

Daughter of the Spirit Wrestlers ©

A Story About Doukhobor Settlers

by Faye Reineberg Holt

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"I will not do animal work," Dunia said.

Marya's eyes widened in surprise. Her sister, Dunia, had never before spoken in anger to their mother.

"Listen to the voice inside you," Mother whispered. "Then you will do what is right."

"I work hard, Mother. I scrub clothes and help with meals. Didn't I cut and fit sod for our house? But I will not pull the plough!" Dunia spoke in the Russian of their mother tongue. She untied her kerchief and then tied it more tightly under her chin. Her round face glowed in the early morning candle light. Her ankle length black dress and brown apron were spotless and unwrinkled compared to the dresses of their mother and aunts.

Dunia was fifteen, already an age to marry, and six years older than Marya.

Still, Marya could hardly believe her ears.

Her aunts listened silently, busying themselves washing the morning's porridge bowls and wiping crumbs from the newly made wooden table.

Last night, Grandfather had pounded the last leg to the table. His gnarled hands made small circular motions with the precious sanding paper across the table top and down the legs. Everyone had felt so proud as he stood back from his work, his eyes bright and smiling. He set the loaf of bread, cellar of salt and jug of water at the table's centre and then he began the songs, as if setting food and water on the table had guaranteed a tomorrow for the colony.

The songs had made Marya feel warm and secure and she had snuggled close to Dunia who stood rocking their baby brother in her arms.

After the long ocean trip, and the train rumblings, and the days in the huge waiting halls, and walking along the corduroy trails that were the prairie roads, their lives as Doukhobors in the new land had really begun.

This morning the room was filled with tension instead of joy, and Marya wished there was not the terrible calm from her mother and the angry strength in her sister. As she waited for their words and the changing moods to be mirrored from their eyes and faces, Marya stretched her arms across the clay oven that had been built as a mound against the sod wall of their home.

Under the skimpy blankets, she had felt chilled in the night, and a little quiver ran down her spine as her body began to soak in the heat.

"We work or we die," Mother said coldly to Dunia. "But you should do it gladly. Work is not only a duty. It is an honour."

"I'll work, Mother, at some other job." Tears were in Dunia's voice.

Marya didn't want to hear the words that made hurt.

Mother lifted the blankets from the floor. She shook them and then folded them for evening. She let her eyes settle on Marya and then drift to Marya's baby brother, Petya, who lay curled in his small, grey blanket. His face looked white and sickly.

Marya didn't want to think sickness. Instead, she thought about the wide benches Grandfather would soon build around the walls of their home, benches that became beds at night but were for sitting and working and playing games during the day.

Again, Mother's eyes found Dunia. Her voice was calm.

"The men must work on the railway for money to buy winter supplies. The horses are needed to bring tools from Prince Albert." She hesitated, "We are left."

"But I am not a horse or an ox, Mother," protested Dunia.

"Is my daughter better than God's animals?"

Mother's voice softened, but her eyes showed Dunia would not win.

Marya went to her mother and tugged at her long skirt.

"I'd like to plough, Mother. I'm strong."

"No, Marya. Your job today is to look after the baby. If Dunia thinks about it, I'm sure she will want to help."

Mother went to the door. When all the aunts followed, Marya picked up Petya, cuddling him as she trailed them outdoors.

Sun streaked daylight across the prairies. One day their colony would spread over these hills, Marya thought feeling happy to be a Doukhor, a Spirit Wrestler. Her people had come from Russia for the freedom to live by their beliefs. They had come to this Western Canada for a better life than the one they had left. Not that she remembered much of the Old World. Only a place, happy and beautiful, called home. Then fear, dreariness, anger.

"Leave Russia?" relatives had whispered. Some so sad. Some strong, fearless when they left for Cyprus, the island refuge before they came to this country.

But now, they were again planning a real home.

And Marya could imagine the future buildings, fields and gardens of their colony. She could imagine the little ones she would one day mother.

As she looked around, she saw Dunia running from the house toward her. Her sister reached out her arms for their brother.

"I should look after Petya today. He's too sick to leave with you," Dunia insisted.

"It's my job and I'll take good care of him!" Marya hugged Petya more tightly.

She glanced up at Dunia. Not responding, her sister's stare shifted from Petya to their mother and aunts. Still, she didn't move.

The women were taking their places in front of the plough. They stood in twos, each pair holding a bar between them, like horses hitched in teams.

Dunia's lips were a thin line as if her teeth were clenched behind them. Why was her sister that way? Marya wondered. Why was she so stubborn, so defiant? What was wrong with helping the women work the land?

Mother and Marya's favourite aunt were at the front of the line. Behind them stretched other pairs, more than Marya could count. At the end of the long line, Grandfather held the handles of the plough.

He raised his arm and waved for Dunia to hurry.

Marya saw the tears glistening, ready.

But finally, her sister ran to the place beside a waiting partner.

Mother leaned against the bar, pushing hard, the rest following. Her lips parted. Beginning softly, she sang a chant-like song. And as the women all pulled together, their voices rose, clear and purposeful, against the vast quiet. Only Dunia did not sing.

Marya watched the plough blade cut prairie grass, lift black soil and turn it to be touched by morning air and rising sun.

She kissed her baby brother on the cheek. She and Petya would sit with the women when they stopped for mid-day bread. Then she would take him to pick the beautiful purple and yellow Canadian wild flowers. Tonight she would give flowers to Dunia and Mother.