# VORA RECALLS EXPULSION FROM HAPPY HOME INTO LIVING HELL

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World War II was officially over, but unthinkable atrocities and hideous suffering continued for the Wenzel family, along with an estimated 15 million others – mainly women and children.

Despite the horrors they witnessed and endured, the Wenzels were lucky. They survived; an estimated two million German refugees did not.

One of those survivors is Dr. Erika Vora, who was just a baby at the time. During a recent Sartell Senior Connection guest-speaker day, Vora shared many heartbreaking passages from her book, “The Will to Live: A German Family’s Flight from Soviet Rule.” Her spellbound audience was stunned – horrified and saddened by what they heard.

Vora wrote the book, she said, out of a deep-seated compulsion to let people know of the terrible suffering during one of the biggest mass migrations in history. It is an atrocity largely unknown by the general public. Vora’s book is based on extensive interviews with her mother, who for many years refused to talk about or even think about the terrors she and her daughters had endured. Anyone who reads Vora’s book will immediately understand why her mother tried so hard to force those horrifying memories from her mind.

Vora is a professor of intercultural communications at St. Cloud State University and has taught and done research throughout the world, including in Taiwan, Germany and South Africa. She is the author of many scholarly studies about intercultural communication.

Vora’s book recounts the harrowing journey of her mother, her three sisters and herself from Poland as the Soviet

Army moved westward toward Germany – many of its soldiers plundering, raping and committing murderous atrocities along the way.

At that time, millions of Germans had been born and lived in Eastern European countries, including parts of Poland, because many of those countries had long been part of Prussia ("Germany" before World War I). After World War I, the map of Europe was redrawn according to the victors' dictates, and anger over those new boundary lines were partly what caused the rise of the Nazis.

The Wenzel family was born and raised on a farm in a Polish village 170 miles east of Berlin, Germany. It was an idyllic farm life, and they loved their farm, which included a lake to enjoy. One terrible day, however, in January 1945, three months before the final collapse of Hitler's Germany, Polish men stormed onto the Wenzel farm and ordered the mother and daughters out of the house.

"Out! Out, you Hitler folk!" the Poles screamed at them. "You have no place here anymore!"

At that time, many Poles hated Germans – any Germans – because of Hitler's earlier invasion of Poland and because of German atrocities committed against the Poles and others. Because they happened to be Germans, the Wenzels' father, like most men and even boys, had been forced to join Hitler's army. As Hitler's regime began to crumble, no Germans anywhere in Eastern Europe were safe from the wrath of Poles and the invading Soviets – even though those Germans had nothing to do with Hitler's murderous rampages. Fifteen million women and children tried desperately to make the brutally difficult trek west, hoping to find freedom or at least safety in ruined Germany and beyond.

**Vicious eviction**

After they angrily ordered the Wenzels out of their happy home, the Polish men took all the family's beloved horses except for two; they also took the cattle and shot all of the barking dogs to the horror of Mrs. Wenzel and her daughters.

It was a January day in one of the coldest Januarys on record.

Quickly gathering a few skimpy belongings, the terrified mother Leokadia helped bundle up her daughters, including baby Erika, in many layers of clothing. Then they climbed onto the wagon, hitched their only two horses to it and set off – disoriented by fright, shock and disbelief – into the bitterly cold, snowy day. The three older daughters were Edith, 12; Lilli, 11; and Sophie, 9. Also along was Anton, 39, a German who was mentally challenged who the Wenzels had been taking care of and who was placed in hiding before the angry Poles arrived that day.

As they left, the mother took one long look a the home she knew she would never see again, and then she began to pray with great intensity she and her daughters would all be together, no matter what lay ahead.

Hours later, more and more wagons – all filled with terrified German women, children and the elderly – were going down the same road. Someone rode up to warn them to split up in different directions to avoid a massacre by the approaching Soviet soldiers. Anton, who was driving the wagon, took a different road. Soon, they were assaulted with such hideous sights their minds and hearts recoiled. All along the road were bodies, the snow and ice covered with blood everywhere. Most of the dead women and girls had been raped and then shot to death. In other places, they saw people who had collapsed from cold and hunger and who had lain there with no hope or help as they froze to death.

Leokadia (Mrs. Wenzel) was thinking in a panicked frenzy: “How can I explain this to my little girls? How will this affect the rest of their lives? What is yet to come? I must not think of that. I must think of this moment and this moment only where we are still together. I must not think of my dear mother and grandmother. I must hold my tears back and concentrate on the immense challenges of the moment.”

Wisely, Leokadia painstakingly taught her daughters to twist their faces into ugliness and to flail their limbs about spastically while stumbling along in a hunchbacked fashion. It was a way of dissuading any Russians they might come across from raping the girls, and the ingenious ruse worked. Leokadia, too, pretended to be an old-woman hunchback.

Not long after those scenes of horror in the roadways, three Russians happened along. They began to taunt the Wenzels and Anton. Then they began to slap and beat Anton while spitting on him. Leokadia begged them to leave him alone. He was a friend, she said, not quite right in his head. The Russians, believing him to be the father and husband, shot Anton repeatedly, kicking his body. Fortunately, the Russians had had their “fun” and then left.

Then the Russians decided to take the Wenzels’ pregnant mare, who did not want to go with them. So the Russians, who were drunk, began to whip and beat the horse until it bled. The horse looked back as if thinking “Why do you let this happen?” The mare was Edith’s favorite horse and she considered it a best friend. For every day for the next 60 years, the sight of that poor horse haunted Edith.

“Yes, horses do cry, just like people,” Edith wrote later. “But I am telling you, horses would never do what those Russians did to her, what they did to us. No horse is capable of such cruelties.”

After the Russians stark brutality, killing Anton and beating a horse until it died, the Wenzels were frozen by fright and

grief. Leokadia had to “bury” Anton under snow and some branches. And then they had to move on, more worried and terrified with every slow mile.

[/media-credit] Dr. Erika Vora autographs her books for well-wishers after her talk recently at a meeting of the Senior Connection in Sartell. Vora, as a baby, along with her mother and three sisters, survived a hellish journey of cold, hunger, fear, pain, horrors and utter deprivation right after World War II.

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