1923.)

“Mutter, you sit up front with Emil,” Vater instructed. “I’ll lie down in the back of the wagon. Rosa, you ride Nellie’s colt which we’ll tie to the back of the wagon.” My red lips formed into a smile. My parents named me after those red lips because Rosamunda means “Mouth like a Rose.”

It was summertime and the pears were just ripening when we went to pick up Opa. I was four years old then—born September 29, 1911. I was the only other one of the eleven children besides Emil who had the privilege of going with Mutter and Vater.

Emil drove the wagon over a stone bridge and then we saw Opa. He sat with a loaf of stale bread and a crock of sour milk. Elsie, my oldest sister, sat next to him holding his hand. She and her husband had been caring for Opa, but they were ready to flee from Russia to

Germany. It was during the Great War. Opa was going to stay with my family now because he was getting too old to stay alone in this dusty, dilapidated shack. His face was as wrinkled as a dried apple. When he rose to greet us he walked like a wind-up toy.

“He needs to press his skin,” I whispered to Emil. Emil hooted.

Elsie gave Opa a long and tearful hug, and then, because Vater was in a hurry as usual, he bent down in front of Opa to carry him piggyback. I was astonished—I thought that fun was reserved for children!

When Opa grabbed the sides of the wagon to get in, I noticed that one of his hands was missing two fingertips. I shuddered, and when Opa saw me staring he said, “I accidentally cut them off with the sickle when I was harvesting fodder for the cattle. However, I have saved my fingertips right here in a cigar box. Would you like to see them?” He said it with a straight face and I didn’t notice the twinkle in his eye. I jerked back on the horse, horrified at the idea of such a sight! When Opa noticed my reluctance, he chuckled and said, “Maybe at home.”

Home was a large “mixed farm” where we grew oats, barley, flax, wheat and rye. My ancestors left Germany long ago to come to Russia and homestead this land north of the Black Sea. My father was a farmer *and* a miller. After planting, growing and harvesting the grains, he ground them so they could be used as flour to make into breads. Our farm was within a German colony in the little town of Olganuvka, close to the Russian border. We spoke German in our community, not Russian.

Muttie put Opa to work right away. His job was to help me—but I knew I was really watching over *him*. Muttie was taking care of my younger brother in the house, and the rest of

my siblings were at school or helping Vater on the farm. From that day on, Opa and I were to work together in the family garden.

It was my responsibility to keep the annoying chicks out of the vegetables. I felt like a mother chasing after my naughty children! I quickly grew tired. However, Opa had an idea.

“Rosa, run and fetch a piece of string!”

When I delivered it to him, he untangled the “bird’s nest” and broke it into twenty separated pieces. Then he tied one end of each string to the leg of his chair and the other end to a leg of each protesting chick. “Now see how close those chicks will stay,” he predicted.

The geese were another challenge. When I went to feed the birds, the protective gander would dive at me—hissing and honking. His head looked like a snake stretching out to strike me.

“Help!” I screamed, trying to bat the obnoxious fowl away.

“Quick!” Opa demanded. “Run to the garden and pick some poppy leaves.”

I found them and returned, all out of breath.

“Now feed them to the geese,” he told me.

I did—*throwing* the leaves at them lest they nip me.

After a while they all settled down and went to sleep like well-fed babies.

In the evening, it was my job to lead the lazy milk-cows into the protection of the barn where neighborhood wolves would not bother them. Nevertheless, the cows just would not

budge! I couldn't blame them. I wouldn't like a confining and stuffy barn either, especially if I'd been munching tender grass in the open field all day.

"Rosa, grab a bucket of sweet oats," ordered Opa. "Now lure them into the barn. After they're tucked away inside, give them only a handful or they will bloat and get very sick."

After the cows were in the barn, I climbed onto the fence and then onto the back of Nellie, the family horse. I wrapped my short legs as well as I could around the horse's belly and clung to her mane. Nellie trotted around the yard with me. *She* easily passed under a tree, but a low-hanging branch knocked me off the horse. I lie sprawled on the ground. Opa limped over to my still figure as quickly as he could.

"O...O...Opa...the...the...tree...tried...to...steal...my breath!" I panted.

"I'm glad you didn't let him have it!" he remarked. Opa stooped over, carefully lifted me into his arms and hobbled to the house porch.

I shyly snuggled next to Opa on the bench and with a little hesitation took one of his spotted, callused hands in my soft, tanned ones.

After a while I said, "Opa, maybe we should go in and check on your fingertips."

He arched his eyebrows. "If you give me a hug I'll talk your father into giving both of us a piggy back ride."

"Okay. If the hug gets old or broken you don't have to keep it."

"I'll keep it in a safe place."

"Where will you keep it, Opa? In your cigar box?"

"Nein! In my memory. May I keep it forever if I want to?"

"Okay."

I clung to Opa's neck while Vater struggled with us both into the farmhouse.