

## The Cross at the Edge of the Forest

There was a time when the earth of Holmshchyna hummed with quiet harmony—when roosters crowed at dawn across gardens of Polish daisies, Ukrainian sunflowers, and the low hum of Hebrew prayers drifting from window to window. Vereshyn was not just a village. It was a breath between histories, a lullaby sung in three languages, a place where fences were low, and neighbors' voices passed through open kitchen windows like smoke from warm bread.

The villagers spoke of a miracle spring hidden beyond the tree line, where a cross of stone would rise from the waters no matter how many times it was taken away. Some said it was carved from Golgotha rock, brought centuries ago by wandering monks who sang psalms as they walked barefoot across the Carpathians. Others said it had simply always been there, born of the earth's sorrow, waiting for hands that would remember how to pray.

Each year, on the twelfth of August, they came—Poles, Ukrainians, and Jews alike. They came with candles, with flowers, with aching knees and swollen hearts. They came for healing. They came for hope. And always, the spring was waiting.

But in the year of wolves—1944—they came with guns.

The snow had barely melted from the roots when the first columns arrived. The trees, once green and drunk with birdsong, now stood like silent witnesses. Men in Polish Home Army uniforms, rifles slung across backs not yet grown old, marched with orders hidden beneath slogans. They did not see neighbors. They saw enemies. They did not hear lullabies. They heard ghosts of past wars.

On February 12th, while the village prepared for a wedding, the world outside prepared for slaughter. Maria Mykhailyuk, dressed in a headscarf passed down from her mother's mother, placed white bread and salt upon the table. Her daughter, Stefa, radiant in a simple hand-stitched gown, laughed with cousins as fiddle strings trembled in the corner.

Then the gunfire came.

Not even the church bells could drown it out. Bullets cracked through panes of glass, through bread, through skin. Screams clawed at the air. Nina Semenivna, only eight years old, would later whisper through tears, "Tato lifted me into his arms. Mama fell behind us—quiet, red, still." Her father ran until his legs gave way. He buried her beneath winter coats in the woods and returned to the house that no longer had walls.

But there were no more weddings in Vereshyn. Only fire.

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In March, they came again.

This time they herded the villagers into the woods, four by four, men and women, the old and the innocent. They lined them up near a shallow pit and fired. No last rites. No names spoken. Only numbers. By nightfall, the ground was heavy with the bodies of 80 sons and daughters of the land. Some were burned in barns. Others were buried beneath ash. The cries of a baby echoed for hours before finally ceasing.

Among the dead was Władek Cherek, seventeen years old, found days later clinging to life beneath a mountain of child corpses. When asked how he survived, he answered only, "I listened for my mother's heartbeat, but it never came."

And yet—despite everything—they did not forget.

The survivors, scattered by Operation Vistula, took with them only what could not be stolen: memory. They crossed rivers, boarded trains, buried loved ones in foreign soil, and rebuilt their lives with shaking hands. But they carried the story of Vereshyn in their bones. They passed it down like a sacred song sung in hushed voices around kitchen tables in Chełm, in Podlasie, in distant towns where no one knew the smell of that spring or the echo of the wedding hymn that was never finished.

And the cross? It returned.

Unearthed decades later by a child playing near an overgrown path, it stood just as the elders remembered—worn, solemn, and patient. It was placed beside a chapel rebuilt with tears and memory, where flowers bloom every spring without fail, as if the dead tend the soil themselves.

Each year, they gather once more—not many, but enough. Enough to remember. They read aloud the names that were nearly lost. They light candles that flicker like the eyes of those taken too soon. They pray in the language of the land—sometimes in Ukrainian, sometimes Polish, sometimes in silence.

Because Vereshyn did not die. A village lives as long as someone remembers its name, as long as a child asks why the candle is lit, as long as the story is told. Vereshyn is not ash. Vereshyn is not a grave. Vereshyn is the cross at the edge of the forest. And it still stands.