

Alisa Udachina
The Basis Ahwatukee School
2024 American Ancestors Young Family Historians Essay Contest
2024 April 1

Maria Balmysheva – Our beloved great-grandmother, grandmother, and mother

In the summer of 2022, my family and I went on a trip to our homeland, Russia, to visit our beloved great-grandmother, Maria Balmysheva. It was a significant occasion as we were going to celebrate her 95th birthday. However, our hearts were broken when we received the devastating news that our grandmother had passed away just a week before her birthday. The moment I heard my grandmother call my mother to tell her the heartbreaking news is forever etched in my memory. This event deeply affected our entire family, leaving us with a deep sense of loss. I am writing this to honor the memory of my great-grandmother and to spread the story and biography of Maria Balmysheva, delving into the lives of our ancestors and the remarkable woman she was. The last time I saw her, I asked her with a sense of respect and curiosity about her experiences during World War II and listened carefully as she shared her memories, emotions and reflections.

My grandmother's life is an outstanding testament to resilience, strength and unwavering determination, serving as an inspiration and guiding light for generations to learn. Transcending the boundaries of time, her story carries the weight of history and lessons learned during one of the most difficult periods of human existence. At the tender age of 13, she found herself in the midst of the turbulent World War II era in the Soviet Union. The backdrop of conflict and uncertainty did not break her spirit; instead, it ignited the flame of courage within her. Determined to contribute to the war effort, she fearlessly took on the role of a young worker in a gunpowder factory at the age of 15, devoting herself to twelve grueling hours of labor each day. The factory's hazardous environment, plagued by the constant threat of explosions, only underscored the enormous risks she faced. However, driven by an unwavering sense of duty, she persisted, contributing to the collective struggle for victory.

The resilience and fortitude she displayed throughout her life was truly remarkable, despite the limitations of her youth. Regardless the burden of responsibility she shouldered, she remained steadfast, offering help where it was needed. Although she did not carry weapons or directly participate in hostilities, her contribution to the outcome of the war was no less significant. Her unwavering support, dedication and determination provided critical assistance to those on the front lines, ensuring they had the resources needed to win. She demonstrated the idea that heroism comes in many forms and that even in the face of adversity, you can make a profound impact by accepting your role and giving it your all.

After the war, my great-grandmother's life continued to be a testament to selflessness and compassion. She began a new chapter by marrying my great-grandfather, Boris Ivanovich, and took on the role of a loving wife and mother. Her heart expanded even more when she opened her arms to her husband's two orphan brothers, raising them as her own children along with her three biological children: Olga, Vladimir and Sergei. Her capacity for love and her unwavering devotion knew no bounds as she nurtured and cared for her large family with immeasurable love. Her actions

demonstrated the power of love to transcend blood ties, creating unbreakable kinship that will endure time.

Sharing my grandmother's incredible life story serves as a reminder to future generations that life's challenges are not insurmountable obstacles, but rather opportunities for growth and adaptability. Her unyielding determination in the face of adversity, her dedication in pursuit of a greater goal, and her love that knew no bounds are lessons that can be applied to any era. Her story lights a fire within us, encouraging us to embrace our agency, stand firm in the face of uncertainty, and extend a hand of love and compassion to those around us. In a world that often seems divided, her legacy serves as an important reminder of the power of unity and the strength that can be found in a common purpose.

As I reflect on my grandmother's extraordinary journey, I feel deep pain that I was unable to express my admiration and gratitude to her directly. The past time has taught me an invaluable lesson: to appreciate the present moment and take every opportunity to convey our love and appreciation to those who have shaped our lives. It had been six long years since I had last seen her, and the anticipation of a long-awaited reunion was dashed by the cruel hand of fate as she passed away just a week before our scheduled visit. This painful experience serves as a poignant reminder of the fragility of life and how important it is to appreciate our loved ones while they are still with us.

As I reflect on my grandmother's biography, the words of Albert Ellis ring loudly in my head: "The best years of your life are the years when you decide that your problems are your own. You don't blame them on your mother, the ecology, or the president. You realize that you control your own destiny." These profound words capture the essence of my grandmother's journey, embodying her unwavering determination to forge her own path and overcome the challenges that life brings. She personified the power of personal free will and refused to be subject to external circumstances.

By sharing my great-grandmother's story, I hope to inspire future generations to draw strength from her extraordinary journey. May her resilience, courage and unwavering love continue to ignite the flame of determination in all those who encounter her story. Her indomitable spirit and unwavering dedication will always serve as a guiding light, lighting the way for future generations to overcome the challenges of their lives.