

*Night  
of the  
Cossack*

an imprint of Bound by Faith Publishers

# *Introduction*

My grandfather died of Lou Gehrigs disease in 1941, in the same hospital where I was born in 1942. I've always regretted being deprived of knowing him. When I was a child, I spent a week each summer at my grandmother's house. Above the television, hanging on the gold wallpaper, were two oval, mahogany frames protecting two beautiful pictures. The picture on the right displayed a lovely young woman with long, wavy, jet-black hair—my grandmother. The picture on the left was my grandfather, a man with a soft, pleasant round face, a receding hairline, and a partial smile.

My grandmother never talked about my grandfather that I recall. As I grew older, I learned a few things about him, but nothing that really told me who he was. I never understood this. Perhaps it was because I never asked questions in spite of my interest. I've always been aware of the emptiness of not having a grandfather. My grandmother passed away when I was sixteen. Little did I know that any hope of discovering substantive information about my grandfather died with her.

As I grew older, I'd ask my mother and her siblings about him, but no one seemed to know much about his past, and what they did remember conflicted with each

other's memories. Together my grandparents spoke nine languages. They wanted their children to be Americans; so when they spoke of the old countries, they spoke in a language their children didn't understand. She was from Poland, and he was from Russia.

None of their sons had children, therefore, my grandfather's name did not continue. He seemed like a ghost.

All of their children, three sons and three daughters, have passed away except my Aunt Sarah. After my mother passed away, I sat down with my aunt and asked her every question I could think of, gleaning every detail I could. I then began to research the history of the time of my grandparents immigration to the United States. I found pieces of information that made the bits of truth I had already learned make sense. He had been a Russian Cossack soldier in the Ukraine, immigrating to America in 1910.

Writing this story has pushed my imagination to the limit. I wonder what my life might be like had my grandparents not come to America. Would my grandmother have been a victim of Hitler's furnaces like the majority of her family? Would my grandparents still have met and married? Would I be a Polish or Ukrainian citizen—or an immigrant? Let me introduce you to my grandfather as I imagine him.

# Chapter 1

Nathan's eyes flew open. Sounds, screams and gunshots penetrated the cold air of his upstairs bedroom. The pungent smell of smoke invaded his nose. He coughed. *Am I having a nightmare?* Shadows danced wildly across the ceiling and down the walls.

Heart pounding, he threw off his covers, jumped out of bed, and rushed to the window. His little brother, Israel, followed.

*Its real!*

"What is it, Nathan?" Israel whispered.

Nathan pulled his brother against the wall behind him.

"Hey! I want to see!"

"Shush, Israel." Nathan looked through the window at the valley below, his heart racing. Men in long coats and fur hats were running through the village brandishing swords and raising rifles. *Cossacks!*

The Bukolovs' and the Gorbenkos' houses were burning. Bodies lay on the ground. He couldn't tell who they were, but he knew they were friends.

Momma rushed into the room. "Get away from that window, Nathan!"

"Those are Cossack soldiers, Momma!"

"Cossacks," echoed Israel.

“Get dressed, Nathan. Hurry.”

Nathan hesitated at the window.

“Now!” she shouted, grabbing him with such force he lost his balance. “Get dressed. Bring your coat.”

Nathan turned from the window.

Momma pulled Israel’s clothes from the hook behind the door, hurried him into them, and down the stairs.

Nathan shoved his trembling hands into his shirt, the horrible scenes replaying in his mind—houses ablaze, soldiers on horseback, dead bodies, his friends in terror. *Why are the Cossacks here? What do they want?*

He pushed his feet into his boots, jumped up, and hurried to the chest at the foot of the bed. Lifting the lid, he pulled out a knife in its sheath and shoved it into his right boot. He reached back for a leather bag containing lead balls and patches, and a powder horn. He fastened the pouch and powder horn to his belt. The firelight danced across his father’s pistol. He picked up the gun and balanced it in his right hand. *Momma said I can’t use it until I’m older. She doesn’t know I’ve taken it out when I’ve gone hunting and practiced shooting it. I’m sixteen. I’m a man. Why should I have to wait?* The thought calmed him.

Nathan shoved the unloaded gun into his belt, went back to the window, and stared at the nightmare below. He turned away and tried to close his mind against the violence. His rifle, loaded and ready to fire leaned against the wall in the corner. He slipped his arm through the sling, hefted the rifle on his shoulder, and grabbed his coat. He ran down the stairs.

The back door banged in the cold January wind. Nathan pushed his right shoulder against the door and forced his way through. A bitter gust whipped down from the Caucasus Mountains and hit him full in the face, pushing him off balance.

Nathan gasped as acrid fumes attacked his nose and stung his eyes. He blinked away the tears and peered through the smoke. Momma moved like a ghost across the yard, her robe billowing behind her. Her long, black hair blew wildly in the wind. She was only halfway across the yard pulling Israel by the hand. *Why isn't she already in the root cellar?* Then he knew the answer—she had waited until he was out of the house.

Nathan lowered his head and fought his way after her. A few meters from the cellar, he froze when he heard the piercing squeal of his terrified horse. He turned toward the barn. “Aza, I’m here. I’m coming,” he yelled.

Before he reached the barn a woman’s scream ran a chill up his spine. The sound was cut short, followed by an ominous silence. Nathan felt sick. *Momma?*

He glanced toward the cellar. He couldn’t see Momma or Israel. Fearing the worst, he turned and stumbled toward the underground room. His eyes still stinging, he stumbled to the entrance, using his rifle as a crutch to keep him upright.

“Momma?” he whispered.

Silence. His heart stopped.

“I hear you, Nathan. We’re all right.”

Nathan staggered down the steps with relief. His mind swirled with images and terrible sounds. His thoughts

returned to Aza. He turned back to the steps.

“Nathan, stay here!”

“I must go to Aza, Momma. I heard him scream. He’s panicked, he could hurt himself.”

“What can you do for him, Nathan?”

“I can calm him down and turn him loose into the woods. If they set the barn on fire, he’ll die. He’ll be safe in the woods. I must go!”

“You’re more important than your horse. I, we need you here with us. Stay, Nathan. I couldn’t bear to lose you.”

Nathan was torn. Breathing a heavy sigh in resignation as he pulled the cellar door shut, he let his eyes adjust to the dark. He leaned his rifle against the wall.

Momma wrapped her arms around her older son. Nathan felt her shiver. He knew she was more afraid than cold. *Had she heard the scream?*

She sank to her knees, pulling Nathan down. “I know you’re afraid,” she whispered.

Nathan tensed. “I’m not afraid. I’m a man—the man of the house. You’ve said this yourself.” He pulled away from her. “You say I’m brave and strong. You tell me I’m like Papa, but you treat me like a little boy.”

“Nathan, you’re both. You’re my little boy, but at the same time you’re a man. Can you understand?”

Ignoring her question he said, “Papa should be here to protect us. I didn’t even get to tell him good-bye.”

“Don’t be angry, Nathan. He loved you very much. He loved all of us.” She slipped her arms around him again

saying, “It was an accident. There was no chance for anyone to say good-bye. Dying wasn’t his choice. You’re a man, Nathan. You look just like him—tall and strong, yet gentle. You have his black, wavy hair, hazel eyes, even his strong chin. What would I do without you?”

Nathan didn’t say anything. He couldn’t stay mad at her. Her soft voice melted his heart. *Even when she’s afraid, she comforts me. Momma’s right. About all of it. It isn’t her fault Papa died.*

His anger, no longer directed at her, receded.

“Momma, are we going to be all right?” asked Israel.

“I pray we will, son. Who can know with certainty?”

“I’m scared, Momma,” Israel said.

“I know, son, I know.”

Nathan felt her arms leave him. In a few seconds, he felt her rocking against him. He knew she was holding Israel.

The woman’s scream crept into Nathan’s mind again. He put his hands over his ears as if he could silence it. *Was it Vasile’s mother?*

Vasile was his best friend. It didn’t matter to Vasile that Nathan was a Jew. The two of them hunted elk, roe deer, wild boar, rabbit, and birds almost every day and rode their horses all over the surrounding countryside. They raced. Aza was faster and Nathan always won. *Where is Vasile? Is he alive? Is he hiding in his cellar? Does he have his rifle?*

Nathan was the better shot even though he was two years younger. The men in the village used to wager on which boy would bring in the most game.

The wind howling through the spaces in the cellar door pulled Nathan from his thoughts. He realized he couldn't dwell on Vasile and his family. It was too painful.

His thoughts turned toward the village. Gagra sat at the base of the Caucasus Mountains in northern Georgia, on the eastern shore of the Black Sea. Tonight was one of the rare times the mountains let the Arctic winds assault the village. *The Cossacks seem to have blown in like a whirlwind. Why have they attacked us? What is here that they want? Women? Food? Weapons? Many of the houses are already damaged and there are few families.*

Nathan stroked the handle of Papa's pistol. His father found it after the Turks raided the village. He told Nathan a Turkish soldier must have dropped the gun. The rifle and ammunition bag were gifts to Papa from a woman who lost her husband during the raid. That was when Papa became the village hunter. *I'm the hunter now.*

A strong gust rattled the cellar door, startling Nathan. When it died down, he could hear the terror of the night—constant gunfire, men cursing, women wailing. The sight of the burning houses flooded his mind again. *Please God, don't let them burn our house.*

Time crept past. The gunfire died down and the yells ceased. Suddenly, there was the sound of hoofbeats on the road—many horses at a gallop. The sound faded into the night.

“Momma, I think the Cossacks have gone. I'll see if it's safe now.”

“No, son.” She pulled Nathan to her and held him tight. “Wait a few minutes more. Maybe the fires will die down.”

“The wind’s too strong, Momma,” he protested. “The fires will burn all night. I need to see.” He tried to pull away from her.

She tightened her hold on him. “What can you do if it isn’t safe, Nathan?”

*What can I do? I must do what Papa would do. I must be a man like Papa.* “I’ll be careful,” he said pulling free of her.

He reached for his rifle, crept up the steps, and pushed the door open just enough to see into the yard. The fires from the burning village houses cast an eerie glow on the thick smoke swirling in the wind. He breathed a sigh of relief as he realized their home was still standing.

“The house and barn look to be all right,” he whispered to his mother. “Aza is safe. I won’t be gone long.”

Before she could protest, he pushed open the door and stepped into the yard. He let the door go just as Momma cried, “No, Nathan!”

He crossed the yard in a crouch, the rifle gripped tightly in his hands. The wind pushed at him with angry fingers. The back door was shut. *This is good. Perhaps no one has gone inside.*

He slipped into the house, pulled the door closed, and stood still listening for any sounds. There were none except from the outside. The smell of smoke was strong. The blaze of fires lit the room with an odd glow. Through a window, he could see the village. A strange peace filled the house in

contrast to the nightmare outside.

Nathan checked each room. *Clear.* He ran up the stairs. Satisfied everything was in place he returned to the kitchen. He took one last look around and stepped out the door.

As he turned to shut the door, his rifle was jerked from his hand. He froze, his heart pounding, his breath suspended. He felt a pistol jab into his back.

“Well, well. Who do we have here?” asked a deep, raspy voice. “Put your hands behind your head and turn around slowly.”

Nathan obeyed. As he turned, he gazed into the piercing eyes of a Cossack soldier.