As a young girl I can remember sitting around the living room of our two-bedroom house, listening to my father tell the stories of his youth. Our family was poor those days and most of our time was spent working, even as children. What little free time we had was spent in the company of each other. It became a nightly routine to sit around after dinner and listen to him; it was a time I found myself looking forward to throughout the day. His stories were often funny; a childhood prank on his sister or an epic battle of swords and wit with his brother. Most nights I laughed until tears ran down my tiny face. The evenings always ended with mother ushering us to bed as we begged for just one more story.

It wasn’t until I was older that the tone of my father’s stories began to change. I’m not sure if it was just because he was tired of retelling the same stories, or if he thought we were old enough to handle the realities of life, but one thing was for certain, those stories didn’t make me laugh. In fact, I think it was those stories that began to make me understand most of life’s lessons. The stories were harsh and often times so palpable that I could feel the cruel Russian winters in my bones; taste the abrasive sting of vodka against my tongue and smell the smoke of a nearby fire. He began telling us about the civil wars that plagued his homeland and how he escaped.

He was a young man of 16 then in 1916 and life as he knew it was changing. His mother had died the previous year from sickness that his family was too poor to seek treatment for. After his mother’s death, Anna and Victor, his younger siblings were sent to live with their aunt in Baikit, a small town somewhere in middle Russia. He wasn’t certain exactly where. Shortly after, he moved near Moscow with his father. Days once spent playing swords in the fields by their home were now spent waiting in lines in hopes
of a day’s work and often coming up empty handed.

It wasn’t always bad though. He made friends while in Moscow and even became quite enamored with a girl named Iriana Tarasova. Mun Yaz-YUby-lee-na-ya (my sweetheart) as he referred to her, was his first love.

They first laid eyes on each other while he was waiting in the work line one day. He’d often see her walking with a young boy who he’d assumed to be her little brother. He had seen her many times before that day but had never worked up enough courage to speak to her. “She was beautiful and I was a fool,” I recall him saying. “There was no way I was ever going to get her.”

Things changed that day however, when her younger brother, who often waited outside the store for her, came and stood next to the boys in line. He was certainly too young to begin working even during those days. Determined to put in his day's work he stood in the line and remained there even after his sister exited the store and went into a panic at the realization he was gone. He saw this as his chance. He walked over and grabbed the young boy's hand and walked him over to the panic stricken girl who immediately embraced and consecutively scolded her brother. She thanked him and the two set off.

The next few weeks passed and Iriana came by the small grocery store almost every day. More often than anyone could possibly need to. They engaged in small talk as she passed by. Eventually she began bringing lunch by the line. On the days he did pick up work she waited by the gate and he walked her home. She spent most nights sneaking out her bedroom window so she could meet him on a bench in a small park somewhere between their two houses. Time flew by and they fell in love but as their love was
growing so was unrest in Russia.

The following fall the situation in Russia really started to heat up. Civil war was breaking out and the already tough streets were getting tougher. He headed home late one night after a 13-hour day of hard labor. His father usually met him back in their small one-room apartment but it was almost midnight and his father still hadn’t arrived. The next morning he still wasn’t there, and the next week he still hadn’t showed.

A month or so passed with no sign of his father. Rumors began spreading that a revolution was coming. The Red party was taking over and people weren’t being allowed to leave. He’d even heard that people had been shot. It was time to make a decision. It was time to leave.

They made plans to leave the following month. They would meet with friends who worked on the western border. From there they would travel onward to America.

Three weeks later Iriana came down with strep throat. The sickness seemed minor however, so they decided to go ahead with the plan and when the time came to leave she seemed significantly better.

That night they met in the park at midnight as they had agreed. They both carried only a single bag containing what was left of their lives. They set off on foot until they reached a nearby friends house where they had made plans to hitch a ride to the border. That night they slept in the back of the car and woke up early the next morning about eight miles from the western border of Russia. They said farewell to their friend and once again set off on foot.

Iriana’s cough had begun to get worse at that point and her energy was declining. They rested many times before they reached a small house where they stopped for water.
An older women and her husband, who graciously accepted the couple in, owned the house. The women insisted they stay and rest until Iriana was better.

A week’s time passed and Iriana wasn’t getting better. Her cough had spread deep into her lungs, her face was pale and her eyes were small. She barely had strength to sit up in bed. During the day he would help with chores around the house and at night he would lay with Iriana and pray for her recovery. The following Tuesday while in her sleep, Iriana passed away from complications of the illness. He was devastated.

They buried her body at the edge of the fields beneath a tree and said a prayer as they laid her to rest. Painfully aware that he had no one left in the world except his younger siblings, who were far better off with their aunt than with him, he decided to continue on with the plan to head to America.

The next morning while the couple was packing up their truck full of potatoes to bring across the border, he positioned himself beneath a few bags. The potatoes were not heavy, but the thought of being caught sneaking out of Russia weighed heavier on his mind. After the truck was fully packed the old man did a final look to see that he was fully covered and would hopefully go undetected at the border crossing.

They border wasn’t far so the journey lasted only about an hour. He could feel the truck slow to a crawl and he could hear men’s voices as they asked the driver what he was carrying. They began banging against the sides of the truck. His heart was racing. Suddenly, the light flashed in his eyes. A soldier had lifted the cover from the back of the truck to inspect the load. He watched in panic as they began to dig through the potatoes. Then suddenly the soldier stopped. A man’s voice in the distance hollered out what seemed to be the inspecting soldiers name. He covered the potatoes back up and told the
driver to carry on.

After driving from the border for 15 minutes or so they old man stopped and dug him out from the potatoes. They said their goodbyes and he thanked him for his hospitality.

A year or so passed before he made enough money to catch a ship to America. During that time he did odd jobs, mostly farming, to make due. In the spring of 1919 he finally made it to New York.