

Nonna Bannister with Denise George and Carolyn Tomlin

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the secret HOLOCAUST DIARIES The untold story of Nonna Bannister

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The Secret Holocaust Diaries: The Untold Story of Nonna Bannister

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You have only to dip into this astounding memoir to see that the suffering that marked Nonna's early years was the very thing that God used to shape this remarkable woman. Denise George and Carolyn Tomlin have managed to give Nonna Bannister the same feeling of literary and historical importance that John and Elizabeth Sherrill brought to Corrie ten Boom in *The Hiding Place.* Read it and weep or read it and rejoice, but above all, read it.

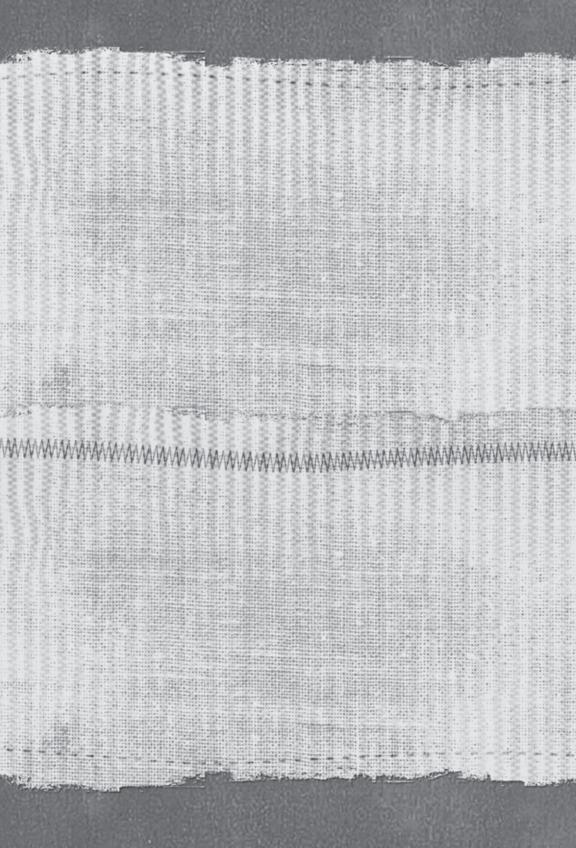
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Calvin Miller
Professor of Divinity, Beeson Divinity School
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What a marvelous service has been provided by Denise George and Carolyn Tomlin in bringing to light the untold story of Nonna Bannister! This inspiring volume provides a window into the personal and painful reflections of one of the darkest periods in human history. Yet readers will be strengthened by reading this most moving and hopeful account of courage, faith, and forgiveness.

David S. Dockery President, Union University

This book is absolutely captivating. It is an extraordinary glimpse inside the oppressive nature of Russian Communism and the viciously evil heart of Nazi Germany. But, the revelations of human depravity manifested in horrific acts of brutality and murder notwithstanding, rays of God's Light appear in the form of a Russian Orthodox grandmother, a frail Jewish boy, and a group of Christlike German Catholic nuns and priests. These diaries are at once heartbreaking, hopeful, and unforgettable.

Lyle W. Dorsett Billy Graham Professor of Evangelism Beeson Divinity School



Dedication circa 1990

I would like to dedicate this book to the memory of all those who perished during the Holocaust in World War II, who are no longer here to tell their stories, and also to those who survived the horrors of it all but lost their families and loved ones.

I thank God for the little Jewish boy named Nathan, who died so that I could live.

I want to express my gratitude to the Catholic priests and nuns who were brave enough to hide me from the Gestapo after they had taken my mother away.

I want to express my deepest gratitude to my loving and caring husband, Henry, who has given me his support and his understanding and caring for me—for sharing my feelings with me and helping me throughout our forty-six years of marriage to cope with the many sad memories of the past. I feel that God sent him to me because He knew what I needed to survive the many hard times. Henry took care of me while I struggled through very bad health, and without him and his love and support, it would have been extremely difficult to write this book and to cope with so many horrible memories.

I thank God for giving me three beautiful children—two sons: W. H. (Hank) Jr. and John D., and a beautiful daughter, Elizabeth J. They also have given me a lot of support and love, which I will cherish until I die.

Nonna L. Bannister

TO THE PAST

To the past, the way has been barred, And what do I need the past for now? What is there? Bloodied flagstone— Or a bricked-up door—or an echo That still cannot die away . . . However much I beg.

Nonna L. Bannister

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Preface

This is the true story of a Russian-American woman named Nonna Lisowskaja Bannister.

The material within these pages comes from the private, handwritten transcripts that Nonna made of her diaries from childhood, World War II, and the years immediately following the war. She expanded and compiled them during the late 1980s, with further commentary based on her memory of events. Translating into English from her original documents, which were written in five languages, Nonna wrote her life story on yellow legal pads and kept them hidden from everyone, including her husband, Henry.

In the 1990s, after decades of marriage, Nonna finally told Henry about her secret past. She also made him promise that he wouldn't share any of her hidden material until after her death. Henry kept his promise to Nonna, only now making her writings public after her death in 2004.

Nonna had kept a lifetime of secret diaries. She began writing as a young girl and received a diary of her own from her father when she was nine years old. In this childhood diary she described her life, her family, and her dreams, and she included some of her poetry. She also kept a formal diary during the latter years of World War II, when Catholic nuns at a German hospital hid her from the Nazis and nursed her back to health. She continued this diary in the years immediately following the war. During World War II, when Nonna left the Ukraine and traveled to Nazi Germany, she kept a pillow made of black and white ticking tied around her waist. In this small pillow, she kept her thin childhood diary, various bundles of paper scraps on which she kept notes of her wartime experiences, and several photographs and family documents. In addition to the written record that Nonna left of her memories—transcribed onto pads of paper and then typed by Henry Bannister—the Bannister family has in its possession one of Nonna's diaries, dated 1947–48; postcards from Nonna's mother, dated 1944–45; and many other personal documents and photographs from the Word War II era.

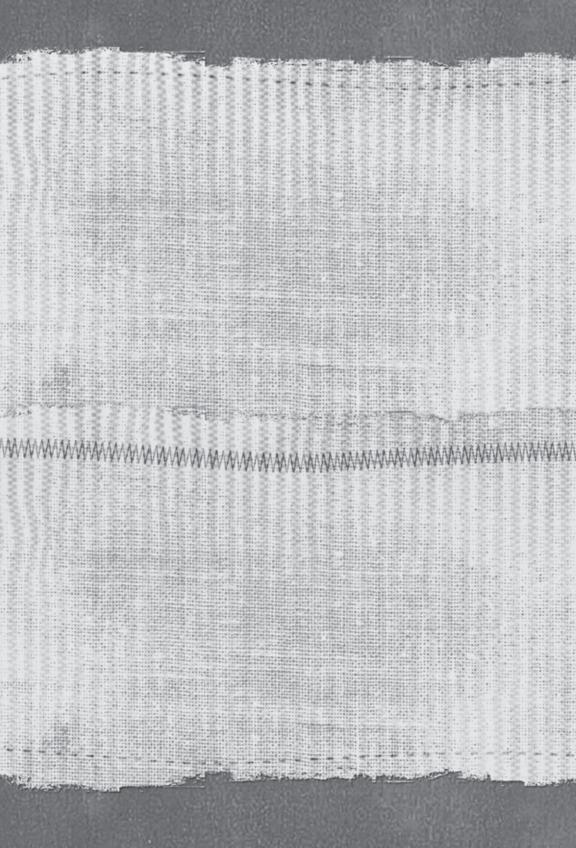
Fluent in at least seven languages, Nonna did the translation work herself. She transcribed her diaries from the various languages in which she had written them into English, one of the last languages she learned—which may account for some of the awkwardness of English grammar and sentence construction in her memoir. Also, transcribing the diaries years after the events described in them and adding her own present-day commentary in places, she did not always adhere to a linear progression. Thus, though translation was not necessary, some minor editing was. Efforts were also made to bring Nonna's family names to a consistent spelling, though it was not possible to maintain any one style of transliteration.

The editors have in some cases combined into one place events that Nonna recorded in different places in her transcripts, as well as giving explanation to the historical chronology in the appendix. Throughout her text, editorial comments have been added where an explanation seemed helpful for better understanding of the transcripts, the historical settings, and Nonna's family. Some of this commentary comes from Henry Bannister's remembrances of Nonna's stories.

Though similar to other memoirs of the war and the Holocaust years, Nonna's account provides a rare glimpse into the life of a girl who was born to a wealthy family in the Ukraine, experienced great suffering in Stalin's Soviet Union, and eventually lost her family and her own freedom at the hands of Nazi Germany. It is a story with unusual significance as one of the few firsthand accounts of a girl from a once-privileged family, who fell into the ranks of the *Ostarbeiter*—the primarily Ukrainian "Eastern laborers" transported to Germany during the war as slave labor under Adolf Hitler's regime. The fact that she not only survived such turmoil and tragedy but also moved on through faith in God to forgive those who took away so much makes her story all the more remarkable.

Carolyn Tomlin Jackson, Tennessee

Denise George Birmingham, Alabama Summer 2008



Introduction

I have now decided that the time has come when I must share my life story—not only with my loving family, but perhaps with all those who are interested to know what life was like for many of us on the other side of the world before and during World War II. I wish to speak the truth and nothing but the truth but some things I shall keep to myself—nobody needs them but me. I doubt that anyone reveals the whole truth about oneself, even in confession. There are things in everyone's life that are known only to oneself and our almighty Father God.

The events described in the following pages were written from my diaries and notes that were transcribed from the four to six languages in which I had written them—starting when I was nine years old. I have translated the poems and thoughts and scripts into English. I have worked on keeping these all together since 1942, when Mama and I left our homeland and were sent to Germany, where we were to be slave labor. In these notes, I kept a record of all the terrors, atrocities, and the new life into which we were thrown. Throughout these ordeals, I never forgot my grandmother and the rest of my family, which had been torn apart and ultimately destroyed—when I would hear a train whistle in the distance, I would immediately think that my dear brother, Anatoly, would be on that train and on his way back to us. This work is an effort to tell the truth about what took place during World War II under the direction of Hitler and his Gestapo troops. There are not many of us remaining that lived through those very difficult and troubled times and are now free to tell the true stories of life. Many, including my own family, perished before having a chance to reach freedom. I am compelled to write this story because I was a witness to many events that took place then and because I am the only survivor of my entire family.

I do regret that I did not write this story sooner. But when I came to America in June of 1950, I was overwhelmed by my new life. I wanted so much to forget the unhappiness of the past and to make a new and happy life for myself that I actually shut the door to the past and had no desire to dwell on it. And a happy life I have made for myself by falling in love with the most kind and wonderful man and marrying him on June 23, 1951.

When my first son, "Hank," was born on October 30, 1953, there was just no end to my happiness. I engrossed myself completely in motherhood, and I loved my husband and my son too much to ever even think of my sad past. So I became a wife and a mother full time. Then my daughter, Elizabeth, was born on July 11, 1957, and my happiness and duties as a full-time mother increased. My youngest son, John, was born on March 27, 1959, which happened to be on Good Friday of that year. My family became my only concern, and my entire interest was now directed exclusively to my husband and my children. I was filled with love and the responsibilities of taking care of them and loving them with all my heart and mind.

There were times when I would think about my family that I had lost, and I would think about how close and loving we had been. However, I just could not bring myself to inflict my sad memories on my husband and my still-young children. I did not want anything to interfere with the happiness that we had, and certainly when the children were growing up, my only concern was to protect them from anything that would leave them with depressing impressions. I wanted so very much to create a healthy and happy environment for all of them.

Now that the children have grown up and are well-adjusted and intelligent human beings, I feel that they should know more about their ancestors from my side of the family—that my children must know how they lived and how they died. I also feel that by telling my true life story, I may be revealing some facts from the past that could make a contribution, however small it may be, to the history of mankind.

It is very difficult for me to relive that part of my life even through the memories that are still with me—so precise and vivid. However, I have an uncontrollable desire to write about those years of my life, which were filled not only with sad events but also with happy times when I was growing up and still had all my family. It took great effort to put my story together, but I have had tremendous support from my loving husband. I feel very fortunate to have had him by my side and to have his encouragement. Without this encouragement, it would have been very difficult to go through with it.

When I left Russia, I took with me a passionate love for my homeland the way it was before the Bolshevik Revolution the Russia I knew from the stories that were told to me by my dear grandmother and my loving parents. My hope and desire is to live long enough to see my homeland, the country so dear to me, become free again as it was before I was born. The hope that I live with and my prayers to God are that I will see—or at least my children and grandchildren will see—Russia become the "Old Mother *Rossija*" as it used to be—to see Russia return to its beauty and magnificence.

Is it really possible for this to ever happen again? "The Rossija shall become free again"—those were the words of my dear grandmother. It was a promise that she made to us, her grandchildren, as well as to her children. The beautiful land where creativity, art, and music would flourish again someday, free and independent. The land where the Russian people would be able to exercise their talents freely.

I get furiously angry at the thought of what has been done to my ancestors and to the land I love so much. But I do feel very fortunate to have at least some knowledge, which was passed on to me by my own family before I lost them. I shall try to pass this on to my own children so that they will know the truth and be as proud of their roots as I am.

How can one tell the story, especially *write* the story, without knowledge of the writer? The story is so real and so full of horrors. How can I describe the things that I have seen and felt and that made me the sole survivor of my family—all the troubled times and horrors and terror that surrounded all of us? It is difficult for me to put my thoughts into proper perspective, especially since my English vocabulary is somewhat limited.

Though I have lived in America for forty-seven years, I still find it difficult to express my thoughts properly. I have yet another problem, which is that I have allowed myself to forget the languages I knew so well when I came to this country. I spoke six languages very well, and most of my notes and some of my poems, which I wrote between nine years old and nine-teen years old, were written in the Russian, Ukrainian, Polish, Latvian, and German languages.

I kept diaries during those years, and even as I lay in the hospital stricken with rheumatic fever and the ensuing heart problems, I continued to write in my diary for some time before I left Germany. My diary was written in several languages, but it was written with the deep feelings of one who had gone through a great deal of sad times. Most of my writings were about my mother, father, and my brother, Anatoly. I also became very close to God Himself, and my writings were full of expressed feelings toward faith in God and His mercy on me. I felt very close to God, and I felt that He had chosen to keep me alive for a very definite purpose. So I put into writing all my feelings as best I could—and all that I had learned about God from my dear grandmother and my parents.

Translating from my own notes and diaries, I find myself in a great state of confusion, because it is difficult for me—after so many years—to understand my own writing, especially since the languages it was all written in became somewhat estranged to me. However, with extra time and much effort, it finally comes to me, and I am able to put it into English so that at least I can understand the meaning of my own thoughts during those troubled times. When I wrote some of my poems, I wrote them under the influence of grief, which was still with me after losing my entire family. It was so recent, and I was still in shock from the whole ordeal.

My age has become a hindrance to me in remembering some of the events that took place during the very early part of my childhood. But it seems that I manage to block out the sad times in my memory and to concentrate only on the happy ones. Little by little, all of it comes back to me as though by chain reaction. It may take me some time to put it all together, but I am so inspired to write that I don't think anything can prevent or discourage me from writing my true life story now. I only wish that I had some education in writing stories, even if it is the story of my own life.

Perhaps someday I will be able to put it all in proper perspective, but right now I only want to get it out of my head and just write it down the best I know how. What I write is all true, and I have witnessed all of it. Most of all, I like to write about things that I learned from my grandmother and my loving parents.

Nonna L. Bannister



Prologue

Henry Bannister met Nonna Lisowskaja in 1951. He knew little about her when she agreed to marry him. She was a mysterious woman with a painful secret—a secret she hid from him for more than forty years of marriage.

A decade before Nonna died, she took him by the hand and led him to the attic of their small house in Memphis, Tennessee.

"It's time," she said.

Henry had waited a long while for those words. He didn't know what secrets the attic held, but he had watched his wife climb those stairs many times, disappearing into the night for some unknown reason. He never asked why she went or what she did up there, knowing that she could not speak about it and deeply respecting her privacy.

He also never inquired about the black-and-white-striped ticking pillow Nonna held to her heart each night at bedtime. He just knew she couldn't sleep without it.

Nor did Henry ask Nonna about her family back in Germany or Russia, or wherever she had come from. He knew she'd tell him when she was ready. So he waited.

Only once did Nonna give Henry a glimpse into her painful past. They and their three young children attended a church service at Central Baptist Church in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, at which the guest speaker told of his harrowing Holocaust experiences at the hands of German Nazis. Nonna shocked Henry by jumping up from the pew and running out of the sanctuary, crying. He quietly gathered the children and took Nonna home. She immediately went to bed—and stayed there for several weeks. Henry didn't know how to help her.

"What's wrong, Mama?" their younger son, John, asked again and again. "Mama, what's wrong?" John received a mother's embrace, but no answer to his question.

Again, Henry didn't pry into Nonna's past. He simply took care of the house and children, and he waited for her to get up from her bed, to reveal what had so disturbed her.

Many years later, he was still waiting. The children had grown up, married, and built lives of their own. Nonna suffered with her health—her heart and her back—and underwent several surgeries. Her fingers knotted with painful arthritis, Henry's eyesight dimmed, and together they grew old. Then one day, out of the blue, she spoke the words he longed to hear: "Henry, it's time."

They climbed the attic stairs and sat down beside the old heavy wooden trunk Nonna had painted lime-green—the color of living things. She picked up a worn key and turned the metal lock. She showed Henry old photographs, introducing him one by one to her family: grandmother, aunts and uncles, mother and father, cousins, friends—all of them dead, long buried a world away in unmarked graves. The last photograph Nonna pulled from the trunk was one of her only sibling, Anatoly.

"He'd be almost seventy years old now," she said.

Nonna reached into the trunk. She took from it a fragile, hand-sewn diary, its pages filled with writing in Russian.

"My childhood diary," she said. "Papa gave it to me on my ninth birthday."

Then she put into Henry's hands a small pad of paper diaries she had written immediately after the war, each page covered with microscopic pencil marks.

He held the small pad of paper up to the attic's ceiling bulb and tried to read the faded words.

"My eyes are too weak to read them, Nonna. What do they say?"

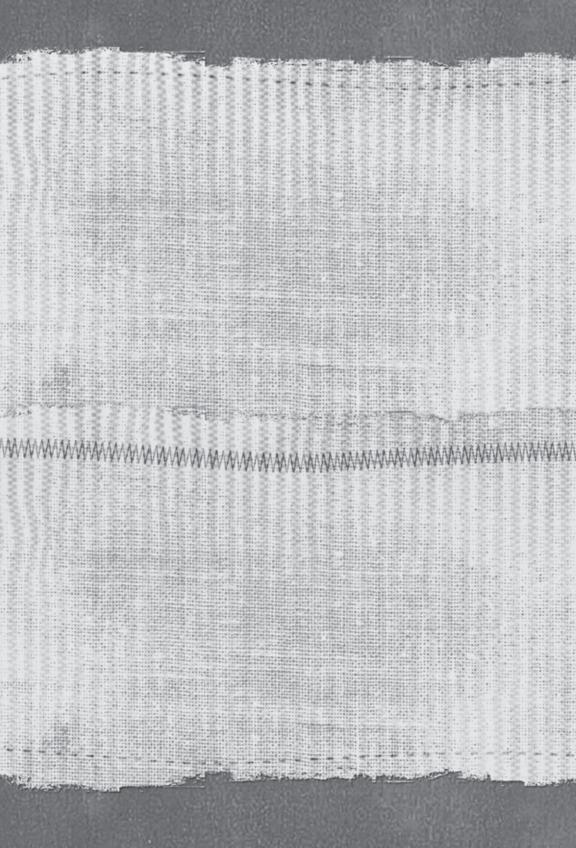
"They're hard to read, Henry. I wrote in such tiny print."

"How am I to learn your secrets, Nonna, if I can't read your diaries?"

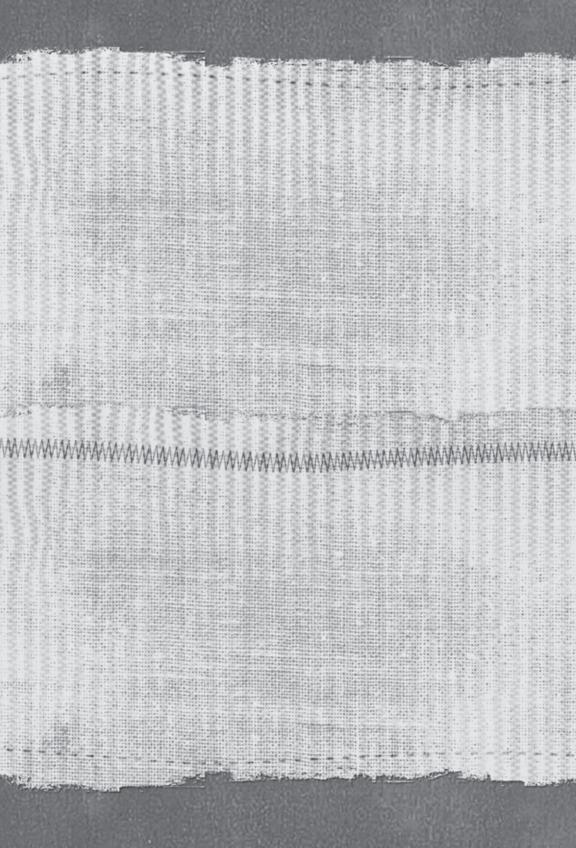
Nonna smiled. Then, from the trunk she pulled a thick stack of legal pads, each long yellow page filled with hand-penned words.

"The translations of my diaries, and my story," she said. "In English."

Then Nonna climbed down the attic stairs, and Henry began to read.



Train to Agony



BOARDING THE TRAIN

August 7, 1942-Konstantinowka, Ukraine

It is fourteen hours and fifteen minutes (2:15 p.m.), and we were just loaded on the train! My God—this is not what we thought it would be like to make this journey! We are packed like sardines in a can into the cattle cars of the train. The German soldiers with their rifles are with us and Mama is scared. (I know that she is.) Mama still thinks we can get off the train and leave our luggage behind and walk home. There is Grandmother standing about twenty feet away, looking so shocked and in dismay—she is crying—with the tears running down her face as she waves good-bye. Somehow, I know that we will never see her again.

As the train starts to move, Mama and I just look at

Grandmother until she is out of sight. At the hour of 1600 (4:00 p.m.) everyone inside our car is very quiet and nobody is talking. Some are crying quietly—and I am glad that I have my diary and two pencils.

I got into the corner as far as I could so I would have some room to write. Now the door of our car is open, but I can hear some noises from the top of the roof. The German soldiers had positioned themselves on the top of the train, and they are talking and singing—I think they are drinking—they sound drunk to me.

It is almost midnight—the moon is so full—and we are crossing large fields. I need to get closer to the door so I can get some fresh air. As I approach the open door, I see a pair of legs in black boots dangling right above the door—then this face leans down and the soldier yells, "Hi, pretty one!" and I get away from the door very quickly. Mama pulls me closer to herself, and I think I am getting sleepy.

August 8, 1942

When we wake up, we can look into the horizon and see the sun rising from the edges of the biggest fields that I have ever seen—it is a beautiful sunrise! Where are we? How close are we to Kiev? The train is slowing down, and it looks as though we will stop moving.

August 9, 1942

We are in Kiev, but the train stopped at least a block away from the large train station. The Germans jumped down, and I could see how many of them there were—we were surrounded. They were telling us to get out—"*Raus, raus.*" We saw trucks approaching the train, loaded with German soldiers and German shepherd dogs (lots of dogs). There was a truck loaded with food (soup made with cabbage and potatoes, and there was black bread). They passed out some bowls to us, and as we walked to the food truck, I looked to the back of the train and I saw two cars loaded with Jews. They were not allowed to get out—the doors of their cars were barred with heavy metal bars, and the German soldiers were guarding them. I saw old men, women, children, and even some babies. They were begging us to give them some of our bread with their thin (almost skeletonlike) hands stuck out through the bars. I started to go there with my food, but just as I got close to them, a German soldier shouted at me and commanded me to get back or he would shoot me if I dared come any closer.

SEPARATE CARS • The Jewish prisoners, headed for concentration "death" camps, were in the same transport but rode in separate train cars from the Russian women, who were headed for the labor camps. The Nazis allowed the Russian women to leave their cars, go into the woods to relieve themselves, and eat. But they allowed no such privileges to the Jews.

August 9, 1942—late evening

When we got back into the car of the train (Car 8) and the train started to move, we thought that we were on the way again. But in fifteen minutes, our train came to a stop. Three trucks loaded with Jews approached our train, and the Germans loaded them into the first two cars of our train. It was close enough for us to hear the screams of the children, the wailings and moaning of the women. There were shots fired frequently. Oh! Those screams and cries! And the dogs—there were so many of them. It was mass confusion, and I became aware that we, too, were prisoners and that there was absolutely no way to escape as Mama had planned to do when we got to Kiev.

August 10, 1942

We are leaving the Ukraine now, and the train is moving fast. I will never forget the sight of the last sunset as we were leaving Kiev. The sun looked like a huge ball of red and orange fire, and it was moving down slowly against the horizon at the end of the endless fields. Almost it was as though the sun were saying, "Farewell, my dear—we shall never meet on this soil again!" As I stood there near the door of our train car, I kept looking at the sun until it had completely disappeared. Then I suddenly felt very sad and lonely. It was a "farewell" that made me feel that a part of me had died. Many sunsets and sunrises were thereafter, but never was one so beautiful as the sunset that I saw at Kiev.

"MANY ... WERE THEREAFTER" • In some places it is difficult to distinguish what Nonna might have written during or just after the war from what she added later to her transcript. In this chapter, Nonna directly translates her diaries almost exclusively, though this comment reflects her backward look at this story from a late-twentieth-century point of view.

Now I know that we are heading into Poland, and Mama is beginning to make plans for us to escape when we make the first stop in Poland. The next stop is for a meal. We will crawl under the car and wait for everyone to get loaded, and we will get out quickly and run toward the wooded area. Mama is planning.

About the Author

Nonna included this "About the Author" page in her transcript.

MOST IMPORTANT IN MY LIFE

My husband, Henry; my children; and my grandchildren

THINGS I LOVE

To listen to music, read books, and write.

- To play chess—I learned to play at a very early age, five or six years old.
- To paint—I used to paint when I was younger but have not done so in a long while.
- Classical music, opera, the symphony, concerts, ballet, stage plays, the works of good artists (paintings), and literature—I love to read good books.

To meet new people and make lots of friends.

- All my grandchildren—Catie, Cristen, Zachary, Benjamin, and Kara.
- To have my immediate family around the table and laugh a lot, remembering some of the funny and even silly things.
- To laugh a lot—my two sons and my daughter and Henry have a great sense of humor. So do I!

MY FAVORITE COMPOSERS

Peter Tchaikovsky (especially his *1812 Overture*), Beethoven, Schumann, Mozart, Bach, Chopin, and others—too many to name.

MY FAVORITE OPERA SINGERS

Luciano Pavarotti (tenor) and, of course, my mother, as I remember her singing when I was a child.

MY FAVORITE BALLET DANCER

Mischa (Mikhail) Baryshnikov, especially in Swan Lake.

MY FAVORITE PIANIST

Vladimir (Volodya) Horowitz—his last concert was held in Moscow, Russia, in 1986.

MY FAVORITE ARTISTS

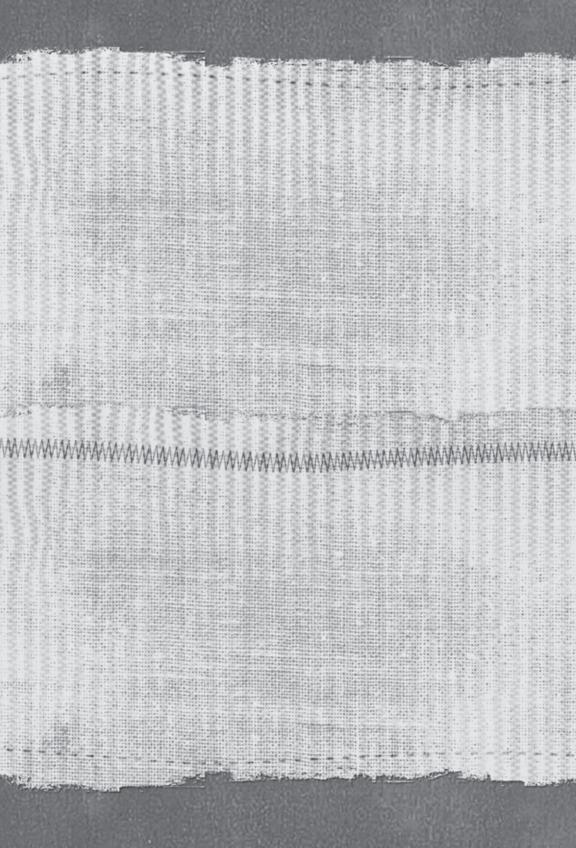
Rembrandt and Repic, and the works of most artists.

MY FAVORITE WRITERS AND POETS

Leo Tolstoy Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn Aleksandr Pushkin (the greatest poet I know) Anton Chekov Charles Dickens

I know much about Anton Chekov—he was born and lived on the same street on which I was born, in Taganrog on Azov. I know much about Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn—when I was five years old, my mother and I spent the night at his mother's home in Rostov-on-Don. His mother and my mother gave concerts together (piano and violin). At the age of six I danced (ballet) the "Tatar Dance" at one of his mother's parties. They lived near the "Great Theater" in Nachichevan, which was near Rostov. My memories of those times are so vivid, and I visited the university where he attended very often.

HOROWITZ'S LAST CONCERT • Nonna refers to Horowitz's last concert in Russia. His final concert took place in Hamburg, Germany, in 1987.



Acknowledgments

When we decided to publish the story of Nonna Lisowskaja Bannister, we didn't realize how our lives—and the way we see the world—would be changed. To know this incredible woman through handwritten notes and photos from her darkest days and then see her survive, meet a remarkable man, marry, and have children can only be possible through her faith in God. We will never forget.

I would particularly like to thank my husband, Dr. Matt Tomlin, who has offered encouragement, support, and love throughout this journey. Special thanks go to my son, Kevin Tomlin, and his wife, Peggy; my daughter, Cindy Tomlin Coulston and her husband, Jimmy; and our six grandchildren.

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