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I Heard My People Cry, *one family's escape from Russia*. . . 2nd Edition

Interview with author: Elizabeth Lenci-Downs.

Elizabeth, how did you come to write this book?

One day Louise turned to me and said, "Elizabeth, I heard my people cry and I will never forget." I was stunned. I knew immediately those words would change my life. When Louise and her family agreed to tell me her story we spent all summer putting her words onto tapes. In the book she is: Lise. This was her Russian name. As we speak, I will call her: Lise.

What inspired you?

Lise's grandfather told her she, "had to live to tell the world what happened to her people." I decided to make that possible.

How did you proceed?

I first wrote about Lise's childhood and the village of Tchongraw because they so touched me. Then I wrote chapters from Elizabeth Koop Huebert's secreted diaries in Taganrog and Ukraine. My life in northern Minnesota helped me find the words to describe those winters and the land. The last chapter was written first, with Lise's love for Walter fresh in my mind. That was a good decision. I didn't write the first chapter until the end.

Were you confident about Lise's story?

When I was matching dates of events to Lise's words I was astounded at the accuracy of her memory—even as to time and weather. This gave me confidence in her history. Many of her experiences have never been exposed before. This book adds to the literature of her people.

Do you consider your book is anthropological?

One expert considers it anthropological. This book includes generations of people whose lives are woven into the bloodied history of their adopted land, how they were chosen, how they are interrelated and pioneered, how the events of Russian history affected their lives. In the fore are individuals of Lise's family and Lise herself. There is beauty; there is love and uplifting spiritual strengths. There is Lenin's rule, Stalin's purges and people verschlept. I Heard My People Cry can be considered a saga.

What is verschlept?

Imprisoned, tortured, disappeared.

When did you realize the importance of this book?

The very moment Lise turned to me and said: " Elizabeth, I Heard My People Cry, and I will never forget it."

There is much in I Heard My People Cry, One Family's Escape From Russia for all of us. It opened my heart and mind to the realization of what can happen when a whole nation of people are so subjugated they do not take responsibility for their freedoms. I have friends who have lived in Russia and others who have traveled there recently. Citizens of the former Soviet Union have been denied their history for generations. Lise's words speak to the average reader of all generations. This makes my book unbelievably moving and very valuable.

In her *Foreword* to the second edition of *I Heard My People Cry*, Dr Nancy K. Splain, J.D. writes: "For it is the nature of tyrants to deny people their history." Dr. Splain was serving with the Central and Eastern European Law Initiative (ABA/CEELI) in Ukraine when she offered to write this *Forward*.

Who is Elizabeth Koop Huebert?

She was Lise's mother. Elizabeth Koop Huebert was one of the most incredible heroines to ever have come out of Russia. Count Tolstoy wrote of such a heroine and so did Boris Pasternak, especially through his poetry.

Did she ever re-marry?

No. Nikolai was the love of her life. She expressed her love for him so eloquently in her diary I gasped.

Did you use parallels between your lives when you wrote?

Oh yes. They began when all our grandparents fled their countries ahead of W.W.I. Some parallels influenced my writing more than others. One was the importance of our paternal grandfathers.

In the 1930's and '40's winters in northern Minnesota, Russia and Europe were brutal. Living through Minnesota's winters gave me important insights into Elizabeth's survival in Ukraine. Instantly, and intensely I related to the fear in her diary. Winters meant hearing the "boom" of nails popping out of frozen walls-like gunshots in the night. They meant frost bitten flesh.

What was different?

Tsars, Lenin and finally Stalin. Lise grew up under the worst tyrant the world has ever seen. I lived in freedom.

What Happened During W.W.II?

My years during W.W.II were of the greatest importance in writing this book. When Lise describes fleeing through "blackouts" with screaming air raid sirens, shades over windows, men walking with shuttered lanterns—that's how I remember those years too. I will never forget winter cloud layers that covered the moon and spread an eerie blue-blackness across the snow. Cloud layers that deadened all sound. Hundreds of allied bombers thundered over her shaking the ground before she could see them. They flew over my parent's house too, on their way to Europe or Alaska. Bombers gave me a feeling of hope. Lise too.

Did this affect you as a child?

Very much so. Virginia's iron ore mines made our town a critical area for the war effort. As the mournful horns of huge Malley engines sounded day and night and I went to sleep every night with that sound. It was like the haunting call of the Great Loon. I used this experience to write about the sirens of Moscow.

Those Malleys pulled long trains of iron ore cars, summer and winter to be shipped to steel mills. Two of my uncles were train engineers. This helped me write about Lise's escape so vividly.

Did anything about this book surprise you?

An awesome thought came to me the day I wrote the last word of this book: "My little city of Virginia in far northern Minnesota provided the iron ore for the bombs that freed my friend Lise." I thought about this for a long time.

Did you self-publish?

Lenci Studios, Inc., my company, payed a print-on-demand company, Trafford Publishing in Victoria, BC Canada to produce this book. *I Heard My People Cry* is sold on websites of: The Historic Germans From Russia, also: The University of North Dakota Historic Library. Books are also in libraries across the country and in I bookstores near me. I am in demand as a speaker.

Response from so many readers tell me, **I Heard My People Cry**, *One Family's Escape From Russia* would be a powerful movie. I can see Lise's story in the like of Dr. Zhivago. Portions of Elizabeth Koop Huebefrt's diary are of the same era.