

## VENTURE INTO THE UNKNOWN

The first signs that summer was drawing to a close were evident in October, when the days became shorter and the nights became cooler. Overnight, white frost covered meadows and trees, which sparkled in the morning sun. By December, we experienced blustering winds and blinding snowstorms. At one time, we were held prisoner in our hut by a blizzard that raged non-stop for three weeks!

By January 1941, our food supply was exhausted and we were nearing starvation. Local people in the village were not willing to do any trading (clothes for food), as they did not have much for themselves. I had no choice but to go from hut to hut and beg. Once I brought home potato peels and wheat husks (bran). Mother made a meal that resembled porridge, and she encouraged me to eat more, saying, "You have to keep your strength to be able to look after us." So I took the larger portion. Afterwards, when I drank some water, my stomach expanded like a balloon.

Before, I used to be able to catch sparrows in the barn and we would boil them in soup. By this time, I could not find a single bird. With each passing day, we were becoming weaker. My mother was no longer getting out of her bed.

After a long discussion regarding what we could do to end our hunger, we decided to look for help outside the village. What worried me most was that I had no idea where or how far I would have to go in order to find another settlement. My mother had a lot of faith in God's help. She said: "God will guide you and bring you back safely." We packed our toboggan with clothes to barter, took two strong sticks to defend ourselves against wolves, and the next day at dawn, we began our quest for food.

The day was sunny and very windy. The flat surface of the steppe was covered with packed snow, and the going was slippery and bumpy. After a while, I came up with an idea: why not use the energy of the wind to our advantage? So my sister and I, with the aid of two sticks and a bedsheet, constructed a sail. With the wind blowing behind our backs, the sleigh scudded in the right direction.

The sun in the west was almost touching the ground on the horizon, and in the far distance we noticed a few columns of smoke reaching towards the sky. As we approached, we heard the sounds of cattle and dogs. Finally, we neared a settlement with huts and shacks in a circular formation, surrounded by a protective wall. Initially, we were greeted by a

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bunch of children and barking dogs, but eventually, an old man appeared and invited us inside.

It was almost dark now, and the only light inside the hut came from the fireplace, located in the centre of the room. We gathered around the fire and sat on the floor, which was covered with skins. In the light, I could better recognize our hosts, who were Mongols. They were hospitable people, offering us food and shelter for the night. We conversed with them late into the evening, as they were very interested in our predicament. I had to explain why and how thousands of Polish families found themselves in Kazakhstan. They also admired our courage, forsaking our own safety to travel across the steppe into the unknown.

After a good night's rest, we had breakfast with more curious people present, and answered more questions. Finally, we entered the business of bartering. We received much more in return for the clothes than I expected. Actually, they were very generous, and I wonder if some of their kindness was motivated by pity.

Upon our return back home we found our mother in tears. When we did not show up on the same day as our departure, she assumed the worst, thinking that something terrible must have happened to us.