

# Mrs. One-Arm

## An Easter Tale



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My maternal grandparents had lived in China, as had numerous upper-class Tsarist Russians in the early years of the 20th Century. But after the Bolshevik Revolution in 1918 they justly feared the Communist regime, so could not return to their homes in the newly-created Soviet Union—or indeed go anywhere else since their Tsarist passports were no longer valid and they were stuck in Shanghai (which was then an “international settlement” run by the French) during the Japanese occupation of that city in World War II from 1941-1945.

My mother had come to the United States in the 1930’s, however, and so was out of danger. As my grandparents were non-combatants and had Finnish passports, they, too, came to America after the Japanese surrender, joining my mother, older brother, and me in Berkeley, California. My grandfather had made quite a lot of money in China as a dealer in the paper business, second in value only to arms and ammunition in wartime, so my family was well off when they arrived in America but were deeply concerned about their many friends still in Shanghai as the Chinese Communists were becoming more active there.

These Russian friends were merchants or Imperial Russian ex-soldiers or old Russian aristocracy and were Russian Orthodox Christians. When the then-newly formed United Nations issued “displaced persons passports” allowing men and women whose passports were no longer valid to come to the United States if they had a sponsor who would guarantee that they would not go “on the dole,” my grandparents provided some of that sponsorship. This was the major reason that Russians would come en masse to San Francisco after the war, where they would ultimately build the Russian Orthodox cathedral on Geary Boulevard as well as establish an orphanage for Russian children from China.

Of the many Russians who came to the Bay Area, my brother and I, then both less than 10 years old, met a

large number. They were always coming to our house and we to theirs. We also met many who were working as gardeners, elevator operators, store helpers, taxi drivers, manual laborers, and maids in order to support themselves and their families.

One such maid worked as a housekeeper for my family and was fascinating to us children because she could, even as an older woman, navigate an extremely heavy Hoover vacuum cleaner over the rugs in every room, in spite of the fact that she had no left forearm, a condition she hid by stuffing her remaining upper arm under the bib of her apron. I can not remember her name, but we kids secretly called her “Mrs. One-Arm.”

On the Saturday night preceding Russian Orthodox Easter there is a traditional midnight service at the church and my brother and I were allowed, for the first time, to come with our grandparents and mother to that event. When we arrived at the church and went in, it was darker inside than I had ever seen it. Black cloths covered the icons, fewer candles were lit, and the choir was singing Russian baritone laments. There was, in the middle of the church, a small coffin on the table, a table also covered in black cloth.

As midnight approached, the choir lined up and headed for the exit door, all carrying unlit candles. Candles were also distributed among the worshippers who followed them out of church. When the priest emerged to lead the choir and worshippers fell in line behind the choir, we all walked three times around the church. It was cold! It was dark!

When we, after three walk-arounds, came at last to the front door again the priest stood in full regalia on the porch. The crowd began to light their candles, passing the flames from the front to the back of the line. The doors swung open; the light inside was now brilliant.

The priest shouted, “Christ is risen!” and the congregation shouted back, “He is risen indeed!” Then the priest and the choir re-entered the church and all following

them began to sing in triumph. The icons were glistening; the casket gone. The walk around had signified the three days the crucified Jesus was in the tomb described in the Christian Bible.

After a fairly long sermon the ritual was over. It was time to eat Easter breakfast. Many did so in the church basement dining hall but we went home as my grandparents had invited close friends to the Easter feast at our house. When we arrived home, the big dining room table was fully set and the food laid out before us, as Mrs. One-Arm had stayed behind to prepare the places and put the food on the table.

Everybody sat down and my brother and I took our usual seat, but I was confused. The chair at the head of the table, where my Grandpa always sat, was empty. I looked around and found him sitting two chairs away from us on the opposite side of the big table. I'd never seen him do that before.

Within several minutes after we all arrived, but not yet begun to eat, Mrs. One-Arm came out of the kitchen dressed in a silver gown with a tiara on her head, and sat down in Grandpa's chair. She was, we discovered that night, a Russian baroness and so was the highest ranking aristocrat in the room. Though she had lost everything in Russia, she had not lost her social status.

I was reminded of Mrs. One-Arm (and the lesson she, and others, taught to my brother and me on that Easter Day long ago) when the salaries of physicians and other faculty in the University of California Medical Schools and Colleges were made publicly available on the internet. A distinguished faculty



Photo: Yuval Helfman

**San Francisco's Russian Orthodox Holy Virgin Cathedral on Geary Boulevard in San Francisco, also known as Joy of All Who Sorrow.**

colleague came to my office, angry and distraught. He had reviewed the sums given to our UC Davis School of Medicine doctors and was irate when he found that radiology faculty much junior to him in rank and length of service had much larger salaries than he did.

"Are you in need of money?" I asked him.

"No, but these guys are making more than I am to sit in the dark and read films, while I see patients in clinic, attend on the wards, teach students, administer programs, do research, publish, and do major management tasks," he said. "Hell, football coaches make more than I do."

"Do you want to be a radiologist or a football coach?"

"Of course not! I love my work but it is unappreciated and that makes me angry."

We Americans (with notable exceptions for descendants of upper-class families in some Southern states or on the East Coast) rise in "rank" by how much money we make rather than a social hierarchy based on old family status. We admire success but to use salary or accumulated wealth as evidence of

our societal status is just wrong and truly problematic in physicians—who should have their "rank" determined more by patient and colleague trust in them rather than wealth—as it now contributes to the rising cost of health care, which is especially damaging to those who have little money to pay for it. Now some physicians, disquieted by the increasing demand to prove their worth by how much revenue they generate, have left their practices and academia to care for people, here and abroad, for far less remuneration... and are happier.

I am, as an American, not desirous in any way of a return to any hereditary aristocracy. Moreover it seems to me that doctors, no matter what their lineage, are granted high social status in our country simply by being good doctors who are trusted and, if deserving, admired by their patients. Mrs. One-Arm and the other Russian emigres we met taught my brother and me a wonderful and enduring lesson: people can be highly valued socially for how they adapt and how they behave, rather than for their wealth, and I have been grateful to them for that insight all of my life.