

From the memoir "The Girl from Varklyan"
From the memoir "The Girl from Varklyan"
In the book Across the Street and Far Away

Big City
 1942

My cousin Hana Bluma and I presented ourselves at the Gorodishe (Big City) school on a cold afternoon in late December. The headmaster, a war veteran with a hand missing, brought us to a house and knocked at the door. It was opened by a skinny old woman. "Babushka, could you take our new teacher, Anna Ossipovna, as a lodger?" he asked, adding "She's with her sister..." "All right, I don't mind a lodger," says she, "as long as it's not a Zhidovka (Jewess)." My cousin and I exchanged glances. "My sister and I are Latvian," I said confidently. "Suits me," the old woman shrugged – clearly the first time she'd ever heard of a Latvian.

She led us through the entrance into the room where the family lived. There, huddled next to a large Russian stove, sat an old man, evidently the Babushka's husband. The only furniture in the room was a square table between two benches set at right angles against two walls. In reply to my question as to where my "sister" and I would be sleeping, the old woman pointed to a shelf above the stove. "Up there, on the palati," she said, "it's warm there." It turned out that she and her husband slept on top of the stove too, just beneath the palati. The living room, we learned, was also home to the old couple's daughter-in-law and granddaughter. I asked the Babushka where *they* slept. "Where do you think?" she replied, amazed at my ignorance, "On the floor." "No bed?" I asked. "Bed!?" she cackled, "Does this, look like a hospital?"

The palati was just big enough to wriggle into. There were no pillows, no bedding, nothing like that. This was the home we would be sharing with cockroaches, fleas and a few onions, for the foreseeable future.

Next morning I began my job as the German teacher. Big City's school ran two shifts and I taught the top three classes of both. Morning school was for the local children and in the afternoon the school was taken over by several classes of evacuee schoolchildren from Leningrad who along with their teachers lived in dormitories above the classrooms. To hide my imperfect Russian I spoke only German at school – in German no one could catch me out. The previous German teacher, the headmaster, didn't know a tenth of what I did.

My local pupils called me the "Nyemka" – the German woman; they were convinced I was German and hated me for it. To get my goat they'd speak Udmurtian among themselves, knowing I didn't understand a word of it. The people around here were a mix of Udmurts, a local Mongolian race, and descendants of Russian exiles. When the babushka had introduced Hana Bluma and me to her daughter-in-law Clavdia, she'd obviously been proud to point out that Clavdia's parents were actually pure Russian.

I was not, it seemed, the only Jewish teacher at the school. The headmistress of the evacuees' school, Sofia Michailovna Israilevitch called herself Russian and I was not going to argue. Another teacher, Yevgenya Feig, claimed to be Georgian. While Sofia Michailovna had blue eyes and a snub nose, Yevgenya Feig, with whom I made friends, had black eyes and dark hair and looked typically Jewish. Having presented myself as a Latvian, and not wishing to jeopardize our friendship, I let her be Georgian.

My two teaching jobs together brought in a fair monthly wage, enough to buy sixteen kilos of potatoes. Money I had, but there was very little you could do with it. The normal form of trade was barter and we had nothing to barter. So Hana Bluma and I would borrow the old woman's sledge on a Sunday and traipse through the snow from village to village till we found someone willing to take my money and give us potatoes in return. Some Sundays we'd walk twenty kilometers, but without potatoes we would not go home. The potatoes were small, less than half the size of an average potato today. Every day we'd take from our stock six potatoes for breakfast, six for lunch and six for supper; those for breakfast and lunch we cooked with water and milk – the latter purchased from the babushka – in a large pot she lent us. For breakfast we'd eat three potatoes each with a lot of liquid, and at mid-day, when I had my break, we finished the soup left over from breakfast. In the evening we'd usually bake our potatoes in the small stove near the front door they lit in the evenings when the fire in the large stove died out. Our bread ration too, four hundred grams per day, we divided into portions for breakfast, lunch and supper.

The school headmaster's family lived in a corner of the staff-room, where there was stove in which his wife baked a kind of pita bread from mashed potatoes, usually eaten with home-made cheese. The sight of the headmaster's children walking around munching that bread and cheese drove my salivary glands crazy. I literally dribbled. My eyes never left those children, and if they dropped a crust on the floor and I managed to swoop down, grab it and stuff it in my mouth unnoticed, I felt I had done pretty well. My other source of tid-bits was the babushka's cowshed. Because neither of them had any teeth the old couple would cut the crusts off the bread and give them to the cow – they had one cow and a few chickens. There was naturally no toilet in the house and we all used the cow shed. I'd go in there whenever I could and comb through the cow's slop with my fingers to try and fish out a few wet crusts from her trough.

Our constant worry was food, there was never enough of it. We talked about food all the time. And fruit! Whoever heard of fruit? Once, Valka, the old couple's granddaughter, tried to describe to her grandma what an apple was: "It's like a round potato, only sweet," the child explained. "Remember, babushka, once, when my dad worked in the store, they brought apples from Moscow for the bosses, for Revolution Day? Dad brought one home. You didn't want to taste it so he gave it to me." "I've done all right without them till now," said the old woman, "so who needs them?"

At supper time the family ate soup from a single earthenware bowl at the center of the table. They each took a wooden spoon and some bread. The old man would dip in his spoon and say: "Teshem!" – let us take – and eat the first spoonful. The family dipped into the bowl in order of age, holding the bread under their spoons to catch the drips. Once I asked the babushka why there were no plates in the house. "Again hospitals!" she sighed, exasperated: When would I ever learn?

When the meal was over they all returned their spoons to the large bowl; the old man would then cross himself, say grace, and go back to his permanent seat by the stove. After him the family left the table one by one in order of seniority. Only after Clavdia had cleared the table did Hana Bluma and I sit down to eat. The babushka had given us the corner where the benches met, where we could eat at the table and store our belongings.

Whenever they came into the house the old couple crossed themselves before the icon fixed in the wall. The old man, shorter than his wife -- a tallish woman -- but just as lean, seemed to find occasion to cross himself several more times

during the day too. But beyond his role as the family's spiritual head he did very little, said even less and was clearly not the one who wore the metaphorical trousers at home. That was the babushka. Although she too spent the best part of her day sitting by the stove, it was she who saw to the food, such as it was, and decided what was what. Clavdia, who worked at the kolchoz dairy, did the cleaning; the wooden floor had to be kept ivory white.

On Saturdays everyone went for a "black bath." The bath-house was a low building with neither windows nor a chimney, standing in a square walled yard. Inside, there were large cauldrons standing on blazing wood fires that belched black smoke. For the novice, two minutes inside that black furnace were enough to give you a pounding headache, the only cure for which was a roll in the snow. Whenever the heat became unbearable, you went out naked for more snow to cool the water a little so you could bathe. Our old man would keep running out naked, roll in the snow, then run back in for another wash. Hana Bluma and I never went as far as actually rolling in the snow, but we did go out in the yard where the temperature could be more than 30 degrees below zero and sat there naked a few minutes, then went back in and washed. Our body lice, however, defied all the bathing and freezing in the world. Everyone had lice. The old woman said only dead people didn't have them; we should thank the good Lord we were alive.

All in all the babushka thought I was a fine girl, just a little soft in the head. This was because my cousin and I undressed at night. She had never heard such nonsense! What sort of a thing is that? You get undressed when you go for a bath, but taking your clothes off to go to sleep? It didn't make sense. Something else she couldn't forgive us for was our pants. In all her seventy years, she said proudly, she had never owned and never worn such abominations. The winter we arrived was colder than ever, temperatures sometimes dropped to minus fifty, and for a little extra warmth Clavdia had put on her husband's long-johns under her skirt. The babushka was scandalized. A shame she couldn't write, she commented sourly, otherwise she would have written to her son at the battlefield and told him what a loose woman his wife had become.

Fifty years have gone by since then, and I still don't know how my namesake Hana Bluma and I survived that cold without any protection. All we had to wear were our thin skirts and blouses, the clothes we had on when we fled Riga. More by sheer luck than good management I had also worn my black winter coat, even though it was mid-summer (My elegant gray coat with navy leather trimmings was too good for traveling so I'd left it at home). Again by luck, we had been befriended by that kind Russian "old woman" at the kolkhoz and she had given Hana Bluma a work coat to wear on top of her thin blouse. These coats were never off us; at night they were our blankets.

The house naturally had no running water and my cousin and I were given the chore of fetching water from the spring for the family and their cow. Between my teaching shifts we'd go down to the spring, each of us balancing a wooden yoke on our shoulders with two buckets suspended from it. The trickiest part was to navigate the slope coming back up the bank, where the water slopping from buckets had turned to hard ice. It took much slithering and drenching till we finally mastered the art of climbing back up the slope with the full buckets without breaking our necks in the process, and learnt to bring home the water with not a drop spilt. Another job of mine was to fetch firewood. Theoretically the local council gave the old woman a firewood allowance as my rent. In practice the council lent me an axe and a horse and directed me to the forest. Not having much experience in this line of work, I usually latched onto someone else going

to the forest for firewood and helped them out, in return for which they let me have some wood of my own to take back.

Being a schoolteacher I automatically sat on the local council, and on one occasion derived a little benefit from this when the secretary of the council acquired a dead piglet and offered to sell me half. Whether the poor creature had been slaughtered or had merely dropped dead I don't know, but for what seemed to me an exorbitant sum I bought half the carcass; I proudly took it home and hung it near the door where it soon froze. Every morning the old man hacked off a chunk for us which we'd put in our soup, together with the six potatoes and water. We were doing very well! I even filched one of the onions the old woman stored on our palati and put that in our soup too.

In the evenings we would sit round the little stove near the door and bake potatoes. But by the end of the month we had no potatoes left, so we'd just sit and watch the family eat. They'd also do whole onions on the hot coals and the aroma could drive you mad. Very rarely, when no one was looking, I would filch a couple of onions from our palati and say I'd brought them from school, and we would bake them in the little stove and eat them.

In early spring, when the snow began to melt, we were introduced to a new vegetable: "wild asparagus" -- asparagus-like shoots, edible only when very small, smaller than your little finger. We would rise before dawn -- Hana Bluma, Valka and I -- to pick them; for me this meant getting up two hours before I had to be at school. As the pale sun coldly rose we'd be wading knee-deep in ice-cold mud, collecting these tender green shoots between the trees of the forest. They were like the manna God sent the Israelites in the wilderness; if you thought of fish they tasted like fish, if you thought of meat they tasted like meat. One pail-full, which we boiled in water, lasted two days and allowed us to spin out our potatoes a little longer.

Outside our daily treks to the spring to fetch water, Hana Bluma spent most of her day sitting by the stove with the old couple -- with whom she couldn't converse since she could barely speak Russian. Between ourselves she and I spoke Yiddish, which we passed off as Lettish. Young Valka would listen entranced. It sounded so beautiful. If only she could speak Lettish too! she sighed wistfully. Hana Bluma undertook to teach her and I often came home to find the two of them sitting next to the babushka and the old man singing Yiddish lullabies. "See, I know Lettish! Nyura taught me Lettish!" the child would greet me, her face wreathed in smiles. "Nyura," by the way, the name we had adopted for my cousin, is a variant of "Anna," or "Anya" and it always surprised me that no one there, not even at school, asked me how come my "sister" and I had the same name.

The only time "Nyura" ever worked while we were there was when I got her a job as a cleaner at the evacuees' school. She had to wash the dormitory floors, the staircases and classrooms and also help out in the kitchen. In return for the kitchen work the cook gave her a whole pot of soup. She ate as much of it as she could at work and usually managed to bring some home. We were onto a very good thing. It did not take long, however, till Hana Bluma came down with 'flu, after which she resolved never to work again. "It's easy for you," she wagged her finger at me, "all *you* have to do is go into the classroom and talk, but I had to work like a slave in the freezing Siberian cold!" "Look, we get soup, Hana Bluma! Real soup! It isn't fair to leave a job like that!" I tried to persuade her. But my efforts were to no avail. "You want me to get sick?" she threatened -- leaving me with nothing more to say.

One day my colleague Yevgenya Feig told me the school had received a length of calico and were looking for someone to make it into school blouses. I rushed home with the good news: “Listen, Hanale, you learned sewing, why not take the job?” “Me?” she looked at me in alarm, “I’ve never cut a pattern in my life!” “We’ll do it together,” I said. I borrowed a blouse from one of the children and asked our headmaster for some newspaper. Newspaper! Where do you get newspaper? The school received a newspaper regularly by mail, but all newspaper was rolled and smoked as cigarettes. I told the head I just had to have newspaper and finally, after a week or two, he gave me some, evidently the supplement. I came home, flattened the shirt on the newspaper and made a pattern. From it we cut out the sleeves, the back, front, collar, everything. All that remained was to stitch the pieces together.

The people of Big City considered themselves a cut above the villagers who lived deeper in the forest. True we were forty–eight kilometers from the nearest railway line, but we were on the highway and to travel anywhere the surrounding villagers had to go through our village. In the whole of this metropolis, however, inhabited by about two hundred families, there was but a single sewing machine, a hand-operated machine that belonged to a woman I knew. I started visiting this woman in the evenings for a chat. Her husband, like all the others, was fighting at the front. She hadn’t heard from him in over a year, she told me. What wouldn’t she give to know whether she was still a wife or, God forbid, a widow! What she needed was someone to read tarot cards and enlighten her about what had happened to him – that was the only thing in the world that could make her happy. “Cards?” I said without hesitation, “Why *I* read cards!” Her eyes lit up. “Listen,” she said, “if you can tell me my husband’s alive and I get a letter from him, you can borrow my sewing machine for as long as you like – even two weeks.”

I had never in my born days held a card, but our neighbor in Varklyan, mother’s friend Rosa the widow, had made a few coppers from reading cards for the villagers who would visit her house after church on Sundays, and I used to watch her. I remembered how she used to explain: “That’s a building, it means someone in your family is in hospital...” or “Your husband is in the army barracks,” or: “That’s a blonde woman,” or: “That’s a black woman.” A black woman is trouble... But where to get the cards?

I had made friends with another teacher, also Russian, who, it turned out, had her own tarot cards which she was always consulting about her own husband, far away at the fighting front. The teacher lent me her cards for one night. I took them over to the woman with the sewing machine, spread them out on the table, turned them over one by one, studied them and told her her husband was in hospital wounded, but he would recover and she would receive a letter from him probably in the near future. God helped and the following week a letter arrived from the woman’s husband telling her he was in hospital. She lent me the sewing machine and we sewed the blouses.

These stories may make you laugh but I can only cry. I was twenty-one, an only child who grew up in sheltered surroundings. I had come to Riga straight from high school, and had been away from home hardly a year before the war. What did I know about life, about how to manage in life? On my own I could never have done it but I always had the worry of my cousin. I didn’t have only myself to feed, I had to feed her too. Not only feed her. After a time we were practically naked. By autumn 1942 we had no shoes and nothing to wear.

Desperately, I wrote to the Latvian expatriate government in Kirov: “I cannot go into the classroom barefoot!” They replied, inviting me to their depot. I got a

lift to the railway station and from there took the train to Kirov. The journey there took a whole day and I spent the night at the railway station. At the depot I was issued a pair of “valenki” – felt boots – good boots but both for the left foot. I was entitled to the boots not as a Latvian citizen but as a teacher; then what about my cousin? True, she mostly stayed indoors, but sometimes she had to go out to fetch water. So with the money I still had from home I bought another pair of boots at the Kirov market, bearskin boots worn with galoshes, which I bought too. Red inner-tube rubber galoshes. The Latvian authorities also gave me a length of cotton for a dress and two pairs of red long johns. I arrived back in Gorodishe, after an absence of two and a half days, with a heap of treasures.

From the cotton we made a dress and a blouse. One week I would wear the dress and my cousin the blouse with our old skirt, the next week I'd wear the blouse and skirt and she got the dress. On Sundays we did the washing, boiled everything in a big pot with wood ash to kill the lice, then sat naked under our coats, spread the wet clothes on the stove and waited for them to dry so we could put them back on again. The poor diet and the cold evidently affected our hormones; both of us had stopped menstruating, which was perhaps just as well. Otherwise, how would we ever have coped?

In return for making the blouses the school gave me a bottle of vodka and a jar of the local butter, which tasted rather like goose fat. That was the only time in four years we saw any kind of butter. Vodka could be exchanged for practically anything. I bartered ours for eight kilos of flour, and with the babushka's help we baked bread. This was the first time in years we had seen real bread, bread made of wheat flour. There was nothing resembling a cupboard in the house, so we stacked the warm bread in our corner and covered it with a cloth. What a mouthwatering aroma! What a feast to look forward to!

That night we had guests: some soldiers stationed deep in the forest who had been given home leave in celebration of the Red Army victory at Stalingrad. By the time they reached our village on their way to the railway station it had grown dark, and they'd knocked at our door to ask if they could sleep over. The babushka said they could sleep on the floor. When we opened our eyes in the morning the soldiers had gone and so had our eight loaves of bread! It would be many a year before we saw white bread again.

Life went on, every day and its deadening monotonous preoccupation with food in a life as gray as the boiled rags we wore. Then one day Clavdia came home with an interesting bit of news: two Polish boys had applied for admittance to the kolkhoz and had been accepted. Poles!

“Like I'm Latvian!” I whispered to Hana Bluma.

They had started working at her dairy, Clavdia said.

After school next day we went to see the Poles, two emaciated young Jews in rags, whom we found chopping fire wood. We hung around there till one of them muttered to the other, in Hebrew: “*Eyze bachurot yefefiyot!*” (What pretty girls!)

I said: “*Yidn?*” (Jews?)

“*Un noch vi!*” (And how!)

They were older than us, but we immediately clicked. From the little they told us it transpired they had been released from the gulags and were trying somehow to work their way back to civilization in the hope of eventually reaching Eretz Yisrael! They didn't know Russian all that well; with us they spoke a delightful Yiddish, and between themselves often spoke Hebrew. They were obviously educated. Meeting people like that, here in this dismal landscape, was indeed an event. Not that any of us had time or mind for romance. Not when you're faint from cold and your stomach groans with hunger. Besides, darkness

fell in the early afternoon and after that you couldn't go out. At the babushka's, when it got dark outside, Clavdia would light the "kaptilka" (oil lamp) – to provide some light during supper. After the kaptilka burnt out you went to bed. Even on Sundays we were not free: we had to wash our clothes and wait for them to dry. Sunday was also our potato-buying day. The weather, too, was against any kind of romantic intimacy. It was freezing cold, we had nothing to wear and the boys had even less; we were cold and hungry and they were starving. Their only sustenance was four hundred grams of bread a day, and a little milk in return for working in the dairy. Unaccustomed to hard physical work they were always exhausted. To them the kolkhoz was the worst place in the world and they only planned staying there till the weather improved. "If you don't get out you'll starve to death here," they warned us. "Here, there's no hope and nothing to live for. Even when the war's over you'll be stuck here forever, they'll never let you out."

Our friendship with the boys was but a brief flash of excitement; one day they came to tell us they were leaving. They had heard there was work at a tractor station about ten kilometers away; there, you were paid in cash and there was a canteen where you could get a mid-day meal. There was even a high school there, they said. Maybe I too could find work at that place?

For some time I had been trying to figure out how to get away from this bleak wilderness, and, in fact, already had an idea of my own. If only, perhaps, to make our life a little easier – my ambitions hardly dared stretch further.

Just as my cousin and I trailed round the countryside on Sundays on potato missions, others came to our village to barter. I had in fact started talking to one of them, a young Russian woman called Valentina who told me she ran the baby-house at a prison camp about eight kilometers away. The staff there had sugar, she said, and you could get three meals a day at the canteen; not only that, the pay wasn't bad either. She had heard talk of a school being opened for the staff's children, and no doubt they'd be needing teachers. She herself had a small child, and was looking for someone to mind him while she was out at work; whoever took on the job could live in her room. I asked who to speak to about the school. "Yakov Markovitch Schwartz, the prison camp director," she said.

The name sounded promising and a couple of Sundays later I walked there to see Yakov Markovitch Schwartz. I showed him my work card and told him about my experience, but he said the matter of the planned school was still up in the air. And then again, even if a school did open at the camp, I would have to be officially transferred there by the Ministry of Education otherwise I couldn't leave my present job.

It must have been around this time I had a nightmare I can never forget. Mother had come to see me. She looked horrific. Her face was green and she had hollow black eyes and white lips. She said: "I feel so awful all alone. Your father has been gone, over a month." I reached out and tried to grasp her but she slipped further and further away till she disappeared. Suddenly I felt my two front teeth being wrenched out of my mouth. I saw them fly out, my mouth dripping blood. I must have screamed. Hana Bluma had to shake me awake. I knew then that those two teeth were my parents and that I would never see them again.

My visit to the Ministry of Education office at Kirov, where I had to put in an application for a transfer to the prison school, turned out to be a waste of two whole days. Had it been a matter of transferring me to an established school I may have stood a chance, but to quit a school-teaching job and go off somewhere else? That was a criminal offense. I thought: All right, so they'll put me in jail. It

wouldn't be the first time. In prison at least I'll have food. In this place we'll starve. Without saying anything at work I took Hana Bluma and we left the kolkhoz.

Before leaving, I thanked the old woman for everything she and the family had done for us.

"Was I all right, Babushka?" I asked her. "Was I any trouble?"

"You're a good girl," she said, "and I didn't mind at all having you here."

"I'm Jewish, you know," I said.

She laughed – what a joke! "Go on! You can't fool me!"

"I *am* Jewish, babushka," I said. "My sister and I are Jews."

"Never! You don't fool me!" she laughed, flaunting her pink gums. "If you *were*, you'd have horns growing out of your head, and a tail behind."

(In memory of my friend and neighbor Hana "The Girl from Varklyan")