

Fleeing Ukraine: History repeats itself

'The Last Green Valley' chronicles one family's escape from Soviet forces in late World War II

By Cheryl Hoefler
GO! Magazine

"Bombs echoed from the north and east. The rumble of war was getting closer by the minute."

"Where are we going, Papa?" "West ... as far west as we can go. Across the ocean, maybe; I don't know."

"Another Red Army tank had reached the crown of the hill behind them and fired its cannon before the other three tanks followed suit."

"Not an hour passed when they weren't rolling by a wagon pulled off to the side of the route so survivors could bury their dead."

These are not words lifted from recent headlines, but from Mark Sullivan's latest historical fiction, "The Last Green Valley," which documents a young German family's arduous flight out of Ukraine from 1944-1947.

When Russian President Vladimir Putin declared war on Ukraine Feb. 24, I realized I knew nothing about either country's history or geography. But in my quest for information, I knew I didn't

want an encyclopedia-type book or comprehensive history of the conflicts between the two countries. I yearned to learn in a more personal and impactful way. This novel, which was released in May 2021, more than filled the bill.

Trapped between opposing forces in late World War II, Emil and Adeline Martel and their young boys are faced with a desperate choice between two evils. They can stay in their Ukrainian homeland and face the probable — oppression from Stalin and the Soviet regime — or embark on a dangerous trek westward toward the possible — a life of freedom. Having suffered under the former, they opt for the latter, even though it means relying on the protection of Hitler's Nazi police.

Their journey begins by horse-drawn wagon, in a caravan alongside a multitude of other refugees, but quickly turns into a tireless on-foot trek, with only meager possessions pulled in a small cart. They are joined at the outset by extended family members but eventually are left to trudge forward on their own, driven by sheer physical strength, willpower, ingenuity and faith.

At times, the story slips into the past, giving the reader background insight on historical and personal events

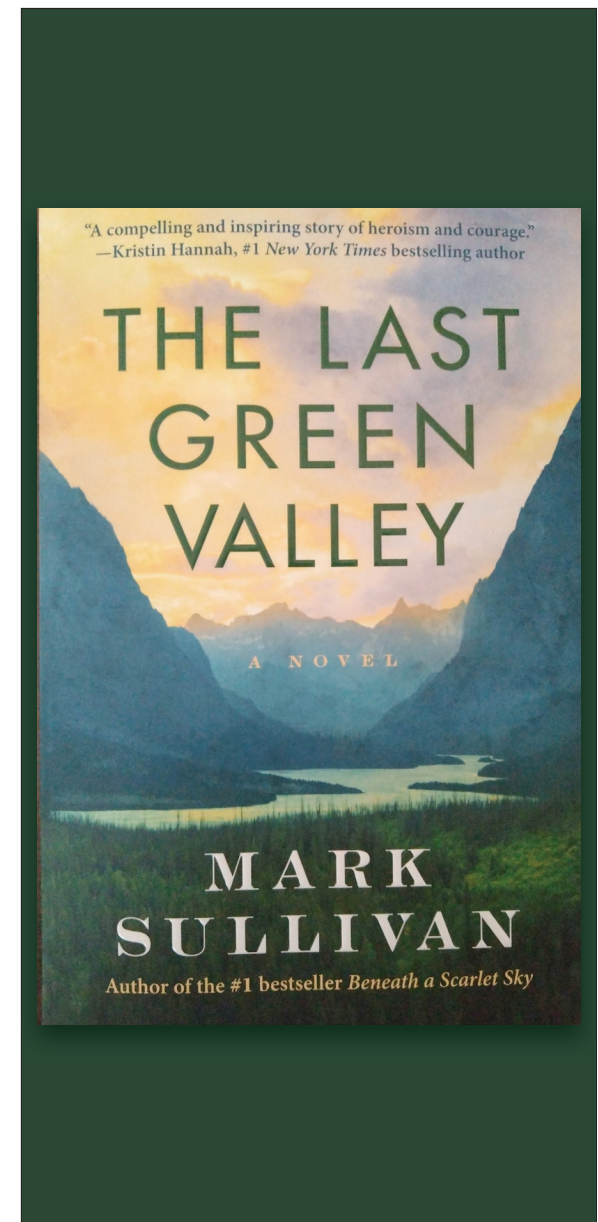
that led to the dire plight in which the Martels find themselves.

I raced through page after page eager to see what lay next in this family's struggle for freedom. But be warned: This is by no means an "easy read." The Martels endure a relentless and unspeakably horrendous stream of trials and obstacles. And Sullivan spares nothing in his apt descriptions. I was frequently teary-eyed and fearful. The passages that seemed to haunt me the most involved food — eating garbage covered in rancid grease and even grass to avoid starvation.

Sullivan explains in the book's afterword how he crafts his blend of facts and fiction in his works. But make no mistake, the Martels are a real family who fled Ukraine nearly 80 years ago. Family descendants live in Montana, as does Sullivan who makes his home in Bozeman.

The book includes a map outlining routes the family journeyed, which I found incredibly helpful. There are also photos and discussion guide questions.

Needless to say, I highly recommend this novel, which exceeded my expectations and left me thirsting to know more about that part of our world and how we arrived at our current tragic state of affairs.

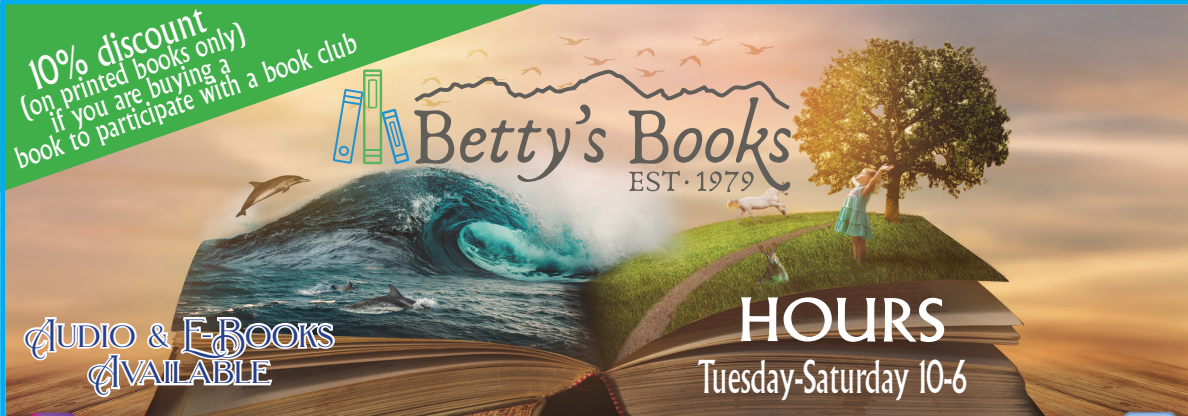



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