

The Land of the Free

By Marilyn Reeves

As the sun sets along the west coast of Africa, you squat beside the river to fill your gourd with water. Suddenly, without warning, rough hands fall upon you, your arms are brutally forced behind you, and cold, steel shackles are wrapped around your wrists and ankles. Your screams are muffled by a filthy rag stuffed in your mouth. A gang of white men – terrifying in their pale demeanor – shoves you into a small boat that takes you to a ship bound for America: The Land of the Free. If you are lucky and don't succumb to disease or starvation in the stench of the ship's hold and make it to the shores of this foreign land, you will be treated like an animal, stripped of your clothing and your dignity, and placed on the auctioneer's block, to be sold to the highest bidder. If you are lucky, the man who buys you will not work you too hard, or beat you too often, or come into your cabin at night. You are just one of thousands who must do his bidding, learn his language, serve his table and toil in his fields. You call him Massa, but you don't look him in the eye, for he knows that given the chance you'll run, because – more than anything – you long to be free.

You are a young Russian student accused of political crimes and sent to the work camps in Siberia. With the help of your friends you have managed to stash away some warm clothes, a knife and some biscuits, and – despite the freezing weather – you crawl under the barbed wire fence while the soldiers are partying, getting drunk on vodka. First you run through the falling, drifting snow, hoping that the storm will cover your tracks.

That first night you climb a tree in order to rest, listening for the sound of men and dogs. In the morning, you press on, beginning the impossibly long journey – on foot, by stolen donkey cart, and finally by rail, where you stow away in freight cars – all the way from Siberia to Europe. But even as you make a new life for yourself, first in Greece, then in France, you are constantly looking over your shoulder for fear someone will recognize you, and send you back. Your goal is to save up enough money to get to America, where you'll finally be free.

You are a brilliant surgeon living in Berlin. Your father's a respected Rabi, your son studies the violin. But the ugly man with the crude hermit's mustache who screams hatred to the masses has come into power. Your beloved country has become a police state. Someone tells you to gather your family, take only what you can wear on your back, and get out while you can. There's a ship sailing for America. If you're lucky you'll be one of the few who manages to book passage – just in the nick of time, before the Holocaust begins.

And when you see that beautiful lady with her torch held high, you weep for the welcome she offers, you weep for the loss of those left behind. But she heralds the promise of a new life,

new hope, new possibilities. After a long and tortuous ordeal and with a bitter-sweet sense of relief, you have arrived at the shores of America: The Land of the Free.