

Tante* Ida's ghost stories

*aunt

From the collected memoirs and journals of Mathilde Burak (Stober), compiled and edited by Marco Burak ©2020

Background information: Mathilde Stober was born in 1932 in a small village called Klistchi near the city of Zhitomyr, in Soviet Ukraine. Her ancestors had come to Russia from Germany in the 1860s at the tail end of the great migration of Germans to Russia which started at Catherine the Great's invitation in 1763 and which continued until about 1871. Despite living in Russia, they retained their German language and culture. The family lost most everything in the Revolution, and in 1937, during the Great Purge, Mathilde's father, along with a great many other men, was arrested and executed for 'anti-Soviet agitation' (in 1989 declared not guilty). In 1943 the family was evacuated to Germany as refugees.

The Old House

On our way to school, the road went across a meadow with a creek flowing through it. Beyond the meadow, looking up to the left there was this old big house standing on top of a small hill. It was big in comparison with the one room cottages the peasants were living in. The house was old, grey, the windows were dark and empty, and everything was bare around the house. It stood there all by itself. Walking by, we always hastened our steps with a quick backwards glance. My older sister and cousin whispered to me that a witch was living there, and that it was haunted.

At that time the house was the village bathhouse with sauna. People did not have plumbing then, and that so-called witch was probably the caretaker. She had one cow and in summer you could see her grazing her cow on the roadside, leading her with a rope. It was said she used witchcraft to double the amount of milk the cow was giving.

Later I found out that my grandparents from my father's side at one time owned that house and that they sold it because of poltergeist activities that were going on there. These stories were told over and over on winter nights when people huddled together by the fire and light. There was no electricity. We lit our homes with petroleum lamps, and to save petroleum, the people gathered in each other's houses to do their knitting and spinning. Even the children were kept busy—we had to pull the wool apart.

Tante Ida

Tante Ida was one of my aunts. We were always very happy to see her, especially if she came with her knitting or on a winter evening with her spinning wheel.

Tante Ida was my mother's sister. That was all they had in common, other than maybe a little physical resemblance. My mother was very quiet with a soft voice and with a sad and longing look in her eyes. Tante Ida had a hard, loud man-ish voice and had a habit of telling everybody the truth whether they liked it or not. Her movements were brisk and to the point—unless she had another bout of rheumatism. Then she could hardly walk, and hobbled around on a stick. But what a story teller she was!

All her stories were true. At that time nobody had a radio in our village, and TV wasn't invented yet. I saw my first movie when I was 12 and I hardly understood it. So when Tante Ida came, we sat around

her, looking up at her, and if she didn't start something on her own, we usually asked for one of her ghost stories. Some of them happened to her. It was against her religion to believe in ghosts. She said that the devil is a great artist and can take on the form and shape of everyone and everything he wants, meaning she saw the devil in person quite often.

The Story of My Grandparents and Their Haunted House

My grandparents on my father's side had a maid whose name was Hannah. She was a teenager. They said she started the whole thing. She always set an extra place at the table. When asked about it, she said "We have to set a place for the dark one." Once, she stood by the open door, looking out across the field. "I see, I see..." she said. "What do you see?" they asked her. "The whole field is full of devils."

In the kitchen they had a picture on the wall, and it always fell off. Once, the hired hand said he was going to stand in front of it and wait to see it come off the wall. He stared and stared, and when he finally looked away, the picture fell off the wall. He started cursing and just then a rock flew in and struck him on the head.

In those days they were still cooking in the open fireplace. The pot was hanging on a hook. And when something was cooking, the poltergeist threw ashes into the pot.

My grandparents had a money box. One day, all the money had disappeared from it. They told Hannah to look for the money. She found it all. A lot was torn, it was scattered all through the room, some in the hearth ashes. One bill even looked like it had been used as toilet paper. The copper coins were all bent.

But it was most haunted in the storage room, and especially if Hannah was there. Equipment was stored there, as well as grain. There were separate bins for wheat, rye, and barley. One morning they made a disastrous discovery: all the different types of grain were mixed together in the bins. A jug that was supposed to be hanging on a nail, it was always down. Often the poltergeist threw everything out of the room.

My grandparents told Hannah to go into the room and ask the ghost what he wanted, what his wishes were. When she came out of the room, she was as white as a sheet. When she calmed down, she described what happened: She had entered the room, and a man was standing by the window, leaning his elbow on the windowsill, dressed in a blue suit. His head and his face were bloody. Hannah said: "all good spirits praise the Lord," and the man said three times, "I don't." Then she asked, "What is your desire?" He answered, "My head has been kicked and trodden on for 40 days and now my killer has given me the power to destroy everything here in the house." Then he floated towards her and she said, "Get away from me, evil spirit."

The local Ukrainian priest heard about the haunting, and came on his own initiative with incense to bless the house and drive away the evil spirit. My grandparents didn't call for the priest, as they were Baptists. They were just preparing to slaughter a pig, and had a big kettle of hot water standing there to scald the carcass. Suddenly, the kettle levitated and threw itself along with the boiling water at the priest, who ran off terrified.

When it became too much for them, they wanted to move out and demolish the house. My grandfather was on the roof and wanted to start breaking it apart. At midday an owl started screeching. He scoffed at that, and then suddenly two invisible arms grabbed him and lifted him off from the roof and placed

him onto the ground.

My grandparents ended up selling the house to a wealthy Ukrainian. After the revolution he was exiled to Siberia, and the house was made into a communal bath and sauna.

Many years later we learned that before my grandparents, the house had been owned by a lawyer who murdered his secretary and buried him under the floorboards.

Tante Ida Sees a Headless Man

Tante Ida was visiting some people on the other side of the forest. Night was falling when she set off for home. They teased her, saying that maybe she shouldn't go home alone, and one of the young men offered to escort her. They told her that a few days ago, at a certain spot along the path, they had found a bloody cloth lying there—perhaps someone had been murdered there. There were aspen trees at that spot on the path, and people always said that there were ghosts there, that it was haunted, that place. But Tante Ida was always so bold, and not afraid of anything and insisted on going alone. So they said, take this stick and if you see a ghost, beat it with the stick, but always away from you. If you move the stick towards yourself, then you invite the spirit and you won't be able to get rid of it.

When she came to those trees, all of a sudden there came a wild storm, and in that storm appeared a man without a head. He brushed past her, touching her shoulder with enough force to turn her around. She looked after him, and he vanished into the trees with the sound of snapping and cracking underbrush like a hunting party beating the bushes to flush prey.

When she got home, she was completely white and could not speak for a long time.

Grandpa Stober and the Irrlicht

(Irrlicht is the German word for will o' the wisp, a ghostly phenomenon sometimes observed at night especially in swampy areas. Folklore and superstition attribute it to spirits, but modern science explains it as bio- or chemi-luminescence caused by the oxidation of certain products of organic decay.)

Grandpa Stober visited grandma's relatives. On the way home at night he saw an Irrlicht bobbing in front of him. He followed it, and it always stayed ahead of him. He picked up a club-like branch, and threw it at the light. It scattered and rose up into a tree, illuminating the whole tree. When he went on his way, it was in front of him again. He followed it until he no longer knew where he was. And then he started to become frightened. When he finally was able to have a good look around, he saw that he had wound up far in the bog.