

My name is Maria Helena, but I would like you to call me *Starka*. I was born on a farm in Silesia in 1885. I was *Starka* for many years, *Starka*, “the old one.” It is our Silesian word for grandmother, and I was a grandmother for a long time before I died, in 1975. When the day of All Saints comes around, and my grandchildren, and my great-grandchildren, and my great-great-grandchildren put flowers and candles all over my grave, and come out in their best clothes to sing and pray for me, they call me Maria Helena because they are talking to God, and only my granddaughter still remembers to talk to me and calls me *Starka*. But when the prayers are over, *her* grandson turns around and calls her, *Babka!* (That's Romek, my great-great-grandson, the one this story is about.) This is the Polish word for grandmother. But he calls his other grandmother and grandfather *Oma* and *Opa*, which is German. But that is all right, because we are the people who live in the borderland, that was once Germany but is now Poland, and we use German, and Polish, and our own Silesian language, and we understand each other perfectly.

Well! My great-great grandson Romek looks just like a Polish child, or just like a German child, but you know he is a Silesian the moment he opens his mouth to talk, and that, if you want to listen to some people, is not a good thing. When Romek brought a note home from his teacher, there was trouble. It was a Friday and usually Romek tears into the yard like a soul into Heaven, he is so happy that school is over for the week. Not this Friday.

When Romek got into the kitchen, he put the note between the salt and pepper shakers, hoping that Babka would not notice it. But my granddaughter has sharp eyes.

“What's this?” she said, as soon as she placed the bowl of potatoes in buttermilk down in front of Romek. “A note from your teacher? We'll save that for when your mother and father come home from work. Now, eat.” She turned to the stove to scramble eggs to go with the potatoes and buttermilk. She had waited for him to come home so that they would be hot.

At supper, nothing was said about the note. I could tell it was a little hard for Romek to eat. But he cheered up a bit when his mother said, “What's the matter with you? Worried? Don't worry. We already read the note. We'll talk about it all together on Sunday when everyone is here for dinner.”

The next day, Romek's friend Marek turned up asking if Romek wanted to come out and ride bikes. He did. Romek and Marek like to ride beside the rye fields where they meet the woods. When they got there, Marek heard Romek brake, so he stopped his bike and turned back. He found Romek sitting next to a mud puddle under the trees. “I hate school,” Romek said.

This was not news to Marek, who was not such a big fan of school himself. He had also seen Madame Kowalska give Romek the note, with a pat on the shoulder that did not look mean, you had to admit. “What was in the note?” he asked.

“I don't know yet. My mother said we are going to talk about it tomorrow. But you saw what happened when Madame Kowalska asked me what are the visible characteristics of edible mushrooms.”

“Hey! You said it!” Marek laughed.

“Great! I said it *now*! I'm not getting a grade for saying it *now*!” Romek stood

up and kicked the dirt.

With an effort, Marek stopped laughing.

“I think you're lucky,” Romek went on. “Your parents speak to you in Polish. I wish mine did.” He sat down again. Marek sat beside him.

“Well,” he said slowly. “I think you're lucky that your Opa speaks to you in German. You understand Frau Schwann much better than I do.”

“But German is only one hour a day and Polish is everything else!”

It was true. For a minute, Marek could not think of anything else to say. Then he said, slowly, “Your father tells the best stories in Silesian. When your dad tells a story, everyone listens.”

This was true too. And Romek knew how much his father loved to tell stories. Romek had heard his father say “I speak Polish well, speak it all day long at work -- but I can't tell stories in Polish. They just aren't funny in Polish.” Romek was quiet.

Marek slowly leaned forward and before Romek noticed, he flipped a handful of mud at him.

“HEY!” Romek shouted. He looked at Marek's grin, and soon they were both covered in mud, panting and laughing.

“Now you know what Babka,” said Romek,

“is going to say,” said Marek, and they said it together: “You're as dirty as a Russian soldier!” And they laughed and got back on their bikes.

I'm always happy when I hear people say these things, “You're as dirty as a Russian soldier,” or sometimes, “This room looks like the war ended yesterday.” People

say those things now because the war did not end yesterday. The war ended a long time ago, when Babka was a little girl, and I was her Starka. That was when Silesia was part of Germany and Germany was under Nazi rule. Then Russia and America and Britain fought a war against the Nazis, and when they won, Russian soldiers came into Silesia and Silesia became part of Poland, under Communist rule. The Nazis were terrible, but the soldiers were worse. So when Babka says these things, it shows me that she has forgotten what we went through, and only her words remember. I am happy that there has been peace for so long that people have forgotten the war.

In Silesia, everyone looks forward to Sunday dinners. For us, “everyone” means Romek and his mother, who is my great-granddaughter, and her name is Brigitta. And then there is his Babka, who is my granddaughter who remembers to call me Starka. Babka's husband is here in Heaven also. But of course Romek's father is alive, and his name is Heinzl. Heinzl's parents, Romek's Oma and Opa, always come over and have Sunday dinner with them. So altogether, there are six of them at the table.

So it was that when everybody had finished their dumplings and roast rabbit, Romek's father Heinzl rose slowly. “I've got this note here,” he began, “from Madame Kowalska, that I want to read to you all.” He held the note up to read. When he read he not only spoke Polish, he spoke the way a teacher speaks, and Romek had to smile.

*Honored Sir and Madame,* (he read)

*I am concerned about how Romek is doing in school. He never raises his hand, and when I call on him he has difficulty finding anything to say.*

*Please come to see me so that we can discuss this problem.*

*With friendly greetings,*

*A. Kowalska, teacher*

“I think we all know,” said Heinzl, putting the note back in his pocket, “What she is going to say. She is going to say that we should be speaking Polish at home, and not Silesian. And I am not going to do it.”

“Do you remember,” Opa said, “When you brought a note like this home from school, Heinzl?”

Oma began to look upset. “Garden vegetables!” she said. “Your teacher was all upset because you wrote the names of the garden vegetables in German! She said you ought to be speaking clean Polish, like you hear it in Warsaw, with no Silesian or German words in it.”

“And when we were in school,” Babka added, “The Nazis! One day we could speak to each other as we wished, the next, German only! They start beating kids if they hear a single word that's not German, and even asking us to tell them if our parents were speaking Silesian at home!”

Oma and Opa nodded. They had all three been in school in the Nazi time. Oma went on, “And then the war ended, and suddenly our Silesian is not Polish enough for the Communists, it has too many German words, and people are going to jail for using the word 'Bohnen' for the beans in their own garden!”

Heinzl was shaking his head. “There is no way. Absolutely no way. Others can do what they want, but I speak Silesian to my son because I am a Silesian.”

Then Brigitta said something, more quietly. “But these are not those times! The

Nazis were a long time ago. The Communists are gone now too. We have democracy. We have cultural rights.”

“And that's exactly what I'm going to tell Madame Kowalska!” Heinzl shouted.

“Don't you do that!” shouted Oma. “That's just what they're waiting for! They wait for that kind of thing!”

“Everybody, stop it! Calm down!” Brigitta was almost shouting now too.

“Remember what they keep saying: we want no war in Silesia!”

Suddenly everybody got quiet. After a moment, Babka crossed herself. Now she was really remembering what happened in the war, so long ago. But then Opa started laughing as if Heinzl had just told one of his stories. Everybody looked at him.

“I was just thinking,” he said. “War in Silesia! Poles and Silesians fighting in the streets! Tanks drive in from Warsaw and Berlin! And what was the cause of this terrible war? Romek's note!” He laughed some more. Then he stopped and said, “No, Romek, I don't think so. Nobody is going to war over you and Madame Kowalska. And I would like to know what it is that we are talking about, anyway. Romek, here,” -- and he switched into Polish and said, “Stand up nicely and tell us, which is the longest river in Poland?”

Romek looked at everybody looking at him. Then he stood up and said, “The longest river in Poland is the Vistula.”

Opa nodded. “And which river is it that runs through Silesia?”

Romek replied, “The river that runs through Silesia is the Oder.”

“Can you tell us something about the Oder?”

“Our little river behind the church runs into the Oder. The Oder goes all the way to Germany. It runs into the Baltic Sea.”

Everyone looked at each other. They shrugged. Then they relaxed, nodded and smiled. Romek smiled too. “There you see,” Opa said. “He can do it. Nothing wrong with his Polish. What happens in school, Romek? Can't you do that in school?”

“I freeze,” Romek said.

“But that's normal!” Opa replied. “That happened to every one of us. You just need to practice here at home. That's what we should do, we should give him more chances to practice at home. Son, get me a piece of paper. I'm going to write a note back to Madame Kowalska and tell her that we have solved our problem.”

So Heinzl brought paper and a pen and Opa wrote. When he had finished he read:

*Honored Madame,*

*Thank you for your note. We have discussed the problem and we think that Romek needs to practice giving answers here at home. As his grandfather, I will make sure of it. As you suggest, I will come to school so that we know exactly what lessons you are doing.*

*With friendly greetings,*

Opa signed his name. Then he handed the note to Oma and she signed hers. She handed it to Babka, and Babka signed and handed it to Heinzl. Finally Brigitta signed, and then, to Romek's surprise, she handed it to him. So Romek signed the note too.

Opa switched into his special language with Romek and said in German, “So, that you give to your teacher, understood?”

Romek nodded. He would ask to go into the school early. Madame Kowalska would be alone in the classroom. He would give her the note and she would read it. Things would get better.

And they did.