

## A conversation with Stephanie Williams



I had the chance to meet up with Stephanie Williams for a brief chat over the summer. She was on a tour promoting "Olga's Story," and was in Victoria for a brief visit. We sat down for a few minutes at the Ocean Pointe Delta Resort Hotel.

I first mentioned that I found "Olga's Story" to be much more than just a story about one person, I believed that the book was, in reality, a history of the twentieth century from a unique point of view. Ms. Williams agreed with me, and then I asked her how she came to write the novel.

"I was intrigued with my grandmother's stories as a child, although I didn't give them much credence." She went on to describe how, after she had obtained her history degree, she began to see the importance of these stories. "I was always slightly disturbed about my grandmother's fear of the Soviet Secret Police... we don't fully appreciate the extent of that fear, and I wanted to understand it." She says that she was slightly bored, and really wanted to crack this story, she felt that it would be perhaps "the best story I could get."

Williams continued that she had "no clue" at the beginning about how to find the information she needed. It was during a trip to Siberia that she had her first real revelation - when she saw the gun-running route that her grandmother had taken across the Chinese border. "Granny had been telling the truth." Now all she had to do was uncover the evidence and write about it. Needless to say, the hard part had just begun.

"Olga's Story" was a huge project, and Williams admitted that she could not have completed it if she had become "obsessed" with the tale. She admits now that she never expected to get any information, never expected things to come together, yet slowly, over time, in bits and pieces, information and details began to trickle in. She admits that for most of the time, she really didn't care if she found all the data or not, the project was too daunting, too remote. If she had cared a lot about it, she admits, she probably would have never finished it. "The lack of care made it happen. Ironic."

I asked her about the most amazing moment during the ten-year research period. Williams smiled and said, "There were three moments, the first in 1994." That was when she visited Irkutsk, trying to dig up some records. "I was ready to go home. There were no records, nobody knew anything. I was drinking a whiskey, ready to give up, when the phone rang." It was the phone call that really changed everything. Before she came to Irkutsk, Williams had had her friend place an ad in the local newspaper, requesting information, and including Olga's picture. Nothing came of the ad, until that call. It was from a long-lost relative - who had recognized the picture, but was still afraid to call. Eventually, the two met, "Soviet style," sitting side by side on a park bench out in public, and that was when Williams discovered her lost family in Russia. The second moment was later, after she had made a request to the Russian government about papers pertaining to Vassily, one of Olga's brothers who had been arrested. Nothing came of the request, and Williams had all but forgotten about it, when, about 18 months

## Olga's Story

by Stephanie Williams

358 pp, includes Acknowledgments and Sources

ISBN: 0-385-65986-5

Doubleday Canada

Available at amazon.ca

Olga Yunter is probably not a name that you will recognize, nor should you. If you google the name, you get 68 references, pretty much all of which are about this book. So what's so special about this one person that they deserve a book?

Partially to resolve some of the author's personal issues with her grandmother, partially to illuminate a particularly turbulent period in history in a way that's accessible to everyone, and without a doubt, to illustrate that no matter who we are or what we have done, we are all a little part of history. But then again, Olga Yunter was a pretty amazing person.

Olga Yunter was born in 1900 in a small town in Siberia, and lived her childhood in a trading village on the Mongolian border, where her father partook to the trade with China. She lived a pretty happy and comfortable life, a good education, and the love of a family. That all changed when first war, then revolution, shook her homeland. Two of her brothers decided to fight the Bolsheviks, and Olga herself became entangled into the whole situation. Eventually, she was forced to flee for her life, first to Vladivostok to attend University, then to Tientsin, with only a few precious stones sewn into the hem of her dress.

In Tientsin, she met the man that she would eventually marry, and to whom she bore a daughter, the author's mother. However, Olga's peaceful days were none too plentiful and once more she was forced to flee, this time to Shanghai. After only a short time, she fled Shanghai before the Japanese advance, finding herself in Victoria, BC. Her husband spent the Second World War in a Japanese prison camp. Olga returned to Shanghai to find her husband a changed man, and eventually, they ended up settling in England, where, for the author, the story began.

Stephanie Williams' was intrigued by the stories (or lack thereof) that her grandmother told her, and wanted to find out more. Her search would be long, difficult, and at times, she was ready to give up. Fortune and events kept her at the task, and eventually, she reconnected with long-lost Russian relatives who lived in St. Petersburg. It was after this that she began to write her grandmother's astonishing story.

Williams manages to infuse her historical facts and situations with a reality that can be easily pictured in one's mind eye. Her attention to period detail and the ability to bring these scenes to life makes Olga's Story a joy to read. The author manages to put a human face on history - one of my favourite devices - and weaves a story that describes the first half of the twentieth century in a way that very few westerners will have ever experienced. The story is not only poignant and filled with emotion, it's a darned good one, too boot.

Perhaps the most interesting part of this story, however, is not Olga's tale, per se, but how Stephanie Williams managed to piece it all together, and the final denouement of the tale, when she finally meets one of her Russian relatives in St. Petersburg. They met "Soviet style," or out in the open, on a park bench, so no one could eavesdrop. While never truly understanding the paranoia that her Russian relatives felt, Williams does manage to impart these feelings of her grandmother's throughout the book. It was that, in many ways, that kept Olga moving, the fear of the long memory of the Bolsheviks (then Soviets), and the fear of their retribution. It's a paranoid twist that makes the tale a little twisted to western minds, but one that bears remembering.

All in all, Olga's tale is a better read than many novels, with smooth, flowing prose over a very interesting and engaging tale, one that is sure to fire your imagination and peak your interest in learning more about the history of Eastern Europe. As I have been finding out, it's a fascinating place. I'm sure you'll enjoy your little journey there with Olga's Story. Highly recommended.

J. Michael Dlugos

later, a package arrived. Inside the package were papers - Vassily's arrest records, record of his pardon, and other vital information, and 10 days later, Williams was meeting up with relatives in St. Petersburg. "The reunion was really moving" she admits. Then, in 2000, being met at the airport by her family on her birthday, and learning to sing "Happy Birthday," in Russian. The family still gets together, in fact, Williams was due to meet again with them in St. Petersburg this August, "just to hang out."

When I asked her which was more amazing, discovering the truth about her grandmother, or meeting with long-lost relatives, Williams was straight to the point. "The odds against it were so great, yet finding out about the truth led to meeting my relatives - one led to the other."

We got to the writing aspect of the book when I asked if the book was difficult to write, or was it one of those that "flowed." Williams was a little coy, she claimed that the book "wasn't actually difficult to write - once I'd figured out the approach, it was fine, it was a pleasure to write." She says that one of the more difficult things was to ensure that she stayed with Olga's point-of-view. I then asked how gratifying it was to complete the book.

"It was pretty good," she admitted, "You get to the end. And you don't believe it. You don't realize it's the end, don't know if it's any good." She says that's when the self-doubt sets in. I reassured her about this particular book, and she seemed pleased. I then asked if she thought she had much of her grandmother in her.

"I think I have more of my Canadian grandmother than Olga. I don't suffer fools, though, and I'm probably pretty stubborn. I wouldn't have got this story without tenacity, and I'm a perfectionist, like Olga, although I don't have her charm."

Williams says that her favourite memory of her grandmother is there in the book, when she describes visiting Olga late in her life - when Williams had gone to make her some soup. "She was very gentle and vulnerable, where she often wasn't at other times."

Williams has published much more than just this one novel, and has great experience with journalism. I asked her which is more challenging, writing a book, with all the issues there, or journalistic writing, with it's tough rules and strict space requirements. Williams was quick with a decisive answer, "Now, looking back, I prefer the pace of a book. Once you've been allowed to stretch the writing, it's difficult to go back and "do this in 800 words." I prefer to do it in 8000." She admits now that she prefers to write the long stuff, enjoys the "technical challenge of bringing the narrative to the reader."

I finished off with a quick question about her own identity. Williams has lived in many places around the world, and now resides in England. I wondered if she felt that she was a "citizen of the world."

"I feel very strongly that I'm Canadian. I hang onto that, and I've never thought of myself as anything but Canadian. I've lived in the UK for 30 years, and I can't say that I'm a Brit. My identity, I'm from here."





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