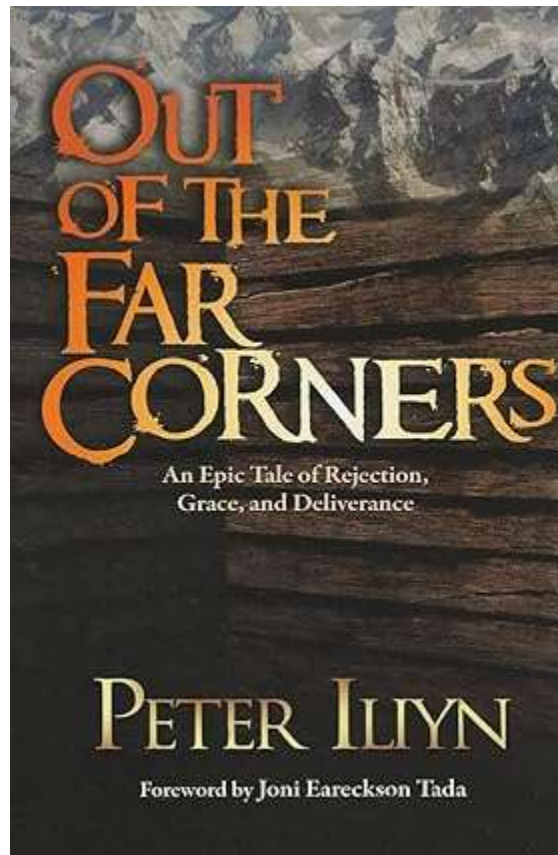


## Chapter 15

Ivan Iliyn



The life story of Vanya Iliyn, as it was told to his son, Peter Iliyn.

This “heart-racing account of an orphan boy’s escape” from Communism in the former Soviet Union as it spread to devour Christians in its path is emblematic of millions of other stories told during the upheaval witnessed in the world during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Starting in the early 1900’s, when the Russian Empire was in the throes of revolution and the end of monarchy, Christians in that country had premonitions, and some even had prophetic utterances, that it was time to leave.

Vanya Iliyn’s story takes place during the spring of 1927, when his parents, Yakov and Pelagea, leave Admovka, Ukraine and begin the long trek to China, always relying on divine providence to lead them safely to their destination.

Along the way, Vanya is born in Batumi (the republic of Georgia) in 1929, and soon enough we are (as readers) introduced to the main cast of characters: the siblings, Misha, Marusia, and Lena; Uncle Mitrofan, Yakov's brother; and Alexander E. Shevchenko, who becomes Vanya's best friend and companion at various states of their journey.

But before we get into the amazing journey, the author gives us a historical overview of the period that is covered in the book, and why the journey took place: "In 1917 the Bolshevik Revolution swept across Russia, leaving major social upheaval in its wake. Vladimir Lenin, self-proclaimed leader of the revolution, ordered farms and industries to be collectivized (i.e. under government control). Vast numbers of people were displaced or imprisoned in this new communist world. Within a few years, Ukraine and other nations bordering Russia were swallowed up into the burgeoning Soviet Empire. With Lenin's death in 1924 came the rise of an even more brutal tyrant, Joseph Stalin. Stalin's legendary purges against Jews, Christians, and numerous real and perceived enemies sent millions fleeing their homeland."

In Part 1, they have already reached Zharkent, Kazakhstan and are getting close to the border of China. Their church leader, Ivan Verhovod (in Russian, Verh-o-vod means "to be on top" or leader), leads a group of sixty-six people. Some sad events take place: Vanya's baby brother Vasya dies, his father Yakov dies a painful death. An interesting episode is described in detail of how the family tried to bury their father: first they are accosted by a Muslim named Sayjan who leads them to a legal burial ground; and after the burial, he tries to have one of the children remain behind and become a son or daughter to help him; of course, he is unsuccessful at convincing one of the siblings to stay; and they leave without further delay.

After crossing the treacherous Tien Shan mountain range to the south and finally arriving in Gulja (or Kulja) China, they are reunited with their mother, who went through her own ordeal and was missing from the group for a while. When she finds out her husband died, she is devastated. Mitrofan tells her: "Merciful God hasn't forsaken you; we'll help you take care of the children." (p. 36)

Soon thereafter, however, malaria strikes the mother and the children. The mother dies, and now Vanya is completely an orphan, without father or mother. He wants to die and join them in heaven, but a long torturous journey awaits him. When his mother is placed and buried in a makeshift wooden coffin, Vanya becomes aware that “it all seemed just like a bad dream. We were four orphaned children with a future as uncertain as the swirling desert winds of this strange new country.” (p. 45)

The siblings move in temporarily with the Shevchenko family, the father Efrem and his wife Niuta. The orphaned children are sent to different homes later, and Vanya gets a temporary home with “unbelievers” Igor Grusha and his wife Lyuda. It is not long after that when Misha rescues his brother from the “unbelievers’ home” and brings him back to the Shevchenkos. If Vanya had become an adopted son of the home, he might have become an unbeliever, too. However, God seemed to have a better family for Vanya – or so it seemed. After living with the former church leader Ivan Verhovod in Tekes, which was 200 km away from Gulja and his siblings, Vanya found out that being an orphan and living in different homes, trying to get adopted, was a difficult life.

And that’s where Part 2 of the story takes a dramatic, yet humorous, turn for the worse. Whereas the church leader Ivan Verhovod was like a father to Vanya, the wife Masha was like a wicked stepmother, always berating and beating him. Masha wanted a girl to help her, but her husband brought her a boy, instead. That made her angry, and she never got over her anger. Everything Vanya did seemed to irritate her, and she whipped him with a leather belt for any little trifle and even pulled his ear. Sometimes she called him “a dog.” Vanya prayed: “Please God, make my new mama like me.” Vanya soon realizes that “we just don’t get the answer we want to some prayers.” (p. 57)

When Vanya is frequently sent to a **corner** as punishment by the mean “mamushka,” Vanya begins to dream of what becomes a prominent theme (and the title) of the book – “out-of-the-way **corners**” where he can pray and be alone.

Even though mean masha is told, “you’re going to have to answer to God for the way you’re abusing the orphan boy” (p. 61), Masha continues in her mean ways. One woman named Dooshaijka Demchenko helps Vanya out of difficult situations, like the comic gathering of eggs incidents, and her caring for Vanya made him see her “like a beautiful rose in the midst of a dry desert.” (p. 65)

Vanya is later given a task of caring for 54 cattle, and when he herded the cattle out to pasture, he started to like what he was doing and where he was placed to be, calling it “like one great big **corner** of God’s world set apart just for me.” (p. 70) He imagines himself as a biblical David, who was a shepherd. At this point in Vanya’s life, there is a turn toward the religious world when he is taken back to Gulja and attends Alexander Shevchenko’s church, where he witnesses women wearing scarves as a sign of submission and reverence, and also where he gets his first desire to sing in a choir that he just heard. There is a church incident that seems unusual and out-of-place, but the telling of it seems to indicate that strange things can happen there, too. The incident involves Masha barging into the church, interrupting the service, and announcing that she releases custody of Vanya. Her husband had recently died, and she never wanted Vanya, anyways.

So, Vanya is given to new parents, Vasil Kondratiev and his wife Marusia. They take him to their home in Tokkuztara, 100 km southeast of Gulja. There he faces a strange and dangerous encounter with a robber in the home, and he manages to thwart the robbery at great risk to his own life. He also describes a story about the broken wrist of Babushka Olga and how they managed to get her into a wagon, a story told with a lot of good dialogue, which makes reading Vanya’s story go smoothly and with great anticipation. I don’t know if this quote is relevant here, but Vany ever so often makes interesting statements, like this one: “I found myself drawn less and less toward dark **corners**,” (p. 86) and yet he always found a special place to say his prayers in private.

Throughout the book, Vanya relates what he calls “many stories of dangers and adventures, and each story ended the same, with thankfulness for God’s protection.” (p. 89) One such story was a fishing trip where it went awry and

they were headed for potential drowning, but they managed to safely reach shore. Another was a story where he was sent to the market to sell green peppers and ended up having some of them stolen and then having to explain the missing money and facing accusations of lying and stealing. That incident ended in the misunderstanding being resolved and forgiveness granted.

And then, there's another adoption story as Vanya seems to go from home to home in search of a permanent family. This story is where his brother Misha tells him to choose his own family over adoption in a strange home. In short, Vanya needs to decide whether to continue with his own family through China to India, or to stay with the family who wanted to adopt him. This major decision to leave with his own family came in October 1940, when many Russian families felt God was directing them to Kashgar, hoping to exit China to India, and then onwards to where God would direct them. And so, on December 1940, ten families set out on the "Silk Road," a 500 km trip to Kashgar.

In an interlude, Misha relates his personal story of how he was almost adopted by an atheist family which tried to convince Misha that God didn't exist. This story reveals to the Christian reader what Russian Communists kept repeating as a mantra: "Religion is the opiate of the masses." (p. 108) Luckily, Misha was able to escape from that home and keep his faith intact.

We are also entertained at this point by the romantic story of Joseph Lokteff and his courtship of Vanya's sister Marusia. We are informed that Joseph belongs to the Baptist group, whereas Marusia belongs to the Pentecostal group, which causes some friction as the relationship unfolds. Misha tries to put things in perspective when he says: "There's not much difference between Baptist and Pentecostal; the main difference is how we prayed and what we believed about the Holy Spirit." (116)

While in Kashgar, the group is confronted by Chinese authorities, who demand that they return to Gulja. The group instantly realized that Russian authorities wanted to take them back to Russia. Nevertheless, they were forced to comply, and so they traveled to Aksu, then around the mountains to Urumqi, where they saw their sister Lena once again. Eight years had

passed since they parted. Lena was now 15, and Vanya 13. Soon they had to part again, and Lena was left in Urumqi, while the group was forced to return to Gulja. Here they saw the Shevchenko family, again. Alexander E. Shevchenko as a married man now, and he had several children.

There is an interlude at this point, as Dedushka's story is told. He had two sons, Yakov (Vanya's father) and Mitrofan, both of whom were raised in the Orthodox church, "though none of us really knew much about God," said Dedushka. (p. 129) Mitrofan was the first to become a Christian («Верующий», a Believer). Christians who were not part of the Orthodox demonimation were called sectarians (Christian sect). There is an interesting exchange here between Yakov, a believer, and how he suffered abuse from his wife, and unbeliever. The entire story needs to be read word for word, as it is beautifully told and captures the essence of religious conflict "in a divided house." The story ends on a high spiritual note, when the wife tries to humiliate her husband in front of his congregation, and instead she undergoes a miraculous conversion and, and as they say, she "came to Jesus." Dedushka also tells another story about how robbers murdered his wife, beat him up, causing permanent scars on his forehead, and stole his money. That was his last story. Later, he died.

Part 3 enters the World War 2 era, when alliances were created, and China and Russia were vying for territory around where Vanya and his family lived in Gulja. There is another personal story, however, that takes center stage in this book. It is the continued saga of Joseph Lokteff, who comes to Mitrofan to ask for Marusia's hand in marriage. Mitrofan makes a crushing condition: Joseph, a Baptist, must marry in a Pentecostal church. Joseph, in a gallant move, comes a week later in a wagon and steals Marusia away to a Marriage Registration house, where they are legally married in the eyes of the law. However, to make it sacred and legal "in the eyes of God" (and the church community), Joseph and Marusia had a solemn wedding on April 4, 1942, in Joseph's house, and the officiating pastor was Ionko from the Pentecostal church.

An interesting story about guilt, confession, and forgiveness of sins follows. It involves Chinese apprentices at a cobbler school, who got Vanya involved

in a plot to steal watermelons. Vanya was complicit, even though he didn't do the stealing. He ate the watermelon. When he couldn't stave off the guilt feelings anymore, he confessed his sin, asked God for forgiveness, and felt cleansed afterwards.

And then a major conflict confronted Vanya when he was grabbed off of the street and recruited to fight in the Turkestanskaya War, which was an escalation between Russians versus Chinese. Vanya was 15-years-old at the time. He wanted to tell the recruiting officer: "My religious convictions do not allow me to take a rifle and kill people." (p. 148) This Christian pacifist stance later brought him before a firing squad and blindfolded. He was ready to die for his Faith. He said: "I know God was the One who ultimately held my life in his hand." (p. 155) Fortunately, or miraculously, a guardian angel appeared in the person of Major Beardin to save Vanya of a perceived unfortunate end to his life on earth, for which he said he was prepared spiritually. Vanya repeats to Beardin what he now held as a firm belief: "I'm sorry, but I can't take the rifle. **You see, I'm a Christian and my faith doesn't permit me to kill others.**" (p. 153) The major saved Vanya because he needed Vanya for his cobbler skills, to make boots for the soldiers. Afterwards, Major Beardin asked Vanya to partner with him to open a shoe store, but Vanya told him: "My destiny is not to stay in China." Amicably, the major replied: "Go find your destiny." (p. 158)

The concluding sections of the book take us to the climactic departure from China to the "new world" that awaited them. According to a prophecy given by God to Mitrofan: "Children, do not lose hope, for I will lead you far, far away, all the way to America." (p. 161) But first they had to travel to Shanghai, then to a tiny island named Tubabao in the Philippines, where Vanya was miraculously healed of a ruptured appendix that almost took his life, and afterwards to Paraguay to resettle and help farm the land in an under-developed country. They arrived in Carmen del Parana, Paraguay on December 19, 1949. Actually, the prophecy about America could have been considered fulfilled, for Paraguay was part of the Americas (South America).

Paraguay was their home for nearly seven years. Here Vanya met the "love of his life," a lovely dove, as he called her – Sofia Neciuk (aka Sonya). The

wedding was performed on January 14, 1951, by the pastor at Colonia Fram, Anisim (Onisim) Koval. For once in his life Vanya knew: "This is not a dream." Eight months later a baby girl was born to Vanya and Sonya. Elders of the church were suspicious of a sin because of the earlier than 9-month usual birthing process, but Vanya denied any wrongdoing.

Finally, the much-anticipated day came, and Vanya and his growing family arrived in Miami, Florida on September 14, 1956. They were greeted several days later in San Francisco by Joseph and Marusia Lokteff, who had arrived in San Francisco in December 1950.

In conclusion, Vany in a prayer says: "I leave behind all my **dark corners**, and I'm ready to embrace all you have for me and my family in this new land." (p. 203)

In the afterward, the author, Vanya's son Peter, explains that he wrote the book because, "I wanted to honor my father, honor God, and give my children a written testimonial of the grandfather's (Dedushka) life." (p. 205)

Peter, the author, adds several things in his afterward that involved me personally. He mentions that Vanya met two brothers, whose actual names are Nick and George Dubenko (I don't know why he doesn't name them in the book), who recently opened a shoe store. Vanya became the third partner in this venture. I clearly remember shopping at that store on Clement and 6<sup>th</sup> Streets in the Richmond District of San Francisco, near where our Geary Street Church was located (Geary & 4<sup>th</sup>). In fact, I vividly recall delivering their shoe advertising flyer from house to house to earn a few dollars; the ads featured 2-for-1 sales on shoes.

And so, my analysis and synopsis of the book is complete. I love the author's final words in his book: "Dad, your story lives on!" (p. 212)



OUT OF THE FAR CORNERS: AN EPIC TALE OF REJECTION, GRACE, AND DELIVERANCE



Peter Ilyin was born to parents who emigrated from Russia. After receiving a degree in Electrical and Material Science Engineering from UC Berkeley, Peter joined Youth With A Mission (YWAM) in 1976. He has traveled to over 80 countries and currently serves as the North American Director for YWAM. He and his wife, Luba have four children and live in Jefferson, Oregon.

Out of the Far Corners: An Epic Tale of Rejection, Grace, and Deliverance Kindle Edition  
by [Peter Ilyin](#) (Author) Format: Kindle Edition

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Vanya Ilyin's formative years were spent on the move, traveling the far corners of the world - - Russia, Central China, and the Americas -- amid seemingly impossible hardships. His journey crossed the landscape of the heart as well. Orphaned and alone, Vanya could look only to God for protection, guidance, and grace. His remarkable story, written in his own words by his eldest son, Peter Ilyin, speaks to the power and majesty of God.



Church choir in the Tubabao refugee camp, 1949. Circled in back row: Mitrofan and Vanya. Middle row: Alex Shevchenko, Joseph and Marusia Lokteff. Front row: Lena.



"Out of the far Corners" Peter Ilyin 1/2

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A-mJNkkkahw> (Interview)



"Out of the Far Corners" Peter Ilyin 2/2

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kRBkWsIxpY>





**Father and son**



**Vanya and Sonia, Peter and Luba**



**Russian Gospel Temple Choir**

**Russian Gospel Temple Choir  
17th and Potrero  
San Francisco, CA**

**First Row: (left to right) Pastor Alex Shevchenko Sr., Peter Ilyin, Lily Soboleff, Raya Pustobaeff, Susan Shevchuk, Tava Soboleff, Nida Lokteff, Nellie Krapivkin, Luba Pustobaeff, Luba Shevchenko, Vera Brachinoff, Choir Director Joseph Lokteff**

**Second Row: Nilla Samosvatoff, Alice Brachinoff, Vera Dubenko, Kathy Prasoloff, Ruth Ilyin, Luba Solovieff, (unknown), Tamara Fedoroff, Raya Soboleff, John Ilyin**

**Third Row: Alex Riltzeff, Ben Shevchenko, Boris Prasoloff, Alex Shevchenko Jr., Fedor Dubenko, Stanley Wigowsky, Alex Shevchuk, Paul Ilyin, Peter Dubenko, Alex Souhorukoff, Peter Dumanovsky**

**[Note: Maiden names are used for the women.]**

<https://wigowsky.com/images/misc/choir.htm>



I was at Vanya Iliyn's funeral in Hubbard-Woodburn. I took photos of the displays in the church lobby and of the burial at Belle Passi Cemetery..





**The speakers at Vanya Ilyin's funeral:**



Mihail Ilyin, Vanya's brother



Walter Ilyin



Shura Temoschenko



Alex A. Shevchenko



Bill Neciuk



Vera Neciuk (maiden name)





Alex Akimoff



Fred Iliyn



Rev. Richard Michaelski



Me with friends (Bill & Nilla Neciuk)



Vanya Iliyn (1928-2014)



Luba & Vera Pustobaeff at parents' gravesite at Belle Passi Cemetery:  
Mihail Pustobaeff (1917-2000), Ekaterina Pustobaeff (1919-2004)





Pastor Ben Shevchenko officiates









Peter Iliyn gives final words about his Dad, "who is dancing in heaven."





Vera and Sarah Dumanovsky (maiden names): at parents' graves  
Leonty (1906-1996), Eugenia (1913-1991)



2:41

<http://youtu.be/g1ZBC-lz9os>

Vanya Iliyn Funeral - Oct. 10, 2014 HD

October 10, 2014



3:20

<http://youtu.be/9fPTldWeZcE>

In Loving Memory of  
*John J. Ilyin*



Beloved husband, father, brother,  
grandfather, great-grandfather,  
uncle, and friend

*Thus far the Lord  
has helped us.*

*1 Samuel 7:12*

*I have fought the good  
fight, I have finished the  
race, I have kept the faith.*

*2 Timothy 4:7*

In Celebration of a life well-lived

*John J. Ilyin*

**BORN**

November 15, 1928  
Batumi, Georgia

**DIED**

October 6, 2014  
Woodburn, Oregon

**FUNERAL SERVICES**

Thursday, October 9, 2014 – 7:00 PM  
Friday, October 10, 2014 – 11:00 AM  
RUSSIAN GOSPEL CHURCH  
Hubbard, Oregon

**OFFICIATING**

Rev. Benjamin A. Shevchenko  
Peter Ilyin

**PALL BEARERS**

Daniel Ilyin, Johnny Ilyin, Mark Ilyin,  
Tony Dubenko, Mitchell Ilyin, Nic Ilyin

**INTERMENT SERVICE (Fri., Oct. 10<sup>th</sup>)**

BELLE PASSI CEMETERY  
997 Belle Passi Road  
Woodburn, Oregon 97071

**ARRANGEMENTS BY**

SIMON-CORNWELL COLONIAL CHAPEL  
Woodburn, Oregon