

William Young,

Tales of living
in Russia during
1914-1918

Written by Freya Scott

My grandfather loves our family history and has even written a book about it. He was extremely pleased to hear I was doing a history project on my great-grandmother (his mother) and he was very good at giving me all the information I needed. My grandfather strongly remembers his mother telling him tales of her travels in Russia. My family helped me lots and I really enjoyed doing this project.

In 1913 my great-grandmother travelled to Russia as a governess, she was only 18 years old. The Russia that we know today is nothing like the Russia that she experienced over a 100 years ago. These are a few diary extracts that she wrote during her time in Russia between 1913-1918.

'We travelled in great luxury, first class, Wagon-Lit, for a day, then a night and then another day to Moscow. Another day, another world: cobblestones, troikas and small 'taxis' with a single horse. The hotel was fantastic, servant after servant. I had never seen such splendour, and such servility, it was almost embarrassing. The servants grovelling, almost on their knees before the 'gentry'. A festive table in the evening, with many glasses. I drank no wine but helped myself to what I thought was water from a jug. I wondered that everybody was watching me, and the girls chuckled, but nobody said anything. I drank and almost choked: the water burned like fire. I had drunk vodka'

This is a great example of the time that has passed between then and now. 'Taxis' were carriages drawn by a single horse. Also it shows a amazing culture. A table strewn with food and wine and vodka would not be uncommon at that time in Russia.

A street scene
in Russia
1913



1913)
St. Basil's, Moscow

'Moscow ... I got a mild shock. It is impossible to describe the dirt. There is no asphalt – just cobblestones set at random. Sewerage? Unthinkable here. Just imagine, it had snowed heavily eight days earlier, and as the thaw set in the snow turned into a flowing grey mass. Pavements are non-existent....The churches in Moscow are magnificent – more churches than houses and all are colourful – mostly in the old Russian style. The most beautiful lies in the Kremlin, St. Basil. At first sight of the Kremlin I thought I saw a fairy tale town – the big palace in the middle in white, surrounded by towers and turrets, hundreds and hundreds of them in gold, red, blue, green, yellow...'

Amazing churches in Moscow
is something that every year
still takes the breath away
from tourists and
Russians alike.



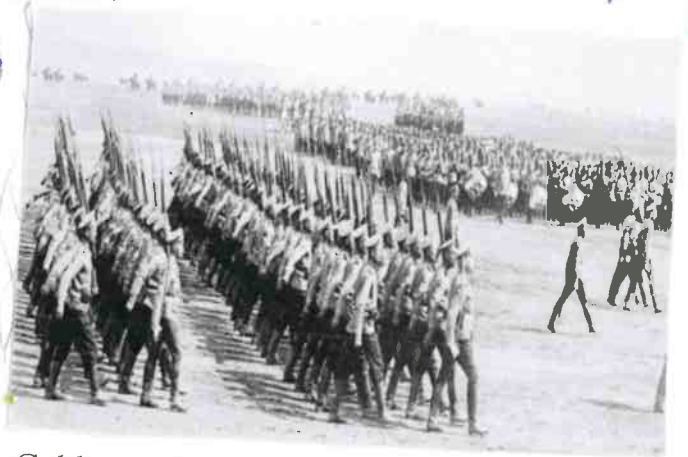
'Next day we continued by coach, drawn by five horses, and I saw for the first time how the nobility lived in Russia: a servant for Mr. von Gabbe, another for Mrs. von Gabbe, a maid for each of the girls, a coachman and a footman for each coach. Something then happened which I will never forget. We drove through a crowded market and the going became difficult. The footman stood up and as hard as he could hit the people that were on our way with his whip. They quickly ran for cover prostrating themselves as they went. I was stupefied, but what could I do? Nobody took offence, and it all seemed so natural.'

Aside from beautiful churches and street scenes, Heidi (my great grandmother) also saw how nobility were treated and how badly peasants or less fortunate people were treated and the barrier between the two. It reflects how Heidi was not used to this culture.

German troops
invade Russia

'The Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austrian throne, was assassinated in the summer of 1914. World War II broke out in 1914, with Russia on the side of Britain, France and others, fighting the Germans, Austrians, etc. We were so deep in Russia that we did not even know that the war had broken out. It was the rainy season and the camels couldn't get to the post office'.

I can't ever imagine what it would be like to be German living in Russia in 1914.



'Newspapers come three times a week. Mr. von Gabbe reads them aloud and a large number of people sit round the table and look at me (a German) with hate and scorn. I live here like a prisoner.....There is no life here. I often ask myself if all this is not a frightening dream and whether one day I will wake...'

You could say that they were being horrible to her but you could also say that Germany had killed so many russians they had a right to.



'I almost ended in prison. Last week the chief of police came. Mr. von Gabbe beckoned me to join him. "Hilde", he said, "the police are accusing you of revolutionary activities. I spoke for you, but the story does not end there. They wish to intern you as an enemy, a German alien. Moreover, they accuse you of spreading revolutionary ideas in Melzani. What have you to say for yourself?" I

A newspaper
from 1914

was dumbfounded. I take no interest in politics of any kind, never mind revolution in Russia. Then I remembered. Out of sheer boredom earlier that year I had collected some of the peasants who worked for the estate and had begun to teach them to write and read, illiteracy being virtually universal in the village. Was this revolution, I asked Mr. von Gabbe. I do this for Russia, for the estate, to bring a little light to this intellectual darkness. How can literacy harm the country? Mr. von Gabbe promised to see what he could do to help. "But you must stop this teaching, Hilde," he said, "the government does not see these things the way you do. Trouble is on its way, I believe"

Literacy was very common at the time though mostly just among the peasants. Unfortunately the government told her that did not like her doing it. They were already suspicious of her and tried to arrest her several times.

'The Revolution in 1917 brought drastic changes. By this time there were about 100 German prisoners of war in Melzani. Then sailors came from Moscow promising to kill the gentry and take possession of the estate. At first they received no help from the peasants who were relatively well off under the von Gabbes. But finally the peasants decided to take over the estate themselves. The Germans in the village got to know and warned us. We quickly prepared two charabancs (drawn by Orloff horses) and drove through the village before the peasants realised what was happening and then on to Saransk. Mr. von Gabbe had stayed behind to see what would happen. He arrived several days later in a complete state of shock. The estate, he said, had been divided among the peasants, the house plundered and then burned. There was nothing left'.

Hilde



Hilde eventually found a transport repatriating German prisoners of war and so finally reached Hamburg in 1918.

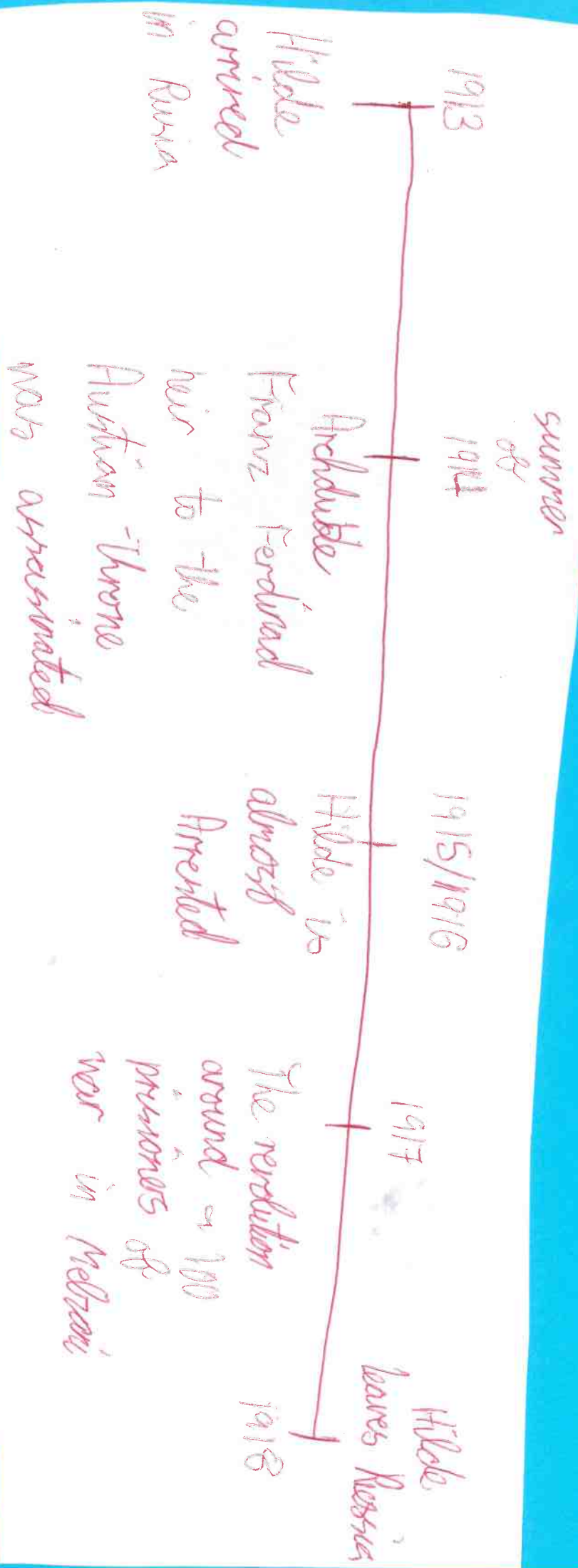
In the time that Hilde spent in
Russia she lived in Melrani.
With Mr and Mrs Non Gabbe and
their ~~the~~ two kids Lily & Nelly



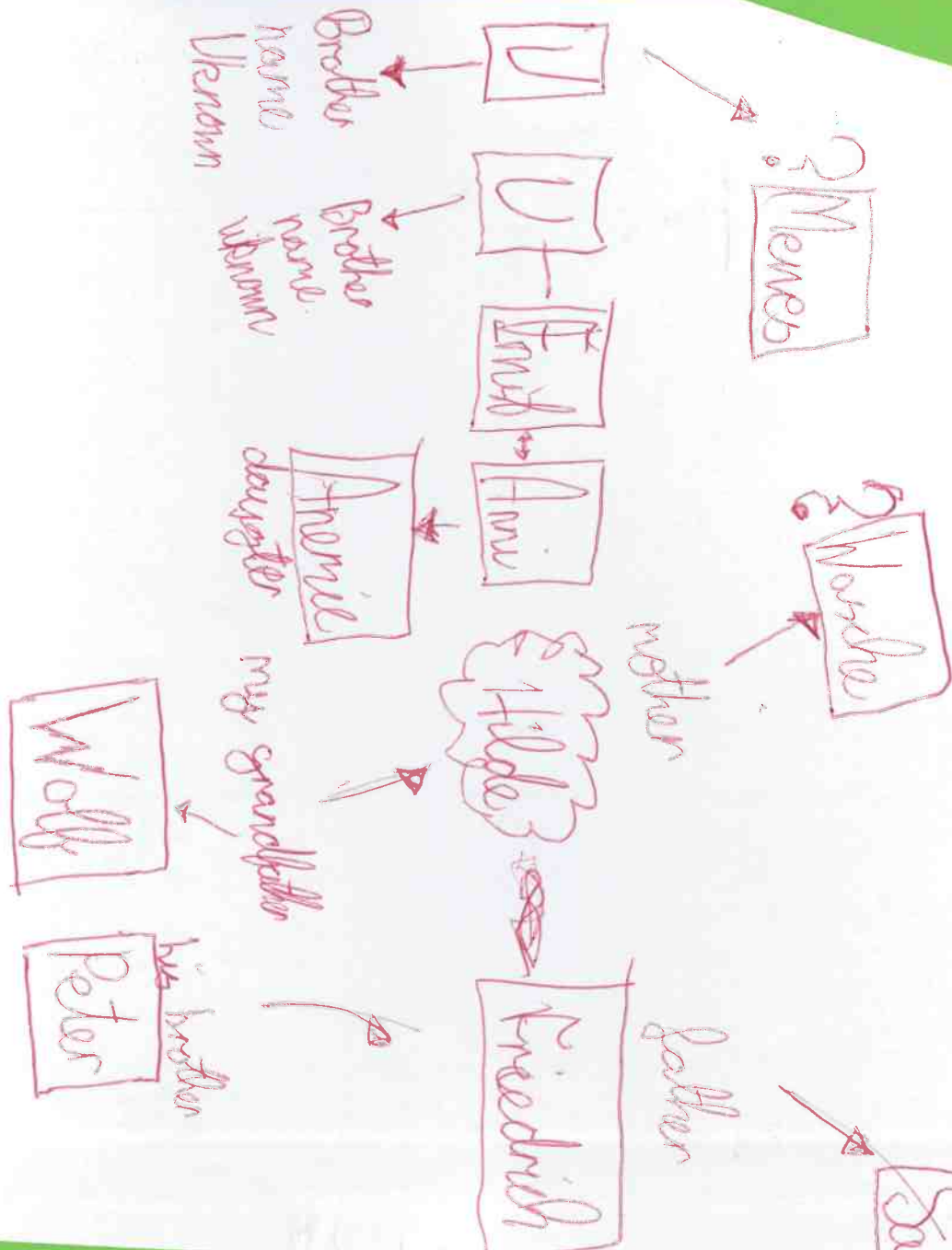
Melrani,
Hilde,
Lilly & Nelly



Timeline



Family tree



3 - first name unknown
 U - name unknown
 → - brothers or sisters

Sarah
mother

Urborn
brother