

GROUP 1

TAMARA NIKOLAYEVA

“Turn over the child,” the village head implored.

“I will live – and the child will live. If we die, we all die. We won’t escape our fate,” answered Vasily. Vasily’s daughter Tamara was deeply worried about the well-being of Marek, the Jewish child in her care. The Feldman couple, for whom Tamara had worked as a Nanny, had entrusted her with their infant son Marek, whose life was in danger only because he was Jewish. Tamara could not reconcile herself to this fact. She felt obligated to the child, his mother, and his family. Her parents agreed with her, and this obligation became a family one.

The story began way before the Germans’ arrival. Before the War threatened to destabilize everyday life in Leningrad and the small village of Zagromotye in the Leningrad district, USSR, Tamara had moved in with the Feldman family, working as Nanny for their newborn child. Frieda, Marek’s mother, was pleased with Tamara, and Tamara soon became attached to the family. In the summer, when families typically left the city to vacation in villages, Tamara invited Frieda to her own village. For Tamara, it was natural that Marek should spend the summer in her village. In the summer Frieda, Marek, and Marek’s grandmother Chana visited Tamara’s family. The village was a nice change from the big city. The food was good and the air fresh, and Tamara’s family, who were warm and friendly, welcomed them as if they were related. When they parted at the end of the summer, the Feldmans promised to return the following summer.

Days passed, autumn arrived and then a difficult winter. Everyone pined for the warm summer. At the onset of the following summer, the Feldmans kept their promise and returned to Tamara’s village. The vacation began like the previous ones, but ended with the start of a terrible war. At the time, village residents had no idea a war was brewing, that shortly the lives of the Feldmans would be entirely upended, and that Tamara would need to make the most difficult decision of her young life, one which would place herself and her family in the path of unimaginable danger.

When the war began, Marek and his grandmother Chana were in Tamara’s village, while Frieda was at home in Leningrad. The Germans began to bomb the region. There was no quiet, not even for a moment. Fear ruled, and no one knew what the next day would bring and what sort of war awaited them. The Germans, it was said in the village, would not surrender quickly, even against the mighty Red Army. Everyone had heard about the Germans, how they invaded European cities and conquered them one by one, without mercy. Chana was helpless to formulate a plan. Where could she go with a two-year-old boy when all the roads were being shelled? How would they return home? And what would become of them there? In the end, a decision was made: The boy would stay

in the village without his mother or grandmother, but rather with Tamara and her parents, who promised to take care of him as if he were their own. Frieda repeatedly attempted to return to the village to collect her son, but this was already impossible; all the paths were blocked by the ever-advancing front. After a short time, the entire village was occupied by the German Army. To all, Tamara presented Marek as her own son.

Nevertheless, the head of the village, who knew the true identity of Marek, soon requested that the child be turned in. Why should the village risk giving refuge to a Jewish child? He even threatened Tamara's father, but despite this, Vasily did not turn in the boy. The other 80 village inhabitants, all of whom knew that Marek was not Tamara's child but rather a Jewish infant from the city, refused to comply with the village head. Had any of them informed on his presence, Marek, Tamara, her family and the entire village would have been endangered. Days passed, and Tamara took care of Marek like a treasure entrusted to her. For her, this was natural and obvious behavior. Tamara's parents managed to get a letter to Frieda, on which was written, "We will do everything to save your son's life." Frieda missed her son intensely, but knew he was in good and loyal hands.

From time to time, rumors spread that the Germans were kidnapping Russian youth and sending them to work in Germany. Tamara was very fearful. "If I am caught, what will become of Marek? What will become of my parents?" she wondered. She managed to evade capture several times. Then Vasily died. Along with the pain and grief of losing her father, she felt that the responsibility for the child's welfare had fallen solely on her. By no means, she thought, would she ever allow herself to be taken away from the village. In the meantime, some of the locals were preparing hiding places in the nearby forest. Tamara joined them. She had to have a hiding place, for her own sake and for Marek's. And indeed, each time the Germans neared the village, she grabbed little Marek and ran with him to the forest, to Zemelyanka, to wait for the threat to pass.

The war did not cease. Although more rumors spread, this time that the Germans had started to retreat, and people praised the Red Army, they also heard that the Germans were setting each village ablaze as they left it, as well as its residents. In the winter of 1943 and with the start of the New Year, the Germans began to retreat from the region; Tamara's village was set ablaze. Village residents resisted the Germans and were injured from enemy fire. Two months later, the yearned-for liberation day finally arrived. Now the lives of Tamara, her mother, and little Marek were no longer in danger. But what had been the fate of the Feldmans? Leningrad had been under an unbearable siege, and suffered a lack of food and water for 900 days. What had become of them? Did they survive? Eventually a letter came from Leningrad. Tamara wrote back to them, and carefully sketched an outline of Marek's hand on white paper to give Freida a sign of life and some joy.

In the fall of 1944, Chana and Freida stood at the entrance to the village, their arms outstretched to hug little Marek and Tamara, their personal redeemer.

Shortly afterward, Tamara married. Sadly, she was unable to bear children herself, and her only “son” was Marek. Each summer the Feldman family would continue to visit Tamara, and Marek, his wife and children run to greet her and call her “grandmother.”

Discussion Questions:

- What motivated Tamara Nikolayeva to help the Feldman family?
- Describe Tamara: age, gender, political and religious outlook, etc.
- What difficulties and dangers did Tamara face?
- Was the rescue a result of a one-time decision or perhaps was Tamara called upon to take responsibility for rescuing at several points? If the latter, what were they?