

Promise.

© 2009 by Mary Katherine May

In a little village called Bila life was hard. Large families, living in one-room thatched-roof houses with dirt floors, struggled not only to fill empty stomachs with food, but also to find enough fuel for their fires. Shoes were a precious commodity that even children cherished, wearing them only for special occasions and out of necessity. Yet, despite difficult times, there was love. Mother, Father, sisters and brothers, all had each other to depend upon.

Beyond that was community of their village that included both relatives and friends. And, most important to all was their faith in the God who would never desert them. It was here that Anna and Paranka (Pauline) lived with Mama and Tato (father) and their six brothers and sisters. One might wonder where they all slept, but they managed. What might seem over-cramped and impossible for us, was everyday life for them.

One evening, with the younger children fast asleep, Anna and Pavlina could hear their parents speaking in hushed voices. “Sylvester,” Maria whispered, “What will we do when you go?”

“Mama,” he replied, “People are talking. It will be a better life for us. There will be food to eat, and work, Mama. Work! I must go ... I will not be alone, others from our village are going.”

The two girls looked at each other with questions in their eyes. Going where? They wondered. Yet, soon all would be known to them. Before not too much time had passed, in the early morning hours, Mama woke the children. “Come children! It is time. Your father is leaving us today, and we all must say goodbye.”

No one wanted to come out from their warm blankets, but the smell of something unusual finally stirred them out into the cold room. What was Mama cooking? That morning, when all would begin to change for them and other village families, Maria was preparing a special meal—foods that usually were only served once or twice a year—to give her beloved husband a breakfast that would be memorable before his journey.

All too soon the villagers came together to say goodbye to their loved ones. The priest came and blessed the group, sprinkling holy water and saying prayers for the travelers. Together the men, women, and children sang responses, “Lord, have mercy, To Thee, O Lord, Oche Nash (Our Father), and Amin. The adults were brave for their families, but a few of the children broke into tears—some not even knowing why they were weeping, only that the mood was serious and sad.

As the wagons rolled away down the cobblestone road, Anna and Pavlina watched with their mama. Then, dutiful daughters that they were, the two sisters gathered the younger children together, and took them back into the house. Maria stood long after, though, watching the wagons grow smaller in the distance....and then she stood there still when there was nothing left to see. Practical as Maria was, after a time she shook herself, stood straight, and walked briskly back to her home. The day had begun and it was time to get to work.

Sylvester's journey, not really different from other immigrants, was long. The wagons took his group to the big city of Ternopol. From there, they traveled by train to Bremen and then boarded the ship taking them across the ocean. Like so many others, he saw the Statue of Liberty before going through the Ellis Island processing center and entering New York. Again, he boarded a train that brought him to his final destination. Sylvester found work in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and through frugal living was able to send money back to his family in Bila.

Then, a serious work accident caused him to lose his hand.

Maria and her children had no idea what had happened when the letters stopped coming. For two years this family waited with no news. When a letter finally did arrive, this mother with so many children could not contain her emotions. Unashamed tears flowed down her cheeks, and she went down on her knees, thanking God that her husband was alright.

Anna and Paranka were next to make the trip to this unknown place called America, that they would find so different from their village. First Anna went as a nanny to a wealthier family from Tarnopil. Then, Pauline one year later with her Uncle Kos and his family.

Pavlina, or Paranka, arrived in Minneapolis, Minnesota, U.S.A., on July 4, 1914—right before communications and travel were cut because of World War I. She came as so many other immigrants did, in steerage class, and following the rough voyage never desired to be in or on top of a body of water again. Pauline set foot on American soil with one dollar in her pocket, to prove that she was solvent and could take care of herself.

While waiting for their Mama and brothers and sisters, Anna married and divorced. Pauline, my grandmother, married the man her father had chosen for her, and soon there were three children three years and younger. My father, Joseph, was the youngest.

Following the war, news arrived that mother and wife, Maria, was very ill.

“You must come, Maria.” Sylvester insisted, “You must do it for your family.” So, after twelve years of separation, the Rychley family, wanting to improve their futures in a country full of promise and hope so different from their own, were together once more. Maria arrived with five children in November. One son, Peter, was not allowed to leave because by that time he was an adult. They had two precious months until, in January, Maria died. The cause of death was tuberculosis.

The point of telling this true story is because it shows faith. Often people say that they won't believe in God because they have no proof. Or, they don't want to put their faith and trust in the unknown. Faith is not an unusual expectation in many instances. Nor, was it a new idea to the Rychley family and so many other immigrants coming to America.

In Hebrews 11 we read: Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. (KJV)

This faith, so elusive to some, is so real to others—but it doesn't have to be that way. This

leap of faith in one sense is no different than any other step into the unknown—and there is no future without faith for the simple reason that absolutely no one on this planet truly knows their future—not the next week, or day, or hour or minute. Will we have a job? An accident? Will we still be alive?

I invite you to take a journey. A journey to a new place full of hope and promise—it will be a journey better than that traveled by Sylvester and Maria's family, for it will not end with more sorrow and hardship, and at the end of this journey there is a future.

The ticket to board the ship to this promised land is free—in fact, the free ticket comes with a gift. You see, someone else has paid for your ticket. His name is Jesus. Jesus took all the bad of our world—Christians call it sin—so that in the home to where we journey there would be no hardship or hurt. There will be no more sorrowing or suffering, hate or crime. And what we have done and will do wrong—Jesus took care of that too. He paid with His life. Jesus lived just as we do, yet only ever showed love. Impossible, you say? Yes it is--for us. Jesus was special in that he was sent to earth by God to live a life of perfect love.

Because Jesus loves, he gave his life to save us. He said, "I will pay the penalty so that there can be justice for wrongs committed by people. I will be the scapegoat, the "patsy who takes the fall," the one who "laid His life down in the battle so that others can live."

What's the catch? You may ask. In fact, there is no catch. It is so easy, that once you have done it, you will wonder why you waited so long and why others don't do it, too. Jesus asks that we think about how we have wronged others by our words, thoughts and deeds, and then say to him, "I am sorry. I ask you to forgive me. I ask that you instill within me the ability to live the life of love that you lived."

That's it! Once you have said that prayer, you have received your ticket to get on board. Will your life drastically change right away? Perhaps, or it may take time. Will you miss all that stuff you used to do that was really not so good but fun? Maybe for an instant, but most likely not, because it will be replaced with better, more wonderful things to do.

From the first day of your new life to forever, you will have a thick and thin friend that will never leave your side, no matter what you come up against. You may not be rich, you may come into hard times and encounter great problems—yet through it all there will be peace.

Jesus and all of His angels will always be there to carry you forward through anything this evil world may throw your way--even when you don't know it. Promise. So, why not now? Why not let go of that foolish pride and take a risk on faith—journey to a land unknown to you, that you may never, ever want to leave.

Your future destiny awaits you, and you need only heed the invitation, "Come. Follow me."