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Layne Philipson, the only child of James and Christine Philipson, graduated from Bishop Guertin High School in Nashua, New Hampshire this June. In school, she played field hockey, was the Editor of her school newspaper, participated in drama, and was a member of both the National Honor Society and National Latin Honor Society. She also mentored immigrant children at a local middle school and volunteered at a hospital for four years, where she discovered a passion for medicine. This fall, Layne will attend Virginia Tech, where she will double major in Russian and English Literature. She then hopes to go on to Medical School and specialize in Invasive Pediatric Cardiology. She is honored to have received the Gwen Pritzkau Scholarship and intends to use it to continue her education.



Mathilda's Journey to America

“Father, tell us again of Wittenberg,” Mathilda urged her father.

Setting aside the accordion he had been playing and turning to his daughters, Fredrich Hermann wiped the sweat out of his eyes as he smiled to each girl individually, preparing to tell the treasured story once again.

“Many, many years ago, our family was living in the south of Germany, in a town named Wittenberg. The Black Forest surrounded it, and it was just outside Bavaria. Life there had surely been difficult, with your grandparents farming on the bits of land they could secure for themselves. Soon, however, war broke out, and they suffered greatly. It became very difficult for our family to survive, and your grandparents had very few options.” Fredrich began.

The fire crackled in the background and the children slid closer to their father, their wide eyes begging for more.

“As you know, Katherine II, Empress of Russia, ushered the poverty-stricken German farmers into her land. After gaining Poland in the bitter war, she opened the land up for farmers

just like grandma and grandpa Hermann. As quickly as they could, they gathered their meager things and journeyed into Poland, hoping to find some form of prosperity.

Soon after they had settled into this new land, Poland had unfortunately grown similar to Germany. Our family found it difficult to farm the land, and a depression hit the immigrants. Fortunately, however, the great Czar Nicholas I drove out the belligerent Turkish army from Southern Russia. Czar Nicholas then came to our Hermanns, urging them to move further East into the newly freed land in Russia. Our blessed Hermanns could not object!” Fredrich’s voice was growing with excitement, and his children were eager to know what happened next.

“Even faster than they had left Wittenberg, grandma and grandpa Hermann once again gathered their belongings and travelled into the Russian land. Czar Nicholas had promised them prosperity and the rare ability to preserve their culture. Remember, children, it is not often that we see people so kindly welcomed into a land, as well as given the ability to keep their traditions!

Anyhow, Czar Nicholas insured the greatest of success in this new land. Grandma and Grandpa were determined to rebuild their lives, so they set to establish a small community in the county of Klöstiz, in the town of Beresina. It was here that they determined to settle, find success, and maintain their beloved German customs.

Years passed and grandma and grandpa had had one baby boy and one baby girl. Then in 1867, I was born. Grandma and Grandpa had managed to build themselves a nice little home and grow rows and rows of orchards and vineyards. I helped your grandparents maintain their home, spent much time in the fields, and designed additions to the property to help it function better. When I was fifteen years old, a kind fellow seemed to think highly of my craftsmanship, and he offered me a four-year apprenticeship. This was a truly wonderful experience, and I was able to

learn a plethora of skills. This is how I became the carpenter I am today! Of course, grandpa would not let me go that easily.” The children laughed, as their grandfather had always managed to sneak a lesson into any situation, even in this circumstance.

“What did he make you do, father?” One of the girls giggled.

“Well, your grandpa made me work on the farm for one year before I could establish my business as a carpenter. He refused to pay me, but nonetheless promised to let me go on my own after the one year was finished.

After the year was up, I moved to a small plot of land on Mulberry Street, where I built our home. After building the house, I made furniture for the inside and decorated the walls with all of these scenes from nature.” The children looked around, thinking of their father’s love for the outside world.

“I also established a small shop, where I now build various goods for the community; as you know, I make anything from yokes to wagons to cradles to, sadly, coffins. And although I had left my parents, their love for gardening had travelled with me. I started to grow small berry bushes and trees in our small garden. It was then that I met your mother, and we started to plan for our lovely family!” Fredrich looked at his children, his smile glowing, his eyes showing the affectionate love for his daughters.

“Mathilda, you were the first born. I remember your mother singing you the lullabies her own mother had sung to her in Germany. Her favorite was “Guten Abend und Gute Nacht!” The children started to laugh, remembering their mother singing this song endlessly. They started to hum it and Fredrich played his accordion along with the tune.

When they finished the song, the children insisted he continue with the story.

“Well, children, there is not much left to this story! Mathilda was born, and after her came you, and you, and you!” Fredrich pointed to Maria, Johanna, and then Amelia respectively.

Mathilda looked to her younger siblings:

“I sure miss the warmer season, when mother brings us out to the Insel, don’t you all? I wonder if they have such a thing in Wittenberg,” she glanced at her sisters, who smiled at their memories. Every summer, their mother would bring them to a small island on the river, where they would play all day long. The sisters then promised one another that when they were grown, they would travel to Wittenberg with their own families to find one.

Fredrich stood, smiling, and reached for his hat. He told his daughters he was going to check on the shop, and that their mother should return shortly.

The girls occupied themselves for the next hour by running around and playing games. After the final round of Katz und Maus, their mother entered the door, looking exhausted from her long walk home.

“Mother, where have you been?” asked Johanna.

“I was out visiting your Opa! Sorry, children, it took longer than I had expected. How are you all today?” she asked.

“We are all very well mother, father told us the most wonderful story today!” Amelia danced around, happily.

“I am very glad to hear that, Amelia! Now, would you children please get washed up? Supper is soon.” Their mother paused, thinking if there were any other instructions she could give at the moment. “Oh, Mathilda,” she continued, “Remember, tomorrow is your first day of school! Please get your things organized.”

Mathilda ran to her room, excited for the next morning to come. It would be her very first day in public school, and she could barely stand the excitement. Her mother had told her that lessons would be in German, so she need not worry about her lack of fluency in Russian. Her mother had also warned her that these German instructors were harsh, and that she must be obedient in order to succeed.

Soon after, their mother called the children for supper. Mathilda ran with her sisters to the table, where their mother inspected each child's hands to ensure they had been properly washed. After they took their seats, their father, who had just returned from his trip, began to take his serving of saguske on his Sonntags geshirr, the Sunday dishes. Mathilda loved Sundays because she could indulge in German dishes and her mother allowed them to use the fine dining ware she reserved only for Sunday evenings.

After the dinner of cold sausage and pickled vegetables, the children helped clean the dishes and tidy their small home. After sitting by the fire for some time playing with their Puppenstube, the beautiful doll house their father had built some years ago, the children went off to bed.

Weeks passed on and Mathilda was excelling in school. One day, however, she was forced to be absent as her mother was very busy around the house, spinning several warm pieces of clothing for the upcoming winter season. Her mother asked her to stay home from school for the day as she could not care for her children as well as prepare for the cold season. Dutifully, Mathilda occupied her siblings, ensuring they stayed away from their mother's work.

Unfortunately, Mathilda's school teachers did not approve of her absence. Regardless of the fact that Mathilda had no choice in the matter, the instructors blamed her absence on childish insolence. One elder teacher forced Mathilda to the front of the wooden schoolhouse, and

instructed her to hold out her hands. He then went to smack her hands with the edge of a thick ruler, repeatedly telling her she may never miss another day of school. He then sent her home, whereupon Mathilda's mother would find her poor daughter's hands swollen three times their normal size.

This unfortunate incident brought out a secret Mathilda's mother had been hiding. Those several weeks ago when she went to visit the children's Opa, she had grown determined to leave Russia for America. Fredrich's brothers had immigrated to a place called Oklahoma and had found a nice living.

Not only had Fredrich's brothers found great freedom in America, but the Russian government was beginning to obstruct the German-Russians way of life. A new ruler had determined it necessary to begin assimilating these people with the native Russians, thus taking away their ability to practice German culture. The current Czar had so much as forced her own brother, Christian, to serve in the military after ensuring he would be exempt from military service. To further matters, the Czar had sent a Russian appointee to govern their small town, the town which had previously been granted to the German immigrants from Wittenberg.

This, in addition to the incident at Mathilda's school, had pushed her mother to decide to leave Russia. As she nursed Mathilda's hands, she began to plan how she would tell this to her husband. Fredrich had assembled a very successful business in Beresina, and he would not be happy to leave his establishment behind.

The very night of the incident at Mathilda's school, her mother sat on the wooden chair near the fire. Fredrich was busy fixing his accordion, and she sat watching him for several minutes. Soon, Fredrich put his instrument down, and looked his wife in the eyes:

“What is it, Johanna? I could sense your worry without looking up,” he said.

“Oh, Fredrich, I have simply been thinking too much lately. Your father, he told me that your brothers have safely reached America, and have found such a nice living in the Southern part of the country. You see,” she continued nervously, “I have been thinking. What if we were to follow them? The Russia we have known for so long is being destroyed, and I do not want to lose the freedoms we have now. Fredrich, your father and I have come to an agreement. Any of his sons who remain in this country will lose inheritance. Please, Fredrich, we must go to America!” She finished fervently.

Fredrich stared at the fire for a moment, his successes flashing before his eyes as the flames flickered. He did not want to leave. His sisters lived here, as did his many good friends. His business, which he had built from nothing, was flourishing. He did not understand this desire to move away. There was, however, little he could do. The insurance of his inheritance had allowed him to take risks in business. He could not lose it; he could not put the well-being of his family in such great jeopardy. Finally, he turned to Johanna.

“I love you, Johanna. And I will do whatever is necessary to ensure our success in life. I will go to America with you and the girls.” He assured her, looking deep into her eyes.

Johanna stood, leaned over, and kissed him on the cheek. She said nothing, but her hand lingered on his shoulder as she was moving away to begin packing for the long journey to America.

The next morning, Johanna told her children they were to pack their belongings, and that they, along with their four uncles and grandparents, were going to America. The children were taken by surprise, but did not complain in the slightest. The Hermann children enjoyed adventures, and what greater adventure than the journey to America?

Mathilda and her sisters were soon on the wagon, their home moving further into the distance. She was suddenly filled with melancholy as the treetops became smaller and smaller. She soon remembered, however, that the mystery of what lay ahead was worth the misery involved with leaving her childhood.

As they arrived at the train station, her frail grandmother smiled warmly. She sat next to Mathilda on the train, taking her hand and enclosing it between her own. The journey was rather short, and at the border of Germany, the large family left the train to board a freight car Mathilda had overheard her father say would bring them across the ocean. Mathilda was overtaken by excitement as she saw the big city of Bremen. Soon, however, as she and her family were crammed into the small cars, she wished she were still at home in Russia. Not only had her family been told to sit on their belongings due to fear of disease, but she could barely stretch her legs out. For over five days Mathilda was forced to sit this way, inhaling the terrible odors of a disinfecting spray the crew continued to put in the air. Her father slept on a table due to the lack of space, and Mathilda could only breathe fresh air when she went to the deck to collect her family's scarce bread rations.

Not a people to leave behind their traditions, the Germans of Russia aboard the ship kept spirits high by singing their folksongs, the overwhelming favorite being "Nur Frisch hinen; es wird so tief nicht sein."

Finally, Mathilda and her family arrived at the port the crew called "Ellis Island." From here, her large family was processed by a short little man who spoke a language she did not understand. They were forced to take a test which would tell them if they were sick; fortunately, the entire Hermann family was cleared to face what lay ahead.

What happened in the next several days was a blur to Mathilda, as she and her family sat on a train for what seemed to be an eternity. She could recall her mother's eyes light up as they passed happy farmers in Minnesota, but as they neared North Dakota, they fell at the sight of empty plains.

Despite this initial impression, Mathilda's family was greeted by the welcoming Gottlieb family, who assured the weary travelers that they would have a safe home with them. While the house was nearly empty, with bare walls much unlike the decorated walls of her past home, she and her sisters fell asleep instantly once their heads touched the feathered pillows. As time passed, Mathilda and her family enlisted the help of their neighbors to build their very own sod house, where the family would have three more children throughout the upcoming years, and upon building another house further into the plains, the Hermann family would be blessed with a total of twelve children.

The whole family worked very hard to preserve the limited resources. Mathilda and her new brother Jacob would spend hours lugging water from a well far down the dirt road, and Mathilda could remember her hands so full of blisters that she considered cutting them off in order to make the pain go away. The sky was often grey, casting a gloomy mood upon the residents of Kulm. Despite its difficulties, Kulm proved to be as good a home as any in this New World, the term Fredrich used for the United States. The residents worked long hours to build a small church, replacing the roof when needed as well as donating items. Mathilda remembered one of the men she saw frequently at the well had donated beautiful wallpaper during the church's construction.

As the children aged, they gained an increased appreciation for their new home. The plains of North Dakota produced a rather beautiful nature scene: roses grew on the walk to the

well, violets sprouted near the duck pond, and moon-blue crocuses bloomed in the pastures. The flowers reminded Fredrich of his small garden back home, which was limited in size. He saw that here, in North Dakota, the flowers could cultivate freely, with no limitations in their growth. He likened this to his own new life, where he and his children could be whoever they wished to become.

As Mathilda stood alongside her father one morning, gazing out at the vast plains, she looked up and smiled to him. He looked down at her, feeling at peace for the first time since their arrival. *Ah, such a glorious Free World*, Fredrich thought.

The United States of America. A place for opportunity, a place for adventure. North Dakota was not as harsh an environment as he had first thought. Neither did it mark the end of his dreams. North Dakota was hardly the end, but an entirely new beginning.

Fredrich again looked out of his small sod window and smiled, content at last with the new life he had been chosen.

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