



A JOURNAL OF ORTHODOX FAITH AND CULTURE

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ACQUIRING FAITH

A Siberian Childhood

by Nina Kartasheva

The compelling story of a Soviet childhood through the eyes of a woman born to Orthodox exiles in the Ural town of Verkhoturys. Nina Kartasheva's childhood recollections are offset by her account of a later critical illness and the miraculous intervention of the last Russian Royal Family.

“The rule of faith and the model of meekness...” I’m reading, as I often do, the troparion to St. Nicholas and remembering the days of my childhood in the far-away Northern Urals, in Verkhoturys, where both my grandmothers were exiled in the 30’s with their children, who afterwards became my parents. I appeared at a later, calmer time when there were no repressions and no one considered my grandmothers to be exiles. Under Krushchev, however, the attitude towards the faith again became blasphemous, to put it mildly, and intolerant if we choose to use harder and more truthful words. Despite everything, traditions were kept up in the old Russian families, along with religious practices and the faith itself. The Orthodox old people in the village, who had been “specially transported,” stood strong: “They shall not send you farther than Verkhoturys.”

I was a little girl, a seven-year-old pupil in the second form at the time of my story. It was the 5/18th of December, the eve of the feast of St. Nicholas the Wonderworker. The Church celebrates this great saint’s day twice a year, on December 6 and May 9, and the people call these feasts *Nikolai Zimny* [Winter Nicholas] and *Nikolai Veshny* [Spring Nicholas]. After school I had dinner, played a little, and then Granny made me sit under the icons to finish copying the Akathist to St. Nicholas for a sick woman. Even now I vividly remember the thin, horizontally lined note-book with the solemn vow of the

Opposite: Russian Wooden House, Verkhoturys, Siberia, 1990’s.

Young Pioneer on its back cover. I remember my china inkpot with golden butterflies painted on it and the pen with the wonderful #12 nib. I was copying the words of the prayer carefully, hurrying a little because the neighborhood children would soon come to take me sledding and jumping into the snow-drifts. I wrote fast but carefully so that Granny would be satisfied and let me go. She and I were going to church in the morning and I was afraid that she would not permit such a worldly pleasure the night before.

The children came in as I finished Kontakion 13 and had begun to copy the prayer. I asked them to wait until I'd finished. Lyuba stuck her nose in the notebook: "And what are you writing?" I didn't want to answer. "Just something... Granny needs it." Teachers and Pioneer leaders had already explained to us that God does not exist. The more conscientious children began to mock me and the most advanced girl in the class, Tanya B., tried to convince me by making a *figushki*, an indecent gesture with her ink-stained fingers, and showing it to St. Nicholas on the icon: "Here! Look! I'm not afraid of your old man God! Do you think he'll cut off my hands and feet, or maybe my ears? Here you are!" I blotted the newly written lines, closed the notebook and blinked in confusion, staring down at the Young Pioneer's vow. Granny came in from the next room, stern, but so comfortingly familiar. She took the notebook, looking at the text. The children quieted down and began to slip out: "Come on, we'll be running behind the sheds." But Granny didn't let me go. I was ashamed to tell her about Tanya's trick. Granny would consider the very word *figushki* to be wild and indecent on my tongue, which of course, it was.

On Sunday we went to church. I stood near Nikolai Zimny. On this icon the saint is painted with a miter, but Nikolai Veshny is without any head covering at all. I liked the winter icon at church – the saint was more majestic than in our spring icon at home with his high, slightly bald brow and plain features. I stood before the icon trying to determine if Tanya was good or bad. Somehow I didn't consider her to be either, and if she did not believe in God, it was only because she was advanced, and so I decided one could pray for her.

On Monday Tanya came to school with her arm bandaged. They had gone to play behind the sheds and the brave boys jumped from the roofs into the snow-drifts. The girls, brought up on principles of equality, also wanted to





test their nerve. Tanya at that time dreamed of becoming a cosmonaut, and she was the first to jump into a snow-drift from the roof, but the result was very unfortunate. The girls took her home and told her mother what she had done at our house in front of the icons. Her mother afterwards told our teacher: “God has punished Tan’ka, and it’s a blessing that her arm isn’t broken, but only dislocated. Olga Nikolaevna, why are you turning the children down on God so? Does He stand in your way?” Tanya’s mother, Marisa, was a straightforward, guileless woman.

Tanya is now a matronly mother of two children. Her husband’s name is Kolya (a diminutive of Nicholas) and Tanya always says, “I’ve believed in God since I was in the second form, and I have no doubts.”

In the second form I was really Granny’s granddaughter. I loved her very much, and that’s why I couldn’t let her down in anything... to do so would have seemed unnatural, it was so good and easy to be obedient. And so it was until the eighth form, the most frivolous age when boys paid me a lot of attention and I became very interested in clothes, dancing, films, and books with “adult” contents. And there was also the “seduction of the world,” as they put it. At school, everyone looked at Granny as if she were a remnant of the dark past. My schoolmates were wearing bangs and short skirts; no one dared use make-up at that time, but they were already trying to put on trousers. I wore dresses of timeless fashion, and a braid with a black hair bow, also timeless. Fashion did not exist for Granny. Her eternal-style, ankle length dress was of black wool in the winter, and a thinner material in the summer with a cream-coloured collar pinned with a brooch. But she was a granny and I was a young girl – I wanted bright dresses!

Again it happened on the 18th of December, the eve of Nikolai Zimny. Granny was preparing to go to church. We were to go by bus to town together where I would go to the music school and Granny to the nuns who lived near the church in a little wooden house. They were secret nuns, “nuns in the world,” as was Granny herself. I was told to come to them after my music lesson to attend the church service, and then Granny would make up her mind whether she would keep me there for the night or send me home. Near the school Granny parted with me, “Well, child, come to pray!”

Now that I am quite a mature age, it will not be so immodest to say that at the dawn of my tender youth, around 14 or 15, I was probably pretty, and this

Opposite: Verkhoturys houses on the bank of the Tura, 1994.

led me out of Granny's sphere of influence. Even the instructor of musical literature, a student teacher who came from the Sverdlovsk conservatory, paid me special attention. He recited fashionable poets to me, like Yevtushenko, Voznesensky, Akhmadulina. He said that Surrealist Art was "Stalinist stuffiness", and spoke of Picasso. He was indignant at the poverty of our little Russian wooden houses with their carved window frames and cross-shaped panes: "...not at all like Italian windows!" When I shyly objected that in our severe climate Italian windows would let in the cold, he insisted that beauty was more important than warmth, but I liked my native beauty and our carved window-frames and I stood up against his weak arguments. His comments were full of approval if he managed to see that "the figure is English, unlike our Russian ones..." or "the eyes are Byzantine, although the nose is Russian". Did they really fill him with such xenophilia and contempt for his native culture in the conservatory? He himself was an ordinary Russian boy, but back then he seemed to me to be very grown-up and intelligent.

That afternoon he said to me: "Wait, I'll see you to the bus stop." I became frightened, "You needn't. I'm going to Granny." "And where is your Granny?" "She's visiting some people she knows." I was embarrassed to tell him, but the young teacher was not afraid, even of Granny. His intentions were most honourable and we left school together. I was already in the last form, and was considered almost an adult. In provincial areas, teachers are deeply respected and, of course, I didn't dare to tell him that he couldn't go with me. We walked through the old town. We passed Trinity Cathedral, occupied by a bank, and other important businesses. We passed the Cathedral of the Exaltation of the Cross, that had once been part of a monastery and was now a work-house for children. The relics of St. Simeon of Verkhoturye had lain there. In 1914 Grand Duchess Elizabeth Feodorovna came here as a pilgrim; she had fasted and taken Holy Communion at the monastery. Verkhoturye at that time was an important spiritual center for Siberia and the Urals. Pilgrims came on foot from as far away as Kiev to venerate the righteous saint of Verkhoturye. Today, in 1994, we will celebrate the 300th anniversary since his relics were glorified on December 31 (the day I was born!) I love and honour him, and owe so much to his intercession before God for me, burdened with many sins, as are we all.

And what is Verkhoturye now? In the 20's and 30's it was a place of exile for the cream of the Russian nation, later it turned into a ramshackle place...

Opposite: Log and cable suspension bridge over Tura River, Verkhoturye. 1994.





the teacher and I were now approaching the outskirts of town where the graveyard stood, and in the graveyard, the only “working” church. Near it were two little houses. In one of them lived a widowed *batiushka*, and in the other lived the nuns. Granny saw me through the window and came out to the gate. She was wearing her black klobuk and I was terrified to think that now everyone would know that she was a nun. Granny recognized the teacher – she knew all my teachers and classmates. She greeted him and asked: “You also have come to pray Valery Nikolaivich?” Poor Valery Nikolaivich flushed and I saw how ashamed he felt for himself and for me that I was so old-fashioned as to go to church with my grandmother. He muttered something and said good-bye in confusion and I suddenly felt exasperated and sorry for myself among the dear old God-loving women. I saw myself through Valery Nikolaivich’s eyes, an unmodern girl who understood neither Voznesensky nor Picasso. “Granny, I don’t want to go to church. I’ll go home.” Granny was unhappy, I saw, but I insisted. She let me go.

My father and step-mother behaved like children when Granny was absent! The TV thundered, and Daddy’s hunting dog Bur’ka leaped about the kitchen, although it never stepped over the threshold when Granny was home. I stood facing the mirror. “Out-of-date... old-fashioned,” I thought. A thin girl looked back at me from the mirror, a little frightened – not so old-fashioned I thought hopefully.... Suddenly something broke within me. In one moment I changed. Until this time I had always felt an aspiration heavenwards, as if I was holding onto a big shiny balloon with the words “Jesus Christ” and “the Mother of God” written on it. This invisible balloon had lifted me high above the earth, and everything had been easy and full of joy for me! I had even written these lines about myself:

Once on a feast-day, a miracle!
Without touching the ground with my feet,
I went to where I was bidden,
From where they will never retreat.

And now it seemed as if I had let this balloon out of my hands and was falling heavily to earth.

I went skating. They let me go, of course. The village for “special transports” was by this time already just another village around a forestry plant,

Opposite: Wooden House in Verkhoturje.

situated in a picturesque spot where the river Aktai falls into the Tura, with its rocky, forested banks and green hills. Nearby, a former convent housed a sanitarium for children. It was always merry there, skating to music in the winter, volleyball and croquet in the summer. My step-mother worked at the sanitarium, therefore they let me onto the grounds, even with my friends. But on this day there were ice-skating competitions and I decided to go to the home-made village rink on the riverbank. Boys used to skate there although I wasn't allowed to because there were ice-holes, but that day I didn't remember that I wasn't allowed. I skated in a very "modern" way, imagining that I was a champion figure-skater whom I liked very much on TV. I gained speed, twirled in the air, and very smartly, as it seemed to me, flew with my face turned to the side, straight into an ice-hole. Scared and terrified? I don't know. It was like being suddenly burnt, but in the water. I was pulled out and taken to a club nearby. I had brains enough to understand that I had to dry myself quickly over a round-shaped Dutch stove. A woman who worked there came in and when she saw me she gasped, and sent some girls to tell my parents. My parents were more frightened than I was. They changed my clothes and wrapped me up warmly. At home they gave me tea with raspberries, but by morning I was ill. Granny was in church and would only come back towards evening. I felt twice as bad without her, and until she came I was in a delirium, and kept asking to be given a balloon with the words "Jesus Christ" and "The Mother of God" written on it. And it was only when I took hold of Granny's hand, as if it were the string of my invisible balloon, that I grew calm.

I was ill for some time before I recovered, but as a result of the accident I came down with pneumonia every year after that, although in a lighter form. Most often it happened at Nikolai Zimny, which was not a good sign. And so it lasted not for one or two, but for about ten years. By that time I had already married and my dear Granny, whom I will never forget, had left this world. That year in the spring, I had sat in a draught and once again became very ill. I did not want to lie down, but stayed on my feet until the fever forced me to bed.

It was May 19th, the birthday of the Emperor New Martyr Nicholas. This day is underlined in my diary. To my great misfortune, I was absolutely alone at home, my husband was away on business, my relatives were far off, and

Opposite: Grand Duchess Maria, with sister Tatiana in background, daughters of Tsar Nicholas II.





there was no one to help me. I badly needed help because I couldn't even get up to answer the doorbell. Something chilling, dead and frightful pressed me down. My spirit grew weak and I knew I was succumbing... in my feverish wandering I was cold and terribly thirsty all night long.

In the morning, I regained consciousness, feeling a little better... There was a smell of lilacs, birds were singing, and my fever was almost gone. There is something heavy covering me over the blanket. An old-fashioned officer's coat with eagles on the shoulders! Lord! Where did it come from? A girl of about seventeen is sitting in the arm-chair, reading in a wonderfully deep voice the Akathist to St. Nicholas out of the old notebook which I immediately recognize. An hallucination! I'm frightened. I don't know this girl and no one, not even my niece from Leningrad, if she were here could read the Akathist in such a manner. This unknown girl does not have modern pronunciation, but like Granny says her "ch" and "sch" like someone from old Petersburg. Certainly, I'm hallucinating. But for some reason I ask aloud, "Where did such a strange coat come from?" "It is my Papa's," the girl replies. "And who are you?" "Marie" "Which Marie?" "A nurse."

I look at her round face and big gray eyes. There is something admirable, and unpretentious about her appearance. Her dress is simple, light-blue, and there is a fresh lilac branch in the vase. "Give me something to drink." She comes to me with a cup of warm milk. I ask, "Is it part of my hallucination?" "Dostoyevsky said that there are no hallucinations and no madness. It is only that in extreme circumstances people also see the other world." I drank the warm tasty milk.

"Today you will completely recover. Papa said so. Today is his birthday, and his namesday is the day after tomorrow. This is his present to you. And I will sit with you. Do you want me to read the service again?" "No! Read something else, something light and merry, and then the service..."

The wonderful voice changes from low soothing tones to crystal-like heights, reading me a story about a young lady with a nice umbrella and a frilled skirt... Is it Chekov? I didn't know the story, and only in the 90's when books by N. Teffi reappeared, did I recognize it! But back then, God knows, I had only seen Teffi's name barely mentioned in Soviet anthologies of other authors. I had not read a single work by this brilliant writer. The story ended. I didn't dare to ask her to read me any more, I had somehow begun to believe in my merciful guest. She rose. Above the head of my bed there hung (and still remains)

Opposite: Tsar Nicholas II in military greatcoat. Oil on canvas by Ilya Repin c. 1896.

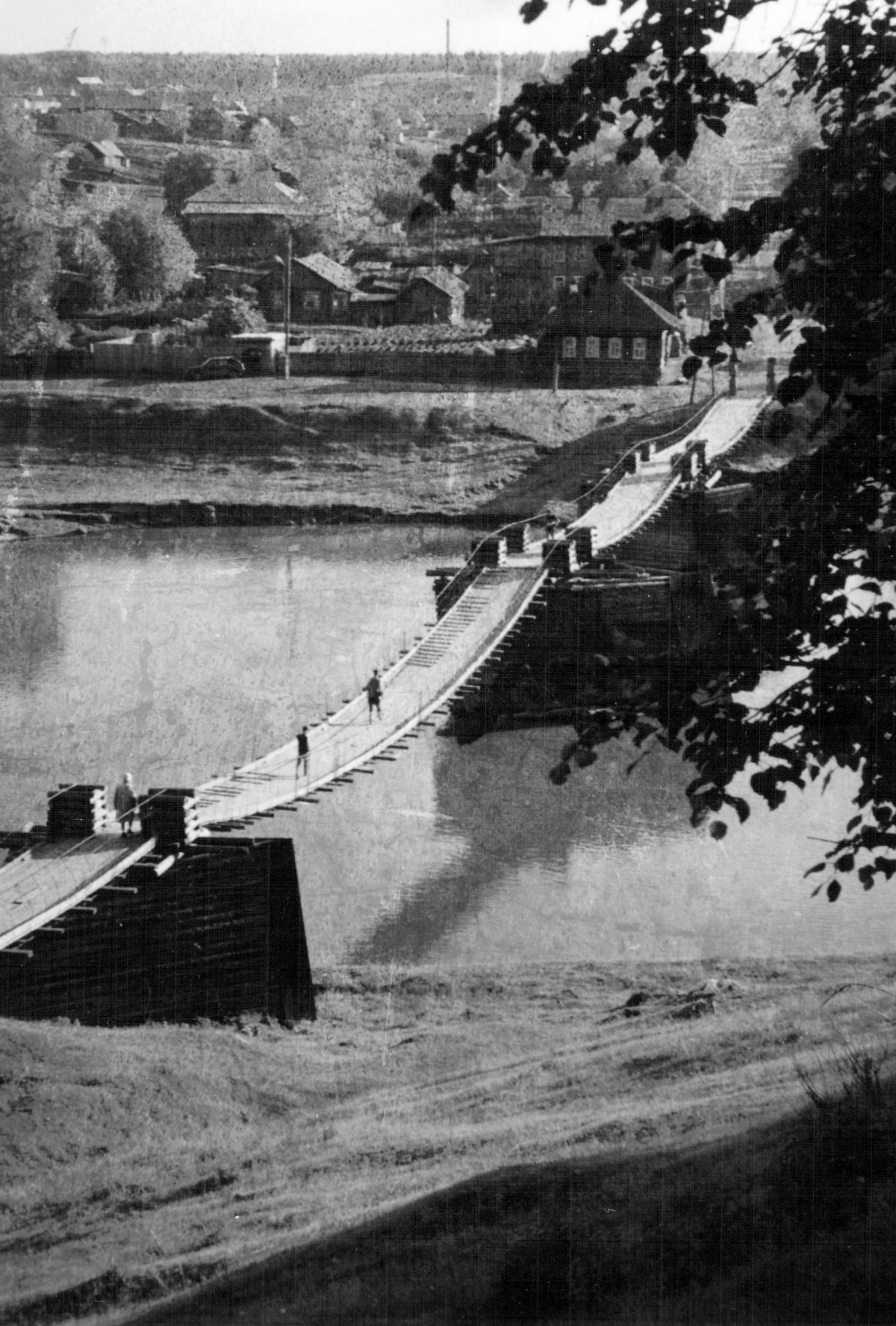
Granny's icons of the Saviour and the Mother of God. The girl stood before the icons and I stood on my knees in bed: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, save us and have mercy on us sinners. Most holy Mother of God, save us."

Then I fell asleep and awoke healthy and refreshed. I was alone in the room. But the lilac branch was still in the vase with its wonderful scent, and it hadn't been there before I laid down. The icon lamp was burning although I hadn't lit it. I didn't even have any oil. I used to buy menthol oil from the apothecary shop, bless it in church and light the icon-lamp on feast days. But that year menthol oil had disappeared from the shops and the icon-lamp had not been lit for three months.

But the most incredible and precious proof of the fact that I had had a visitor from the other world was Granny's prayer rope! The prayer rope was real, and I still have it at home. At that moment it was hanging on the corner of the icon of the Saviour. And this was the prayer rope which we had put in Granny's coffin! The little tassel on the green cross had rotted, but the knots themselves had not fallen apart, and later I took the rope and gave half of the little knots to batiushka. When my aunt came to see me six months later and saw the prayer rope she became pale and frightened and began to cry, begging me to give it to a church to avoid temptations, because signs like this bring misfortune. I have had plenty of troubles and temptations, but I won't part with the prayer rope. I didn't tell anyone about it then or I would have been considered mad, but all my people and batiushka believed me and prayed with me. My illness was completely gone and the doctors were amazed when they saw my lungs.

I have a firm belief that I was healed in such a miraculous way by my Granny's prayers. Is it not a miracle? I believe that it was due to Granny's prayers to St. Nicholas the Wonder-Worker and the Royal New Martyrs whom she always honoured. She and I went twice as pilgrims to what was then called Sverdlovsk [now Ekaterinburg] to the Ipatiev House. The first time was on the 17th of July [N.S.] when the family was murdered, and the second time was May 22, Nikolai Veshny, the Tsar's namesday. People gathered at the Ipatiev House at night because during the day the militia would drive them away. I was a little girl, but I remember everyone praying and telling numerous stories of grace-given help. One young man wept when he told how he'd had a revelation in his sleep that the Emperor-martyr was interceding for him before God, and that afterwards he was released from the prison where

Opposite: Log and cable suspension bridge over Tura River.





he'd been innocently put by a slanderer. The terrible Ipatiev House was destroyed by satanists because the Russian people prayed there for its Tsar – and the Tsar Himself prays for, and always remembers, his Holy Rus!

Now that this decisive time has come we have even more assurance that the Lord can never be put to shame. The Ipatiev House was destroyed, but we remember everything, as we remember that Ekaterinburg was shamefully called Sverdlovsk. And we remember much that we never even knew; much truth that we were deprived of by force. We remember it through some ancestral memory, through our souls. The soul cannot be deceived, it will find its way even in today's half-truth because the soul lives by the Holy Spirit.

From far-away Australia I recently received a blessing from Alexandra Filippovna Kuzminskaya – an icon of the Royal New Martyrs. On the icon's margins stand the four Grand Duchesses like white angels: Olga, Tatiana, Marie, and Anastasia. When I stand before this icon I'm always reminded that everything, even our misfortunes, serves Divine Providence. At the beginning of this century, God's Providence allowed millions of Russians to find themselves exiled from their homeland. Because of this, Russian Orthodox churches are everywhere! On every continent the Divine liturgy is now celebrated in the language that Alexander Nevsky and Dimitry Donskoi spoke. It is our language, brothers and sisters! And Russia, the Great-martyr, is now going through a second acquisition of faith, a saving acquisition at a time when the whole earth is spinning unbalanced through time and space, ready to overturn and burn with the sins that overflow the measure of Divine Patience. It is being saved from disaster only by holy prayers offered to God for peace, love and goodness, prayers to soften the hard hearts of mankind.

May God help us. Forgive me the daring with which I wrote this story. I have written it down without invention, without embellishing anything. This is how it happened. I have sincerely and truthfully told about the little things in which the great become manifest. May God save you, dear reader.

P.S. After I reread this text I was tempted to rewrite portions and make corrections to make my story more believable. Certainly, the fact that my grandmother's prayer rope had been brought to me from another world is too incredible. From the viewpoint of artistic credibility this extract should be thrown out. Nevertheless, I didn't choose artistic credibility, but credence given in the flesh. Quite simply, this is how it happened. No doubt from the

Opposite: Verkhoturye on the bank of the Tura River.

literary perspective, Grand Duchess Marie should be replaced by Olga or Tatiana, because Marie was never a nurse, and the reading of Teffi spoils the plot. But this is not a plot, and I did not invent the narrative, I put down everything as it happened, and as it was said: “Marie... a nurse.” I don’t dare change anything, no matter how incredible or unpolished it seems. Marie’s pale blue dress was simple, without adornment. On my icon of the Royal New Martyrs, Marie is also painted without the nurse’s uniform that Olga and Tatiana wear, she is shown in the white dress of a Grand-duchess. The dress is covered with a pale blue mantle. She is standing at the Emperor’s side below Olga. On the Empress’s side stands Tatiana, and below her, the youngest, Anastasia, who is dressed like Marie, but her mantle is pink.

Real life is much more miraculous and incredible than anything that writers or poets can imagine. Each one of you, I know, has had his own mystical experience, and this healing was not the only instance in my sinful life when I, walking, “as through the snares” of the enemy, have unexpectedly received a terrible mysterious warning or merciful support.

Lord, don’t leave us weak and sinful ones. Save us and have mercy on us, by the prayers of the Mother of God and all Thy saints. ✠