

chapter one

1937–1942



“I wonder if there will be any bread tonight,” I said to my brother Leonid as we walked side by side down the dusty dirt street one afternoon toward the single, crowded room we called home. We had little hope of finding any food when we arrived. Big sister Olga would probably be there, but not Mama or Papa. If Olga hadn’t found anything to eat, it would be another hungry evening. Mama would come home late from a long day’s work, and just maybe she would bring some bread with her, but maybe not. And Papa—I had never seen him. He had been taken away before I was born because of his faith in God.

I was born in July of 1937 into the home of simple, God-fearing peasants in the village of Kazatin in north-central Ukraine. I was the youngest of five children—Olga and Lyuba were my big sisters, and Ivan and Leonid my brothers. At ages four and five, Leonid and I were best friends.

Rarely was there enough bread for us all. Since the dictator Stalin ruthlessly ravaged the country, all the Ukrainian villagers were starving and living in poverty.

“I wish we had a lot of bread for once,” I wished aloud.

“Like a whole loaf just for me, and a whole loaf for everyone else too. Wouldn’t that be special? There’s never enough of anything, especially food. The piece of bread Mama brought last night was too small to start with, and then she had to cut it into six parts. I’m always hungry, I think. Don’t you wish you could have lots of bread, Leonid?”

“I wish I had potatoes.” Leonid topped my wish with something even more special.

“Mhmm,” I agreed. Once we got started, we couldn’t stop imagining all the food we could wish for but knew we could not have. “Oh, Leonid, maybe the lady who saw us last week will be outside again today. The hot milk she gave us was so good! I wish we could go inside her house every day instead of just walking by it. Maybe she will see us and call for us to come in,” I said wistfully, waving as we passed her house, our hungry stomachs complaining. But, once again, we were disappointed.

When Mama arrived home from work later that night, she had a surprise. “Look, children! Do you see how God is providing for us?” she asked reverently. She unfolded her apron, revealing a crumbly pile of odd-shaped pieces of bread. “When I do laundry for people who work at the bread bakery, I always check their pockets to see if there is any trash. Today I found a biscuit in one pocket, and some bread in another. All day I kept finding little bits of food in the pockets. Now we have this besides the half loaf of bread that was my pay for the day. The other workers know I have five children to feed, and that Papa was sent away. They put the food in their pockets where I would find it for you! Let’s thank God for the special way He is giving us what we need.”



So sometimes we had food, and sometimes we didn’t. It was

easy for us children to complain. The older ones wished they could go to school and grumbled that they had no shoes to wear. With very few clothes, we sometimes complained about being cold. Papa had not been home for years, and our mama was doing all she could to keep us together as a family. We didn't realize how hard she was trying; all we thought about was the ever-present, gnawing hunger and how tired we were of nothing but plain bread to eat day after day.

One day as Mama was scrubbing our family's laundry by hand, she heard one of us complain about so little bread. "Do you know how I got to work at the bread bakery?" she asked. Sensing a story, Lyuba, Leonid, and I crowded close. We knew our mama loved us, even though she didn't have much time with us.

"It was becoming very hard to get enough food for our family," Mama began. "You children had gotten little to eat for weeks, and with winter coming, I knew I must get a job. I asked everywhere, but no one would hire me because Papa is called an enemy of the state."

I didn't understand what that meant, but I listened quietly to the story.

"It's almost impossible for a believer to get a job since times are so hard and jobs so scarce. Finally some Jewish neighbors gave me some laundry and odd jobs to do and paid me with food whenever they could. But you are growing children, and we needed more than that. I really wanted a job at the bread bakery, because I thought if I worked where bread was made, I would at least have a little to bring home every day. So one day after praying about it, I bravely went to the owner of the bakery. 'Please, sir, I want to work here,' I said simply.

"'Lady, where's your husband?' he replied gruffly.

"How I hated that question! There was nothing to say but,

'I don't know. I haven't heard from him since he was taken away to prison.'

"When the bakery manager heard that, he said, 'No! That means he is an enemy of the country. You cannot work here.' I had no choice but to go home and pray again to the only One who could help us. I was so distressed and discouraged! I knew the answer would be the same everywhere I asked, and I dreaded trying again. Where else could I go? How could I make someone understand how much I needed this job? Did no one care? I wished I could sleep, but sleep would not come. I reminded myself that I must 'trust in the Lord and wait patiently for Him,' but still the worries persisted.

"Then I heard a voice, children! Someone said, 'Do not go out to seek a job. Someone is coming to you.' I knew it was the voice of God, and I knelt by my bed, thanking Him for sending me this promise. It strengthened me and filled me with joy! I praised God with all my heart. I wanted to tell someone about the wonderful promise. Our pastor was in jail, so I went to the *rykovodyashiy*,¹ the elder. He is responsible for church matters while our pastor is away.

"After hearing my story, he said with a sure confidence, 'Do not be inattentive; it is God's voice! Praise Him, sister, that He has heard your prayer and is sending someone to offer you a job. Give Him the glory for providing for His children in their need!' We thanked God together right there in his house, and then I hurried home rejoicing.

"I was so sure that I would soon have a good job, that I immediately began thoroughly cleaning our little room. Olga noticed I was doing something unusual and asked why. I told her I would soon have a good, full-time job and wouldn't have time to houseclean. We worked together at whitewashing the walls and were just starting to wash the window when Olga saw

a woman approaching our house.

“‘Are you Mikhailuk?’”² the woman asked. When I said I was, she said, ‘The boss at the bread bakery sent me to ask you to come to him immediately.’

“I was so excited! Here lay all my hopes for getting something for you to eat. When I arrived at the bakery, the boss said, ‘Mikhailuk, do you still want a job? We need someone to do the laundry for the people who work here.’

“Of course I agreed at once. I told him I was ready to start immediately, and was so thrilled that I could hardly see the way as I walked home. God had been working in two hearts—the baker’s to offer me a job, and mine to be ready for it. How good He is to us, children! We must never complain. If you need something, just bring your request to God and trust Him to give it to you when He sees best.”



So God provided for us. Sometimes neighbors left a bit of food on our porch, without us knowing who brought it. It always brought tears of gratitude to Mama’s eyes. She understood how difficult it was for anyone to share. She always told us God had sent the food for us, and we thanked Him with grateful hearts for every little bit.

One day, as Leonid and I walked home together, hungry as always, the woman who had once given us hot milk called to us, “Children, come here!” We were very glad to come into her house, knowing she truly cared for poor children such as we were. “Sit right here now and wait just a minute. I’ll soon have some good, hot milk soup ready, and you can warm up your stomachs before you walk the rest of the way home.” She bustled about her tiny kitchen, and we drank in the warm, pleasant smells that spoke of good things to come.