Home

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Amanda Doerrfeld

A senior from Elliottville, Kentucky, I have been part of the Honors Program community since coming to the University of Kentucky. I attended the Summer Environmental Writing Program (SEWP) in 2003. The College of Arts and Sciences awarded me a Dean’s Scholarship for 2005-2006. I also had the opportunity to spend 5 weeks in Mexico this summer studying Spanish with the Kentucky Institute for International Studies.

Whether professionally or as a hobby, I plan to continue my writing. This story has been an amazing opportunity to try my hand at historical fiction. The link to family makes this piece even more special to me. Zoshia in the story is based on my great-grandmother and is the first story in a series documenting the progress of my family in the United States.

This project held the fascinating element of combining research gained through interviews with my maternal grandmother, online searches, and the creativity needed to fill in the gaps.

Working with my mentor, Jane Vance, was an incredible experience. The discussions between the two of us have helped guide my writing and take it in directions yet unexplored.

My interests include reading, writing, exploring the outdoors, time spent with family and friends, guitar, and martial arts. This is a portion of a longer work that includes the story of Zoshia leaving her home and embarking on her voyage. The complete story is included in the on-line version of Kaleidoscope at www.uky.edu/kaleidoscope/fall2005.

Mentor:
Jane Gentry Vance
Professor, Department of English and in the Honors Program

Amanda Doerrfeld’s series of six stories is unique among the tens of creative projects I have supervised during my thirty years of teaching at the University of Kentucky. Each of her stories blends carefully researched facts with dramatization of crucial events in the history of her parents and her grandparents on both sides of her family. After interviewing them, she filled in the gaps by imagining the motives, conversations, and circumstances that are lost to memory, thus re-creating the narrative of their lives, from the experiences of her immigrant grandmother coming in steerage from Poland to America just before World War II, to the adventures of her activist father in the 1960’s in a commune in Eastern Kentucky. Thus she makes real, as both good historians and good fiction-writers do, a prototypical American family drama. Writing about herself and her own very particular family, she tells us about ourselves and our families. Using the methods of creative nonfiction, Amanda imaginatively explores the roots of American life.

Home

Thinking of her family was as painful as it was sweet. Zoshia hunkered in her allotted space and watched the families around her giving each other comfort. A father would cuddle his daughter to his chest when no amount of scolding would quiet her fear. A Marna would grow hungry as she gave the remainder of their food to the children and prayed that they would not grow sick in the dark confinement. There was even some laughter that was the physical expression of the hope that lay thickly even in the gloom. It was this hope that had led so many to leave what they knew behind, because there must be something better. Zoshia wanted her family around her; the backbone of strength she hadn’t realized she rested on until she was alone. Though she learned to control and channel her fear as the days in steerage passed, her fright kept her apart from those around her. Fear of the unknown and longing for love gnawed at her belly as much as the hunger that inspired her hoarding of bread. Occasionally a kind soul would pull her from herself. A woman whose children had fallen asleep would look to her.

"Are you alright, child?" she would ask in the mother voice that woman earn as surely as their breasts swell with milk. Zoshia never knew how to answer. She would say:

"I’m going to America." They would smile knowingly at her response, a gentle smile that allowed Zoshia to breathe easier and turned the
corners of her mouth toward the ship deck above, unconsciously.

"You're a good girl. You are by yourself, but you will make it."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"You're a pretty one and you must be smart or your family wouldn't have sent you on your own. They know they can trust you. That is what that means." Zoshia would nod and force the tears back. She was a Kielbasa and she wouldn't cry.

"You have family in America, honey?"

"Yes, Ma'am. My Aunt and Uncle." Zoshia had difficulty making her sentences more than a few clipped words. Talking to these women reminded her of Mama and she would choke. They seemed to understand and rarely asked for more. Zoshia would begin to relax into the warm words of another woman, a mother figure. She would lean against her trunk and the muscles in her stomach would begin to unclench. And then a sharp baby cry would break the solitude of the moment and Zoshia's Mama-figure would be gone, back to soothe her little ones. Zoshia would be alone again. Though she knew the painful cycle, she couldn't resist being drawn in when that soft voice reached to her, "Are you alright, child?"

One other event made Zoshia's half-trance travel more alive. The chance of fresh air when the boatmen would take small groups at a time up to the deck to stretch deadened bodies was short-lived, but heavenly. With a strong wind in her face and the blurred brightness of ocean and sky, Zoshia felt she had been transported to another world. She would raise her arms and let the wind take her clothing in raise her arms and let the wind take her clothing in 

A adolescent boy beside her nudged her roughly. There was an uprising of movement and another event made Zoshia's half-trance travel more alive. The chance of fresh air when the boatmen would take small groups at a time up to the deck to stretch deadened bodies was short-lived, but heavenly. With a strong wind in her face and the blurred brightness of ocean and sky, Zoshia felt she had been transported to another world. She would raise her arms and let the wind take her clothing in. The bread supply had dwindled and for this reason, if none other, she hoped the rumors were true. An adolescent boy beside her nudged her roughly.

"What's it going to be like?" he asked. The sound of the Polish language brought on a sudden onslaught of homesickness, but Zoshia considered his question. "I don't know. My aunt and uncle went to America for work. They said it would change their fortune. They are waiting for me."

"You here by yourself?" Zoshia studied him for a moment; how would he use the information? A lady with a sick infant sat beside him, curled over the child.

"Yes, I'm going to work. Poland is not safe anymore, you know." Zoshia realized she sounded important though she really did not understand what was going on any more than any of the other youths joining the workforce in a new world.

"Yeah. Father and Mother and me got out while we could." Now he sounded important, then his voice deflated. "We don't know if baby sister is going to live." He looked over his shoulder. He looked back scanning her supplies.

"You got any food?" Zoshia nudged closer to her wicker trunk.

"No. Ran out."

"Us too. I'm hungry."

Zoshia closed her eyes tired of the conversation. She was hungry too, but didn't want to think about it. She was tired much of the time now. And as much as missing her family, she missed the daylight that held all possibilities. Her clothes were gritty with sweat, seasickness, and another byproduct of food she did well not to think about. With her hair knotted at the back of her head she had nothing to anchor her to a reality beyond a dark hovel adrift.

Zoshia awoke with a jump. She didn't know what had happened, but something was different. Tensed and alert she snapped her head about. People were moving, moving and ... leaving. She saw a patch of light and uneven plank boards ascending into the world. Another thump like the one that had shaken her awake made her grab on to her trunk. They must be at a port. Zoshia nearly cried with overwhelming emotion and fear caught at her again. She slowly rose to her feet moving like an old woman; there had been far too little space to stretch before. Her mind raced trying to remember the few American words she had picked up on the way over. She had listened to men and women practicing with what had to be words sent in letters from family already established. She did not like the way the American sounded or felt on her tongue, but she only knew two words of proper American. She was not as strong as her father, but Zoshia struggled her trunk into line and felt all around her the surging mass ready to breathe fresh air and live again.
With the light visible in front of them and a whiff of a breeze making its way even into their darkness, the wait was excruciating. Zoshia felt the need to relieve herself, but refused to give up her place in line. She would not be the last to see America.

By the time it was her turn to climb from the darkness, Zoshia's legs were asleep, but she took those stairs with as much enthusiasm as she could muster. This was going to be her new life.

The intimacy of fresh air was almost like a drug. Zoshia giggled uncontrollably for a few seconds before she was struck by the immensity of the structure before her and the stern men waiting for her to step forward. The sky was full of gray-silver clouds and yet the warmth of sunlight and the joy of being outside transformed the neutral day into an event. And then the enormity of the situation hit Zoshia. She stepped forward, her precious trunk hugged to her slightly trembling frame. The first of the two men held a list of names. He waited for her to speak and Zoshia released the breath she had been suffocating and forced her mouth to form the words she had been practicing.

"Poland. Zoshia Kielbasa. Fourteen." When the men made no immediate response she repeated her words apologetically. Her American must be really bad she thought self-consciously. The man looking annoyed. He shook his head at her with an exaggerated sigh and waved down another man several sections away. The new man approached looking annoyed. After a few moments of exchanged explanations, the man spoke to her. A wave of relief flushed her face.

"You need to keep moving. Follow these people through the second door to the showers. You must be cleaned, then you will answer some questions, go to a general meeting and, if all goes well, be released to wherever you're going in about three hours. Good luck."
Though he even forced a smile for her, the man would answer no more of her questions expect to insist she leave her trunk at a designated area while she washed. She finally relented when she was informed that without the cleansing she would never leave this building.

The water was lukewarm and the disinfectant burned her nose, but Zoshia felt more human when she emerged from the cleaning room. Her relaxation would only last momentarily. Her wicker trunk that contained her dowry and the few cherished possessions from her home was gone. She searched again and again and was reduced to tears and angry words in Polish which only granted her stares from those passing by. After an eternity of draining emotion, a worker took pity on her and directed to a question station where she was quizzed and asked repeatedly about her intentions in the United States. Fortunately, the questions were supplied in her language. They were the same question her father had answered on the form sending her to America. It was beautiful.

“It was on a necklace my father gave my mother when they were married.” For a moment Mama looked young again. “She always wore it on special occasions. When I was a baby I tugged on the sparkly strands and the necklace broke. So many of the pieces were lost it was never remade. My mother was so angry about her necklace, but I was so young I only giggled. She saved this bead for years. I can still see her holding it up to the light as if it held the future with her like the first gust before a storm.”

She forced back the tears and vowed to herself that she would make her mother proud. She would work hard. Zoshia glanced up as a family leaped from the bench to rejoice with friends there to take them away from the Polish pen and make them Americans. When the insistent Americans had sent her here, having finally determined that she was Zoshia Kielbasa, or rather Sophie Kay, that she wasn’t sick and that she was indeed just fourteen, they had called this the kissing post. Watching her Polish comrades she realized why, even from within her haze. Before she could move another family had settled their load on the paint-less bench to wait their turn. Her eyes fell upon a Polish sentence written in red paint on the wall next to a tiny flag that represented her culture. The words read:

Welcome to America

Zoshia stretched, squeezing her bead more tightly within the safety of her palm. Aunt Helen had not yet arrived bringing the future with her like the first gust before a storm. Zoshia knew that she would come.

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