



The MHSA Chronicle

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Brave Beginnings

By Agnes Langemann Thibert

The smell emanating from a coal and wood stove or the sight of golden-brown *Zwieback* cooling on the counter takes me back to the kitchen of my childhood. My mother, Anna Baerg (also written Berg) would take time out from her work to tell me stories of her life back home in Gnadenheim and of the family she had left behind when she came to Canada in 1926.

Gnadenheim was one of about fifty villages in the Molotschna Colony in Ukraine then also known as Little

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Agnes Langemann
Thibert

A Heritage of Horsemanship

By Russ Friesen

"Mennonite Cowboy" - the term might seem like an oxymoron to many. John Wayne and Roy Rogers shooting it out on the silver screen, contrasted with the image of a peaceful family dressed in dark clothing driving a horse and black buggy down a country lane may cause conflict in a person's mind. One needs to dig deeper to discover the true definition of "cowboy" and "Mennonite".

Technically, a cowboy is an employee hired to tend cows on horseback. In our society, the term has come to refer to others as well including rodeo contestants, dude string wranglers, or drugstore cowboys who frequent country and western music concerts and honky-tonk bars. It is even used to refer to people who are reckless or arrogant. Along the same lines, there are many ideas about what a Mennonite is, from being a baptized member of a Mennonite church to someone who eats farmer sausage and Vereniki and knows a few Plautdietsch swear words.

How does a Mennonite with the name Friesen, born and raised in the Saskatchewan Valley, wind up cowboying in southern Alberta following in the traditions of the California vaqueros? Here is my story and the ancestors who influenced it.

In 2018, my wife Melissa and I had the privilege of being part of the Mennonite Heritage Cruise in Ukraine hosted by Walter and Marina Unger.

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Russ Friesen

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A Hundred Years: From Famine to Prosperity

By Henry (Hank) Fast

A hundred years ago this month, my mother, Maria Epp and her family were starving in the village of Tiegerweide in what was then South Russia (present-day Ukraine). My mother was born on a Chutor (estate) on the right bank of the Kuruduiushan river in 1910. Though not an impressive watercourse, this stream had swimming holes and enough trees and bushes along it to give her a rich memory of her childhood home. Her father, Jacob Epp, rented the farm from his uncle Cornelius Epp. Though the word "Chutor" often suggests vast estates with dozens of peasants working the land, the Kuruduiushan Chutors



Henry (Hank) Fast

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Editorial Reflections

by Dave Toews

In this editorial I have three points to make, firstly, in the writing world, there is a frequent saying, to the effect: "No conflict, no story."



Dave Toews

In Oct 2020 I took a Canadian Mennonite University Xplore class "Life Sentences: Writing for Yourself and Others." with Larry Danielson. Among the many writing instructions, we received was the no conflict, no story aspect of writing. And I quote from Larry's website bountifuljourney.ca.

If we are honest, there are plenty of sparks to ignite conflict in our lives: poor communication, misunderstandings, over-reactions, insensitive remarks, repeated complaints, and differing goals, beliefs or values. Yet when we write the stories of our lives, we often hesitate to talk about such matters. "If you can't say something

nice, don't say anything at all," we remind each other. As a result, we joke about "the elephant in the room," but we write about our lives as if there were no conflicts. To the reader, it appears that for us everything always went well. We seem to be people who have never had problems and who probably would not understand the issues and stresses faced by others.

The presence of conflict does generate much of the interest in a story, but it need not be conflict-for-conflict sake. It can and should provide more than mere excitement and narrative momentum. It also can show how you, as the main character, have sought to deal with hostility, complaints, arguments, unfair demands, disrespect, inappropriate blaming, or even violent encounters. Through your efforts to cope with and to resolve the conflicts in the life story you tell, we as readers learn what may work or not work in our own daily living.

Every year I have one or two prospective authors decline to write their stories because after talking to their children and or siblings they decide not to write because someone in the family didn't want to air their conflicts. In the

future, I may direct these potential authors to Larry's website so they can attempt to work through these differences in their families.

Secondly, it is not often that you will have in the same publication a book review and an article of the life story by the author of that book. In this case, *Pathway Through Peril: A Journey of Hope and Brave Beginnings* both by Agnes Thibert. The book is inspired by a true story. My challenge to you the reader is, can you determine from the story and the review which part of the book is true?

Thirdly, I want to talk about the idea of "life delayed", from my CTV Newsfeed App: *Why 'languishing' is a pandemic thing, and what you can do to get out of that rut. Grieving? Traumatized? Depressed? Unmotivated? Burnt out? It's difficult to put a single word to the general malaise many people have been feeling during the pandemic. But "languishing" is a pretty good fit. First applied to our global mood last month, in a widely shared New York Times article, the word has been embraced as a helpful descriptor for the pandemic blues.*

While many of us may also be grieving or experiencing depression due to the pandemic, languishing is an apt word to describe the stagnant feeling the pandemic has wrought in many peoples' lives. "Languishing is essentially described as a feeling of emptiness, numbness, feeling stuck, feeling as though we have no motivation, no ability to focus, tasks take longer," psychotherapist Sarah Ahmed explained on CTV's Your Morning Tuesday.

For me personally, this has not been a huge issue, while much of the usual life experiences are delayed, I have not suffered from the pandemic blues. In fact, I have been so busy I haven't had time to

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read nearly as many books as I would have liked. With Zoom church, MHSA commitments, church committee work in addition to leisure activities like swimming, billiards and cards there is not enough time for my other writing projects.

As always, thank you to all the authors and contributors to this issue. Your articles are always appreciated. It is a pleasure to work with you. The MHSA welcomes your feedback, emails, letters to the editor, and articles. Contact Dave Toews at dmtows@gmail.com with any questions or comments.



Chairman's Corner

by Ken Matis

The Life of My Church - The Coaldale Mennonite Brethren Bible School / Institute

As I recall the many blessings of the Coaldale Mennonite Brethren Church over the last 95 years, one cannot omit the Coaldale Bible School. It began just three years after the church was founded and was operated by the church for 32 years (1929 to 1961) and then by Alberta Mennonite Conference for 4 years more (1962-1965).

Over its 36-year history, nine principals provided leadership for Coaldale Bible School. Abram J. Schierling (1929-1936) served as



Ken Matis

the first principal and was in fact the only teacher in the school's inaugural year. The school's other principals were Bernhard W. Sawatzky (1936-1944, 1946-1948, 1953-1954), John A. Toews (1944-1946), David Ewert (1948-1952), Abe P. Regier (1954-1958), Abram Konrad (1958-1961), Henry Derksen (1961-1962), Henry P. Neufeldt (1962-1963) and Jacob Thielmann (1963-1965). In all, 27 teachers served at the school over its history.

Here are a few of the major developments in the history of the school. Under Abram Schierling, classes began in 1929 in the home of D. Klassen. In 1930, they moved to the church. Then in 1934, the first Bible School building was erected. During David Ewert's tenure, enrolment peaked at 101 students. In 1949 the building was enlarged at a cost of \$11,000. I had Ewert as a professor at the Mennonite Brethren Biblical College for Apocalyptic Literature and Johannine Writings, and I can still hear his voice as he so loved to teach on the end times.

When Henry Derksen was Principal, the school's name changed from Coaldale Bible School to the Alberta Mennonite Brethren Bible Institute. In 1965, it was Jake Thielman who oversaw the school's closure.

Approximately 1,000 students attended the Bible School/Institute through the years. After peak enrollment in 1948, numbers began to drop off as students, especially men, went off to SAIT, the University of Calgary, and the University of Alberta. However, many continued to take up the opportunity to study the Bible right here at home.

The Coaldale Bible School enriched both the church and the world beyond. During the 36 years of its history, all the principals helped in the preaching ministry of the church, as did many of the teachers. As well, a large number of the students went into Christian service of one kind or another at home or beyond. Many of our church Sunday School teachers were excellent Bible teachers thanks to the formal Bible training they had received at the school. Other former students went into active missionary service abroad and provincially to various diverse groups. All were faithful to preaching and teaching the Word of God.

These were golden years for the Coaldale MB Church as it both supported the spiritual enrichment that Coaldale Bible School provided and received the same blessing from it. ❖

Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta

Invites you to "Save the Date" to the

2021 Fall (in person) Conference

Date: Sat. Nov. 6, 2021, **Time:** 2 PM

Red Deer, AB. Venue tentatively booked, details to follow

Alberta launch of Bill Franz book:

Mutti and Papa, A Love Story,

a family history and biography of his parents, Ella and Johann, who met in a MCC refugee camp in Backnang, Germany after WW2

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Both of us had been interested in family history, but our knowledge only went back a couple of generations. In preparation for the cruise, we were sent an Ahnentafel, which allowed us to see all the way back to Prussia. In my Ahnentafel, Prussian cities and villages such as Danzig, Tiegenhof, Baumgart, Montau, Elbing, and Rosenkrantz are a sampling of where my ancestors lived before emigrating to South Russia (Ukraine).

On the lineage of my mother, Doris Margaret Block, my earliest known ancestors were Francoys and Ursula van dem Block from Flanders. Prior to embracing the Anabaptist faith, the van dem Blocks were knights of noble birth. In 1819, Peter Block, my 3x great grandfather in this lineage, came from Montau, Schwetz, Prussia to Krons Garten near Ekaterinoslav, South Russia in 1819. He oper-



Russ Friesen at Cemetery, Insel Khortitza, Ukraine. 2018. Headstone of my 2x great-grandparents, Kornelius and Elisabeth Friesen, parents of Gerhard K Friesen.



Daniel Daniel Peters (left), my 3x and 4x great-grandfather, founder of Petersdorf Estate. Paul J and Katharina (Peters) Peters (right), my 2x great-grandparents (Katharina was a daughter of Daniel Daniel Peters), their children founded the Paulheim Estate, Yazykovo Colony.

ated a mill, distillery, and guest-house there. He was also elected as a minister in the Kronsweide Menonite church.

On my father's side, my Friesen ancestors originated in Friesland. In 1789, my 4x great grandparents, Jakob and Anna Friesen came with the first group of Menonites to settle along the Dnieper River. There they helped to establish the village of Kronsweide in the Khortitza colony.

On our 2018 tour of Ukraine, a highlight for me was to find the gravestone of my 2x great grandparents Kornelius and Elisabeth Friesen in the Insel Khortitza Cemetery. This was the village where, in 1858, my great grandfather Gerhard K Friesen was born. In 1880, Gerhard married Sarah Peters, daughter of Paul J and Katharina (Peters) Peters. Katharina was a daughter of Daniel Peters, the founder of the Petersdorf estate, just north of the Khortitza colony.

Gerhard and Sarah lived in



Back L-R Gerhard G, David, Kornelius, Paul Friesen. Front L-R Katharina, Sarah (Peters), Gerhard K (my great grandparents), Daniel Friesen (my grandfather). Paulheim Estate, Yazykovo Colony ca 1905

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(Heritage from page 4)

Petersdorf in the early years of their marriage, and Gerhard began to establish a horse breeding business there. In 1889, Sarah and some of her siblings established a new private family estate village a few kilometres to the east. This new village, later part of the Yazykovo colony was named Paulheim for their father. Here the family wealth that the children had inherited was put to good use and multiplied many times over. Gerhard's landholdings increased to over 2,000 acres. On the land, a variety of crops were grown, and cattle and horses were raised. According to my grandpa, Gerhard raised some of the finest riding and carriage horses in the Mennonite colonies, and people came from all over to purchase them. He would saddle a horse every day and ride about his properties supervising the work on his estates. On special occasions, when the family went to the big Mennonite church in Nikolaipol, the best carriage horses were hitched to the carriage, using the fanciest harness, and the Kucha (chauffeur) would drive them.

My grandpa, Daniel G Friesen, was born on the Paulheim estate in 1899. He grew up in wealth and privilege; servants did much of the work on the farm, and the owner and his sons supervised the work. Daniel became an expert horseman, learning to ride and handle teams. On one occasion, his uncles observed him racing his father's high-spirited saddle horses. When they brought this indiscretion to his father's attention, Gerhard told them that he fed his horses well, and Daniel could race them if he pleased.

During the years of civil war in

South Russia, Daniel, his brothers, and their father Gerhard were being hunted by revolutionaries who wanted to kill estate owners. Once, Daniel and two of the brothers were hiding in the tall bulrushes of a swamp. A bandit rode so close to them that they could have pulled him from the saddle, but they stayed silent and were not detected.

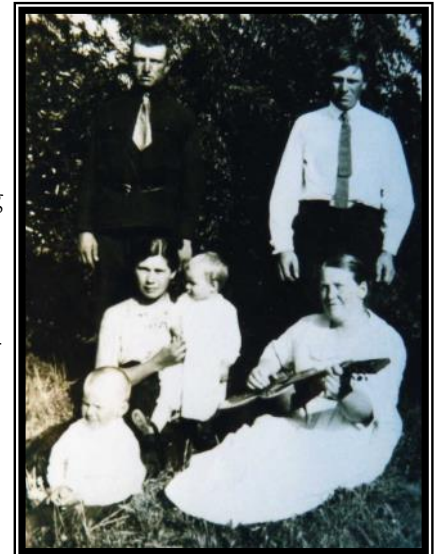
In 1917, bandits attacked one of Gerhard's estates. The family fled to Petersdorf for safety and then moved from place to place to find refuge. During one escape attempt, Gerhard was wounded. By 1919, the family had found refuge in Eichenfeld, Yazykovo colony. However, on June 24, Gerhard was captured by bandits and cut down with sabres in a rye field outside the village. Daniel was also captured and turned over to be executed. Suddenly an old Ukrainian man appeared before the commander and offered to take Daniel's place saying, "For this young man, I will give my life." Shocked, his captors agreed and released him. Daniel believed the old man to be an Angel, sent by God to spare him. It was sometime after this incident that Daniel put his trust in Jesus for his salvation from sin.

Again, on October 26, 1919, Daniel escaped death by seconds when he and his brother Gerhard G slipped out the back door of the house, they were staying at in Eichenfeld as the Maknovtsi burst in the front door. That night, they hid in the hedge of the orchard behind the house as the Eichenfeld massacre unfolded. Daniel's brother Paul and Paul's wife Katharina were murdered that night as were Daniel's future father-in-law Daniel Warkentin and Daniel Warkentin's son Daniel. On November 2, another of Daniel's brothers, David, was murdered when he and others had gone back to Eichenfeld to tend to the livestock.

In the summer of 1919, Daniel had become acquainted with an Eichenfeld girl named Aganetha Warkentin. They were to be married in the spring of 1920,



Daniel G Friesen, White Army, stationed in Ekaterinoslav, ca 1920



Daniel and Aganetha Friesen Family (left) & sponsors - George Sawatzkys (right). Herbert, SK. Oct 1924, shortly after arriving in Canada

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but on their wedding day as they were about to begin the ceremony in the Nikolaipol church, a White Army "press-gang" came to recruit all young men in the village including Daniel. The wedding would be postponed for a year. In the White Army, Daniel was put to work shoveling coal and tending orchards. When it was discovered that Daniel was an expert at handling horses, he became a chauffeur for a White Army officer. In the spring of 1921, Daniel was released from military service.

Daniel and Agnetha were married on April 25, 1921. Their first child was born in Franzfeld, Yazykovo Colony in 1922 and their second in Adelsheim in 1923. It was the time of the famine, but God again intervened on their behalf when a small bag of potatoes that they prayed over lasted the whole winter until MCC arrived with their soup kitchens.

In August of 1924, Daniel, Agnetha, and their children left Adelsheim bound for Canada and a better life. Their ship, SS Melita, docked in Québec, and on September 30, 1924, they arrived in Herbert, Saskatchewan.

Daniel's first experience with western Canadian ranching and cowboys took place in this area of southern Saskatchewan. Their early years, spent at Rush Lake and Beaver Flat, were difficult due to poor land and the drought of the "Dirty 30's. At Beaver Flat, Daniel rented land from rancher Cornelius Jahnke. In 1933, he moved his young family to Hepburn, SK, where the land was better and rain more plentiful. Here he built a new farm, raised

crops, and operated a dairy. He also began to buy the latest farm machinery and traded it to his neighbours for their grain, cattle, and horses, eventually buying a Massey Harris/Ferguson dealership. In addition to using workhorses, Daniel began



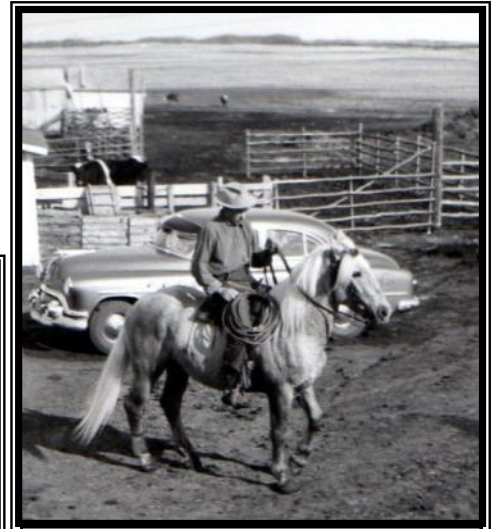
Daniel G Friesen on his farm at Hepburn, SK, with one of his palomino horses ca 1957



Daniel G Friesen on his ranch near Saskatoon, SK ca 1973

raising palominos because he loved their golden coats and white manes and tails. In 1968, he retired and bought 640 acres of grassland near Saskatoon. There he established a cattle ranch where he could ride around and check his cattle just as he had done on the Paulheim estate so many years before. He continued to raise and ride palominos until he died in 1986.

My dad, Helmut Friesen, was the youngest child in the family. He was born on the farm at Hepburn in 1940. He told me his favourite part of school was riding a horse to and from the school. Due to his father's trading business, many spoiled and unruly horses



Helmut Friesen on his parent's farm at Hepburn, SK. 1959

came into their possession, and my dad took on the challenge of breaking them of their bad habits. A freshly plowed field was an ideal training ground. On one occasion, they acquired a problem horse that had injured several people in the Hepburn community. After some work, Helmut rode the "problem horse" down Main Street in Hepburn, came to a sliding stop in

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Helmut Friesen on his parent's farm at Hepburn, SK. 1967. Getting ready for the Centennial Parade in Hepburn

front of the "Red and White" store, dropped the reins, and left the horse standing calmly there while the townspeople came out to gawk at its transformation.

In the 1960s my dad purchased some land along the North Saskatchewan River west of Hepburn, and there began my parents' ranching career. They raised cattle, horses, hogs, and hay. In the 1970s, my dad started raising registered American Quarter Horses.

I was born in 1968, and as a small kid, I remember cattle drives to summer pasture and riding in front of my dad in winter to go and chop a hole in the river ice to water the cattle. The first time I rode by myself was when I was six; my dad finally had a quiet horse that I could ride and control. Later we got a spoiled pony that would take off with its rider hanging on for dear life.

As a kid, I began to gain confidence on a horse while attending Redberry Bible Camp northwest of Saskatoon. By my high school days, I was helping to check on cows during calving. After gradua-

tion, I worked at Redberry Bible Camp for eight summers, mostly in the horse program teaching riding skills and leading trail rides. In 1988, I purchased a small herd of buffalo, hoping to make that my career. The buffalo escaped their enclosure on several occasions, and I discovered that they could outrun a horse with ease. I ended up selling the buffalo to a First-Nations band who wanted to start their own herd.

In the spring of 1992, a cousin of mine invited me to help him for a week on a government pasture he managed in northern Alberta. Here is where I was introduced to the traditions and practices of the California vaquero: slick-fork saddles, spade bits, 80-foot rawhide riatas, and smooth, quiet hands. This differed somewhat from what I was accustomed to in Saskatchewan, where the influence came more from Texas. Because the first cattle drives onto the eastern slopes in Alberta were accompanied by vaqueros from Idaho and the Great Basin, the California influence was felt more here than further east on the prairies.

It was also in 1992 that my parents sold the farm in Saskatchewan and moved to a ranch at Pincher Creek, Alberta. My dad had always dreamed of owning a ranch in the foothills, and ranching or cowboying was all I had ever wanted to do. Besides our own land, my dad purchased shares in the Waldron Grazing Co-op along Highway 22 northwest of Pincher Creek.



Russ Friesen at Camp Evergreen near Sundre, AB, leading a trail ride 1997

My dad and I were invited to assist in the gathers (roundup) and cow work several days a week in the spring to fall season.

The manager of Waldron attended the local M.B. church that we attended. He was also on the board of Camp Evergreen located near Sundre, Alberta. In 1994, he asked if I might consider the position of head wrangler for the camp. That fall I took on the responsibility of 35 or so horses and of operating the program. During my time there, we built a new barn and

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corral facility, expanded the trail system on the property, and introduced training clinics for our wrangling staff and those from surrounding camps in order to better teach the campers horsemanship skills.

I married Melissa Willms at Camp Evergreen in 1995, and by 1997 we decided to move back to the ranch at Pincher Creek. Around the time of our wedding, we purchased several Tibetan yak bulls to crossbreed with European cattle. In 1998 we began to market the meat from these hybrids, and we still do this today. Working yaks on horseback is a little like working buffalo. They do everything quickly, so a calm, steady attitude is required,



Russ Friesen fall gather of yearling cattle near Pincher Creek, AB 2014

or they get very worked up and rattled. Give them time, and they will find the gate opening. Pressure them, and everything flies to the four winds!

In addition to the daily ranch work of riding and tending our cattle, I worked part-time cowboying on the Palmer Ranch east of Twin Butte, Alberta for several years. I also helped some of my neighbours with cattle drives and brandings, and in return, they also helped me. For several years, I raised registered quarter horses for our own use and for sale.

I thank God for the opportunities He has given me to live out my childhood dream of being a cowboy and rancher and for the ranching heritage that I inherited from my ancestors. When we trust God with our lives and futures, He directs us in the way that He knows is best for us.

Russ Friesen owns and operates Springridge Ranch, southeast of Pincher Creek, Alberta. He and his wife Melissa raise commercial Angus cattle and Tibetan yak hybrids. You can find them on the Internet at www.springridgeranchyakcrossbeef.blogspot.com. When Russ is not working, he enjoys nature, hunting, leathework, Mennonite and western Canadian and American history, barbecuing, and his muscle cars (1969 Mercury Cougar and 1973 Ford Thunderbird).



(Brave from page 1)

Russia.

She would bring out two large tin boxes, dented and somewhat misshapen, with lids that didn't close properly. She would open the boxes and take out bundles of letters, folded carefully and tied with yarn. The letters were written on rough paper, crowded with tiny print; on some even the margins were covered so you had to turn the pages sideways to be able to read everything. They were written in the old Gothic German of which I could only decipher the odd word.

"This one is from your Grandmother Baerg," she would say. "She always asks, 'Why did you have to move to such a cold country as Canada, so far away from us? Here the fruit trees are starting to bloom, and the garden paths have been swept clean. Your father is beginning to work the land ready to plant the west fields with wheat. Seed grain is hard to find and very expensive, but conditions seem to be getting a little better and we are hoping and praying for a good harvest.'"

My mother never shed tears when she read the letters, all her tears had been shed years ago when the letters stopped coming.

Queen Victoria's reign was coming to an end, and her granddaughter, Princess Alix of Hesse, married to Tsar Nicholas of Russia, had already given birth to two of her own daughters when my mother was born in 1897. A Russian princess and the daughter of a peasant farmer from a Mennonite

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village could hardly have had less in common, but both would be affected in ways neither could have imagined by militant forces far beyond their control. Evil forces, which were already building, would not discriminate, and would, with impunity, destroy royal and peasant families alike.

The queen in her palace had no more knowledge of the turmoil that awaited her family than did my mother's family in their idyllic peaceful Mennonite village. While the royal children grew up in state-like splendor, the Mennonite children roamed tree-lined streets or walked fertile fields of grain and rich grassy plains. Raised on grand estates with tracts of land and splendid mansions or on small village farmsteads, they took their turn at tending cattle and helping their parents harvest the grain and bring in the fall bounty of fruit and vegetables. While the royal family believed in a God who had preordained their royalty long before they were born, devoted Mennonite families believed in a God who would guide and protect them through whatever circumstance was to befall them.

My mother was the first of five children born to Cornelius and Agnetha (Driedeger) Baerg. Next door on the other side of a fragrant row of lilacs, lived Johann Langemann, one of five sons of Peter and Katherina (Dueck) Langemann. Although Anna never really got to know him in those early years, Johann was the one she was destined to marry.

Mother had four siblings, six half-siblings, and five stepsiblings. She referred to her family as "*tobe yebrocht*", literally translated from

low-German as, "brought together." Indeed, it was that. My Grandfather Cornelius Baerg's first marriage resulted in several children including Maria (Baerg) Born, who in 1948 was able to come to Canada and reestablish contact with her half-sister, my mother.

Cornelius' second marriage, to Agnetha Driedeger resulted in five children, Anna (my mother), Isaac, Cornelius, Lena, and Tina. When Cornelius died, Agnetha married Mr. David Schroeder who had several children of his own including Sara who was the same age as Anna. Mother spoke of huge meals to prepare and children to look after when her half and stepsiblings

brought their families to visit. How big a pot does it take to make borsht for 15 people? *Rollkuchen*, a deep-fried delicacy often served with cold, crisp watermelon grown in the family garden, meant endless standing at the stove wondering when those boys would finally have enough.

Their home, Gnadenheim, was one of the smaller villages, a picturesque rural '*Dorf*' of about thirty-five homes. Burned-brick houses, surrounded by pillared gates and latticed fences, faced acacia and oak tree lined streets and



Author's grandparents- Katherina and Peter Langemann (far right), Great -grandmother Dueck (middle front row) Gnadenheim, Molotschna ca 1900



Author's father Johann, (middle back row) with parents and half-brothers, Gnadenheim, Molotschna ca 1903. Rear L-R - Jacob, Abram, Johann, Heinrich and Peter Langemann

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(Brave from page 9)

orchard gardens. Children played in neat front yards while neighbours chatted on the garden bench. Every village had a school, a few stores and other businesses, and possibly a church and town office.

The rich black soil surrounding the villages produced the plenty of grain and other food products that earned Ukraine the label "Breadbasket of Europe". In this ideal setting, life was good; what more could one ask? Rumblings of World War One were heard, but at first, there was no real portent of the storm of violence that was about to break over their country. The Mennonite villagers continued their unassuming lives.

However, as those winds of war reached the fertile fields of Ukraine, the Russian government, at war with Germany, became suspicious of German-speaking Mennonite villagers. They threatened to confiscate their land and possessions even though they had been loyal and dependable citizens of Russia since the late 1700's when Catherine the Great invited them to Russia to practice their agricultural skills and pass their knowledge on to the Russian peasants.

The Russian Revolution, beginning in March of 1917, put a temporary end to the policy of land requisition but brought with it many other hardships. The Bolsheviks, beginning to see the more affluent and hardworking Mennonite landowners as "Kulaks" or capitalist farmers who exploited the poorer peasants, began the era of forced requisition of grain. Although the policy was eagerly adopted by whichever regime was in power at the time, roving bands of indigent peasants saw the grain as their property, and little of it actually reached the government granaries.

During these tumultuous times, Mennonites endured assaults and incursions of many kinds. Gangs of lawless marauders thought nothing of stealing a family's only milk cow or carrying off their last bags of grain and flour. Invading armies ransacked homes and barns and threatened women and children. The Bolshevik government threatened villagers with arrest and imprisonment for unknown crimes.

The worst was yet to come. Shortage of food was not unknown to many Russian peasant citizens, but the famine that broke out in 1921 and continued until the fall of 1922 was far beyond food shortage. Thieves had left little grain or flour behind. Drought had led to a meager harvest, and gardens and fruit trees yielded only enough for a short period of time. Seed potatoes and grain had to be hoarded for the spring planting. Never before had food been rationed at mealtimes and every little crust of bread or tiny potato carefully doled out. Little children pleaded for just a tiny bit more, but many a mother's heart broke because there was nothing left to give. The severe famine claimed millions of lives and left behind a despairing and broken people. My mother said for many years she was unable to speak of those hungry days without breaking down in tears.

Despite this time of famine, disease, and general unrest, young love still flourished. One evening, as a group of young people walked home from church after choir practice, my mother felt the shy touch of a hand on her own. She was surprised to see the friendly face of Johann Langemann as he measured his tread to hers, and hand in hand they walked to her home. Johann was almost 9 years older than she was and not someone she had con-

sidered as a possible suitor. However, as she got to know him better, she realized he was a "catch" - friendly, funny, handsome and smart. What more could she want? They were married in the spring of 1923 entrusting their future into the hands of a loving God.

However, hopes for a bright future were soon dashed as the Bolshevik government instituted heavy taxes and continued to harass religious leaders, teachers, and anyone who was seen as opposing the current regime. No one was safe from the dreaded knock on the door in the middle of the night and the intrusion of armed men.

In the spring of 1924, Anna and Johann's first child was born. He lived only for a few days, and his death added to the suffering they had already endured. In spring of 1925, my first sister was born. Katherina or Katya as she was called, was a strong, healthy baby, and her coming softened the blow of the loss of the much-awaited first son.

During the period of 1923-30 approximately 25,000 Mennonites left their homeland to find security and religious freedom in other countries, mainly Canada. After Katya was born, my parents considered emigrating to Canada as well. The step must have been an enormous one even to contemplate.

My paternal grandmother, Katherina Langemann, widowed since the age of 38, would be emigrating with them. At 62 years of age, an age considered elderly at the time, she would be parting from the families of two of her other sons and their spouses, Peter and Sara Langemann, and Heinrich and Mariechen Langemann, to face

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the uncertainty of a foreign country.

However, the fears of some had had been calmed somewhat by a lull in brutalities and a moratorium on grain requisition. My maternal grandparents, David and Agnetha Schroeder, felt that conditions might be improving. As a result, my mother would be leaving



Passport of Anna, Katie and Hans (John) Langemann
Sept 1926

them behind in Ukraine along with her siblings, nieces, nephews, and other relatives. One can only imagine the tearful pleas of Mother's parents and siblings, "Please, please, don't go." It is only now, as an elderly grandmother that I can understand the grief of parting from a daughter and granddaughter knowing that this was likely their last farewell. I now understand the price my parents were willing to pay to give their children the assurance of a better life!

The Bolshevik government became more aggressive and menacing, and though my parents didn't realize it then, time was running out for them. On October 28 of 1926, they slipped through the rapidly closing door to freedom. The

tears shed on the day of parting must have been heartbreaking. And on everyone's mind was the question asked so many times in their later letters, "Will we ever see you again?"

The only security to which my parents and grandmother could cling was their faith that God would see them through whatever lay ahead. They were leaving behind not only beloved family members but also their church, their home, the lovely tree-lined streets, and friends they had known from childhood. They left with the sound of the last song sung for them, "*Gott Mit Euch bis wir uns Wiedersehen.*" (God be With You till We Meet Again). Tears flowed freely as "*Auf Wiedersehen*" was repeated again and again. These two words summarized their sadness, the sorrow of parting, and their profound hope of seeing each other again.

Heading for Canada

On October 28, 1926, my parents and many other families departed from the train station in Lichtenau, Ukraine. After days of travel punctuated by nail-biting times of waiting, heart-pounding examinations, and checkpoints, they passed under the Red Gate, the symbol of freedom marking the border between Russia and Latvia. Though their CPR identification card says they were to set sail on the 18th of November on the SS Melita from Southampton, a colonization file for the family states they actually sailed on that date on the SS Montroyal from Liverpool. They arrived in St John, New Brunswick on November 28th.

The trip could not have been pleasant. My mother was in her first trimester of pregnancy and desperately ill most of the time. The job of baby-sitting 1 ½ year old Katie fell to Hans, a 13-year-old Russian orphan whom my family had informally adopted while still in Ukraine. To Hans the journey was an adventure, so he and Katie roamed the ship turning up now and then to eat a hearty meal and to nap as the ship rocked incessantly. For the adults, seasickness must have made the journey seem endless.

After a month-long journey, the family of five arrived at the home of

Letzter Wohnort in Russland <u>Moldenkun</u> Abreise von <u>Lichtenau</u> , Russland, am <u>28 Oktober 1926</u> , in Begleitung <u>von</u> <u>8 Personen</u> , von <u>Wien</u> abgereist am <u>13 November</u> In <u>Sibau</u> angekommen am <u>18 November</u> , von <u>Sibau</u> abgereist am <u>18 November</u> Dampfer <u>Montroyal</u> , England, angekommen am <u>28 November</u> , von <u>Liverpool</u> abgereist am <u>18 November</u> , Dampfer <u>Montroyal</u> In <u>St. John</u> , Canada, gelandet am <u>28 November 1926</u> Erster Aufenthalt in Canada. <u>Arnaud, Man</u> Verwandte in Canada oder Ver. Staaten. Verzeichnis der unterwegs zurückgebliebenen Mitglieder dieser Familie:				
Listennummer	Vor-, Nach- und Familiennamen	Wann geboren	Wo zurückgeblieben	Beschäftigung zurückgeblieben

Colonization record of Langemann family's journey Lichtenau, Moldotschna Colony, Oct 28, 1926 and ending in Arnaud, Manitoba
Nov 28, 1926

(See Brave on page 12)

(Brave from page 11)

relatives in Arnaud, Manitoba in the dead of winter. It must have been difficult for all. Only the kindness and generosity of relatives made it bearable. After spending some time in Arnaud, Dad, Mother, little Katya, Grandmother Katherina Langemann, and foster-son Hans (John) travelled the last leg of their journey to Coaldale, Alberta. Dad's brother, Abram Langemann, his wife Katherina, and two sons Peter and Nicholas had already found a home there. His brother Jacob, his wife Justina, and their children Christina, Peter, Jake, and Martha had settled in Saskatchewan, a not insurmountable distance away.

Life in a new Land

My parents rarely spoke of their first few months in Canada. Those early days must have been demoralizing and humbling, depending on relatives, wondering if they had made the right choice to leave their homeland, trying to make some sense of the foreign surroundings.

They found a small house to rent in the town of Coaldale, a place to call their own until a property could be purchased. In June 1927 they celebrated the arrival of the first Canadian citizen of the family, my brother Peter, a strong, healthy baby boy.

After almost exactly one year in Canada, they found the perfect property for their growing family. On November 17, 1927, for the sum of \$4,770.00 my Dad purchased an eighty-acre parcel of land from the Canadian Pacific Railway by way of a mortgage from the Canadian Bank of Commerce. Two miles from the town of Coaldale, it was to be my dad's home for the rest of his life.

One cannot imagine a worse time to buy a farm, and yet little by little, payments were made. Letters from grateful relatives spoke of monetary donations enough to keep a starving family alive. Looking back, one wonders how it could have been possible.

With the help of relatives and neighbours my dad built the house that was home to the family for the next 40 years. As with many early settler homes, it had one large room, two bedrooms, and an attic, and it was not

insulated, drafty, and roughly built. The cold winter winds sifted in snow and dust while the kitchen range provided the only warmth and comfort. In those early years it was home to Mother and Dad, Grandma Langemann, foster brother John, sister Kay, and baby brother, Peter.

In later years, my mother told me how in the dark of night my parents stole a few moments of privacy in their own room away from demanding children and a bossy mother-in-law.

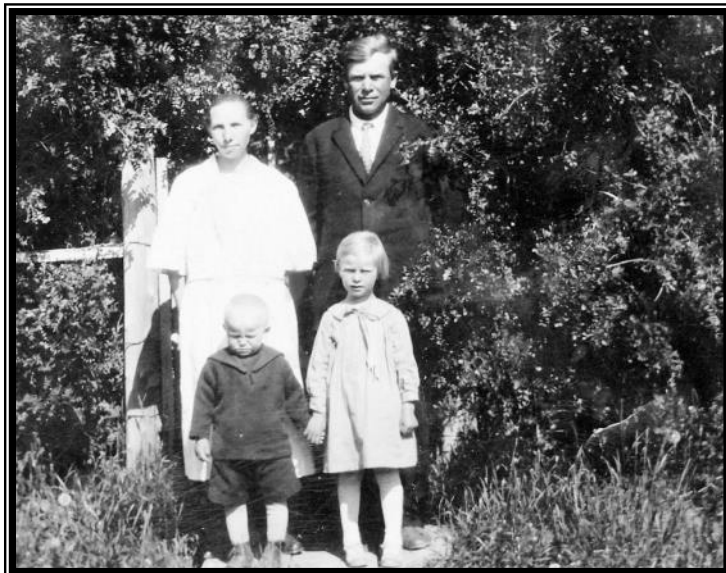
"We don't have much," my dad whispered, "But we don't have to worry someone will knock on the door at night and take me away. Things will get better."

It was only much later that I began to understand the sacrifice they made to begin life in a foreign country. Through the multi-coloured tapestry of work, learning, and worshipping, ran the dark, ever-present thread of worry and grief for the loved ones left behind.

The first few years must have been disheartening with crushing work and little to show for it. Money was scarce, and the food supply depended on families' livestock and the potatoes and vegetables grown in their irrigation-fed gardens. My dad was fortunate in owning irrigation land, but the work was hard and unrelenting. Flood irrigation meant slogging through muddy fields wearing heavy rubber boots as he shoveled the hard clay soil to direct the water. The work took a toll on my dad's health, but he was young and strong and inventive.

Mother's work in the little house was also unrelenting. Luckily, Grandmother Langemann was

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Author's parents, Johann and Anna Langemann, siblings Peter and Katie 1928 Coaldale, Alberta

(Brave from page 12)

there to help. Mother said Grandma could be quite bossy and ruled the roost, but she also admitted that without her the household would not have run as smoothly as



Langemann family farm, Coaldale, 1944. L-R back row- Katie, Anna and Johann, Annie, Front – Agnes, Peter missing

it did.

Mother and Grandmother labored, as every wife and mother did, to can the meat and vegetables that provided some variety to a limited winter diet. Grandmother stood for hours at the kitchen stove making gooseberry, rhubarb, and plum jam, which often took the place of dessert. The brass pan she used must have been an important utensil as they had brought it all the way to Canada.

On February 21st, 1930, my sister Annie was born. Mother said that as she was recovering from the birth, she could see the two older children playing on a dust-covered snowdrift big enough to be seen from her bed. It was oddly symbolic of the years of the Great De-

pression, the "Dirty Thirties" that were just beginning.

The early years of the depression were lean but bearable for southern Alberta farmers. Though money was scarce, there was always food on the table. My dad was a social person and quickly learned to communicate with his neighbours and the businesspeople of the area. Learning English was a necessity, and with the help of friends and the business community in Coaldale and Lethbridge he learned to make himself understood. My sister Katie started school in 1931 when she was six years old and quickly overcame the



Langemann family including Johann, Jacob and Abram and their families. Langemann farm Coaldale ca 1944. Author Agnes Langemann front with doll buggy. Grandmother Langemann missing – was she taking the picture?



School bus to Coaldale School ca 1938. Katie Langemann, (with braids), Helen Toews (white hat)

(See Brave on page 14)

(Brave from page 13)

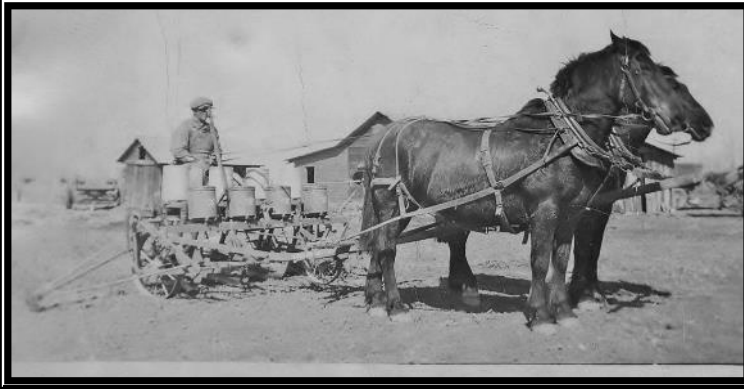
challenge of learning a new language. She made sure her younger brother and sister were exposed to the English language and taught them everything she learned at

school. She was her grandmother's offspring and stood for no nonsense when her young pupils at times rebelled. Dad was interested in everything she learned and picked up many English expressions from her. As with many immigrants, past and present, the women of the family learned the language much more slowly. They did not have the advantage of dealing with businesspeople and English-speaking neighbours.

My dad was involved in community and church activities as well. Our family had the advantage of living only two miles from the town of Coaldale and the Mennonite Brethren Church. The church served not only as a source of spiritual inspiration and guidance but also as a social centre. This meant so much to the early immigrants.

In 1938 I was born, the first of mother's children to be born in a hospital. Mother felt forty-one was an old age for delivering a baby and was appreciative of the professional care.

Though the depression was technically over, money was still scarce. Mother spoke of Dad going to the Salvation Army Thrift store to buy a suit to wear to church every Sunday. Bleached flour sacks were laboriously transformed into children's clothes. Kay speaks of having to wear the hated



Author's father, Johann Langemann with team and beet seeder early 1940's Coaldale

scratchy wool stockings my grandmother knit. When Katie started school, my mother and other women took turns driving the horse and wagon to help pay the School Tax.

In 1945, my dad passed away from complications of deep-vein thrombosis, no doubt exacerbated by many years of heavy labour in muddy irrigation fields. I was seven at the time. Mother moved into a small house in Coaldale where she lived until her death in January 1983.

1934 was when the last letter arrived. It, along with many others, still lies in the tin box waiting to be translated.

Agnes Langemann Thibert was born in Coaldale, Alberta in 1938. She attended the Alberta Mennonite High School there and went on to get her B. Ed. at the University of Lethbridge. After her husband Gerry Thibert passed away in 2011, Agnes turned her attention to the fulfillment of a life dream. It was a never before expressed wish to pass on to her children and grandchildren the history of her parents' experiences before they came to Canada. In 2019 her book 'Pathway Through Peril.' became the vehicle for the fulfillment of that dream. Agnes still lives in her farm home enjoying the company of friends and family and the challenge of writing a sequel to her first book, "Pathway to Peril". Her second book, "The Farewell Years" is a glimpse into the fictional Lentz family's early years in Canada, amid the stress of the Great Depression and the pleas for help from suffering relatives left behind. ❖



Funeral of author's father, Johann, Coaldale 1945. L-R mother, Anna, Grandmother Katherina, Annie, Katie, Peter and John. Front- author, Agnes, All Langemann

(Hundred from page 1)

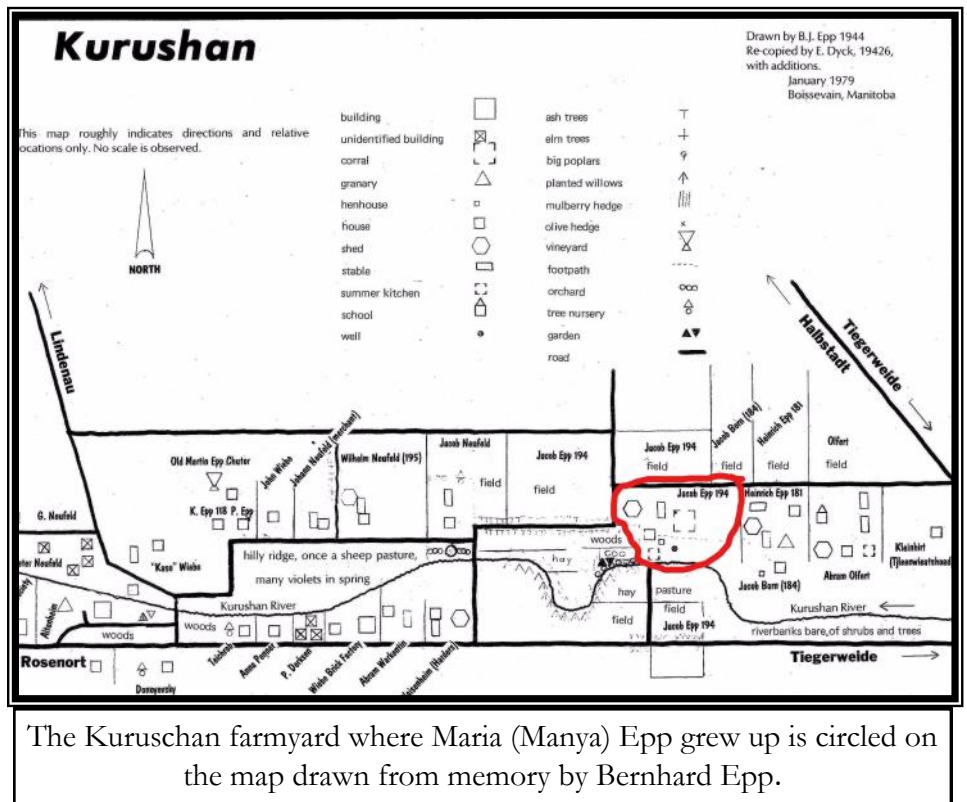
were fairly modest.

Nevertheless, in her first ten years, Maria was accustomed to at least two-house servants, stable boys and farmhands to do outdoor work. During much of her Kurduiushan childhood, her father was absent, conscripted to non-combatant military service. Her mother with the servants and help from friends and relatives managed the farm.

Maria and her siblings attended the village school, for the most part, taught in Russian. As well they were taught to read and write German and memorize Scripture and poetry. Her parents believed in education. Both her older sisters boarded in the town of Halbstadt and attended Mädchenschule (girls high school) in Neu-Halbstadt in preparation for a career in teaching or nursing.

How did my mother and her family come to be living a fairly privileged life on lands that less than a hundred years ago were the domain of Nogai nomadic sheep and horse herders? When Imperial Russia defeated the Ottoman Empire in a series of conflicts culminating in 1792, the new territory was called New Russia. The government of Empress Catherine the Great developed the strategy of driving out the indigenous Nogai people and inviting settlers from Western Europe to settle the land. The government offered inducements like reimbursement of emigration costs, building materials to construct homes, assistance with seed and equipment and, of course, land.

At about the same time far north in what had been the Kingdom of Poland, my mother's an-



cestor Heinrich Heinrich Epp (b.1784) found himself living in a region recently re-named West Prussia. On the whole, the Polish regime had been relatively tolerant, but the militaristic Prussian rulers were unsympathetic to the Mennonite stance regarding military service.

Heinrich Epp and his spouse Anna with their family of about eight children emigrated to South Russia to the Khortitsa settlement in 1796. Not long after they re-settled in Altonau in the Molochnaia settlement about 150 km further to the southeast.

Whereas the forbears of my grandfather Jacob Epp very likely reached south Russia by way of Riga, then south up the Dvina river and down the Dnieper, the forbears of my grandmother or Oma, Maria Neufeld probably walked the 1600 kilometres overland from Tiegenghagen on the Greater Delta of the Vistula river. They would have followed, at least in part, the ancient trade route known as the Amber Road to their new home in South Russia. This was in 1805, by which time the might of the Russian Empire had made this route safe for travellers.

The Neufelds initially settled in Fürstenau along the Tokmak river. Then in 1822, their two sons are recorded as settling in Liebenau, not very far up the same stream. One of these brothers, Heinrich Heinrich Neufeld, had a son Dietrich. There seems to be no record of Dietrich having gone to school or owned land. His son Jacob, my Oma's father, became a businessman in Berdiansk, where my Oma Epp was born.

Thus, whereas my mother's dad grew up in the very stable village of Lindenau, son of a comfortable landowner who was also Ältester (elder) of the prestigious Lichtenau church, my mother's mom grew up in a seaport, surrounded not by fields of waving grain but by cranes and foghorns and wagons hauling freight. My mother's mom must have been quite the wom-

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an. Even though her father abandoned the family, and she with her siblings and mother ended up living in poverty in Halbstadt, she married a highly desirable suitor.

Life on the Kuruduiushan Chutor was good until, with the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918, the German army withdrew from Russia taking with them all the grain and livestock they could carry. This left a power vacuum. Though the Bolsheviks had taken power the previous November, they were not well organized and certainly not in control of many parts of the former Empire. The consequence was lawlessness and terrorism, and then civil war between the Bolsheviks, Lenin's socialist party, and the Whites, the party of the elite, military officers and landowners and industrialists and nobility.

By November of 1920, the White Army was defeated and the Bolsheviks in firm control in south Russia, now soon to be named Ukraine. When Red Army soldiers found a cartridge belt in my grandparents' Kuruduiushan home, they were threatened with execution on the spot. They fled, their only possessions the clothes they were wearing, to the home of Grandma Neufeld in Halbstadt. The house and farm were looted, and the land was confiscated.

Though 1920-21 was a time of terrible famine, my mother's family survived because of food aid from America. But throughout the Soviet Union, the famine was severe, according to Wikipedia resulting in about 5 million deaths.

Lenin's New Economic Policy (NEP) was successful and had the effect of greatly motivating Russian farmers to produce food. My mother's family along with a number of other families moved into a house in the village of Tiegerweide, near their former Kuruduiushan home. Prices were good and crops were good. But many Mennonites were uncertain as to whether this would last. There was the blatant atheism of the Bolsheviks. But more immediate was the scary realization that in the Communist Party the NEP was seen by many as a temporary measure and not true socialism. Among Mennonites, many felt that the radical socialism and the atheism of the Communists would soon bear down on them. My mother in the 1975 presentation she made to an Epp family reunion recalled, "Again and again there were meetings and always again different rumours. It was yes today and no tomorrow. And then different inoculations were started. I don't recall just how many, but there were quite a few."

My parents were in their early forties, I realize now what an undertaking it must have been to make the decision to go to a foreign land with a big family on credit. There was no money (my Parents had lost everything in the revolution).

Credit! In the case of my grandparents, their way was paid all the way to Waterloo, Ontario. It was paid by the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) contracting with the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization (CMBC) un-

der the signature of David Toews of Rosthern. This debt bore the name Reiseschuld (travel debt) and in most Russian Mennonite households in Canada, even in the late 1940s, was an ongoing topic of conversation. Members of the Board travelled from home to home, pleading with people to pay up.

As for inoculations, in the Civil War alone it is estimated three million people died of typhus, to say nothing of the millions who died at the WWI battlefronts. Then there was the Spanish flu in West Europe and the Americas. So understandably Canada was touchy about allowing contagious diseases into the country. Just what their inoculations were for my mother does not say, but she does mention trachoma, the eye infection caused by bacteria in unsanitary living conditions.



Epp family prior to immigration 1924. Rear: L-R Bernhard, Elizabeth, Maria. Centre: Jacob, mother Maria, father Jacob, Annie. Front: twin Henry, Lena, twin Irma.

My mother's family in Tiegerweide was living in one room. Even though the two oldest girls were away at school, that still left

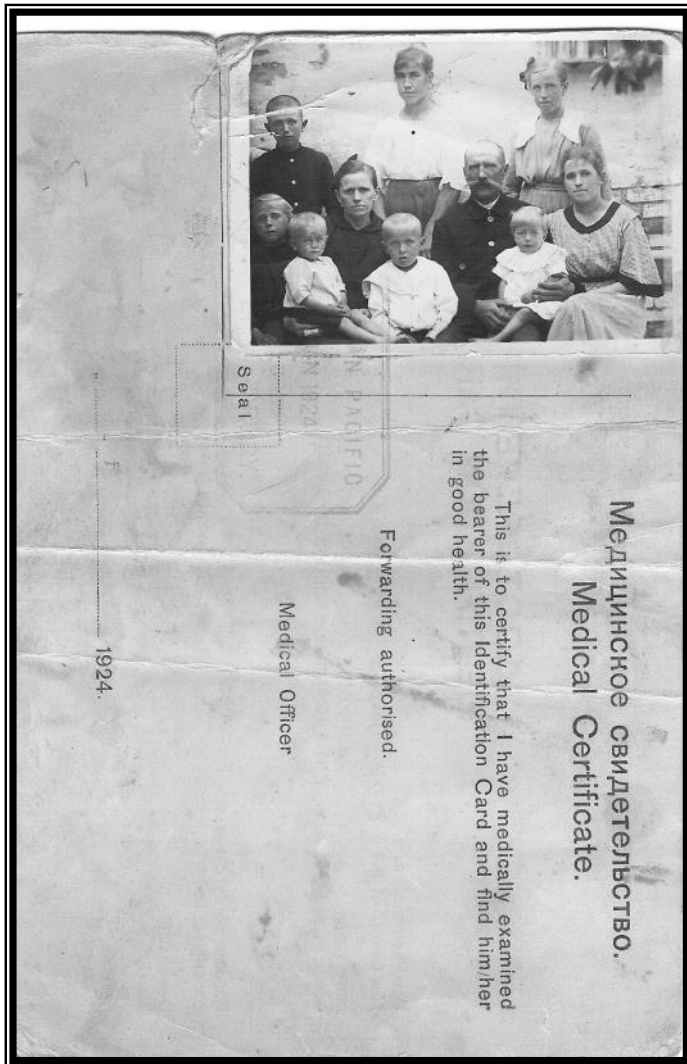
(See Hundred on page 17)

(Hundred from page 16)

the remaining eight in those crowded conditions. The families of Jacob's relatives similarly each occupied a room, and all had large families. The kitchen was shared. We can impossibly imagine the effort involved in sanitation in terms of cookware, laundry and personnel hygiene and the outdoor privy, especially in winter and during periods of rain.

sent out by the Canadian Government. As far as I recollect there were three in our family that had that dreaded eye disease, trachoma, and nobody could enter into Canada with that. You had to have the eye scraped and that was a very painful affair, and sometimes I think I still can hear my young brother scream, as it was all done without any chloroform or needle."

Procuring the necessary travel documents to exit the USSR took time but the government of Lenin did not impose restrictions, though Canada did. Only a few years later



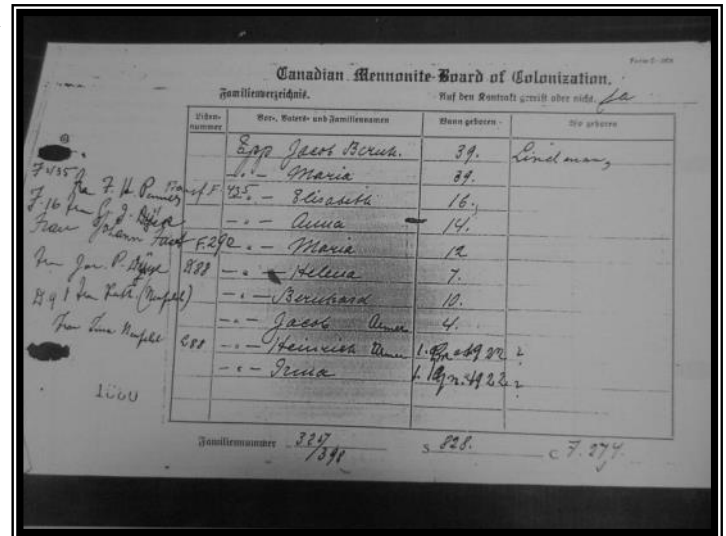
Epp family medical certificate for immigration

She writes, "Then came the day when we all had to go before the specialist. His name was Dr. Drewry. He had come out especially for this. As far as I know, he was

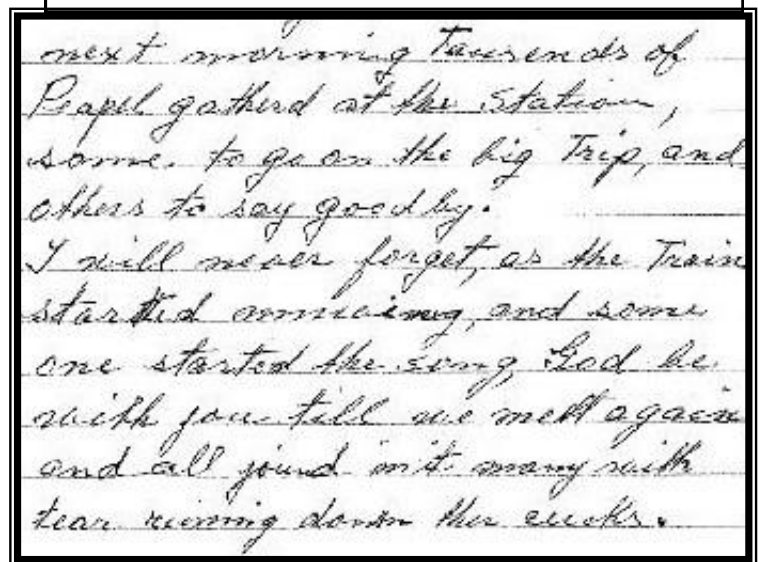
under Stalin's regime, such emigration was for the most part impossible, with exile to Siberia much more likely.

My mother writes, "Then finally, after about two years the time came to really get ready. All the families (about 8) from our village, Tiegerweide [who were emigrating] agreed on one big auction sale. It lasted almost two days. Meanwhile, Dad had somebody

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Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization immigration document of Maria Epp's family (numbers indicate ages, not dates)



Maria's handwritten memories of immigration in German

(Hundred from page 17)

make a big wooden trunk and we had a big wicker trunk. Into this trunk were packed the things that would go as freight. We could not get at them till we came to Canada.

Then there were all the things that we needed on the way, clothing, bedding and food. Mother baked a lot of buns and roasted them, baked cookies, bread and fried some meat, and packed whatever a big family of 10 needed for the next 10 days. We had to provide our own food till we crossed the border. A book could be written on this alone."

Though my mother and her siblings recall that 'we lost everything,' it is



Lichtenau train station scene, where many departed from for Canada

likely that Jacob had taken some precautions during the volatile years of the Great War and the civil war. Most likely some of his savings were in gold. Russia and then the USSR were still on the gold standard. Or possibly he kept some funds in a foreign bank. The most likely possibility is that under Lenin's New Economic Policy program he was able to acquire equipment



Author and siblings L-R Helen, Werner (Vern), Henry (Hank), Jacob (Jack), Elsie. 1938 or 39 model A Ford going to school and or hockey practice after the author's father John Fast laboriously hand shovelled the 150-yard farm driveway, Boissevain, MB ca 1945

and livestock to farm together with his relatives, possibly functioning as a small co-op. In any event, the Tiegerweide families had enough to sell to put on an auction sale. Not all of them had lost their possessions to the extent that my mother's family did. In trying to make sense of the events encountered by my mother's family, it might help us to remind ourselves that in the time of black terror and anarchy, epidemics, war and revolution the events very likely made little sense to them even at the time, let alone to us a century later.

Then came the time to say goodbye. It must have been very hard for the grownups, but for us children, it was all a big adventure. As we lived quite a distance from the [Lichtenau] railway station, we were taken the day before to our [Epp] grandparents and spent the last night with them. The next morning thousands of people gathered at the station, some to go on the big trip, and others to say goodbye.

I will never forget, as the train started moving, someone started the song, God be with You till We Meet Again, and all joined in, many with tears running down their cheeks.

As my mother said, for the young people the ocean voyage was a great adventure, at least for those not seasick. Teenage girls who normally would have been tied up with household chores and babysitting their infant siblings were free to wander. No doubt many a romance blossomed and once the realities of immigrant life set in, many a heart broken. My mother's ship, the Melita, was comfortable. But young as she was, my mother's heart was already committed. She and John Fast, another Tiegerweide villager, had a relationship. He crossed the Atlan-

(See Hundred on page 19)

(Hundred from page 18)

tic on another ship, but they met again in western Manitoba and were wed in 1929, she age 19 and he 20. Before her wedding, she found employment as a domestic and possibly had a few dollars saved up.

They first established their household near the home of his people at Rapid City north of



Maria's parents: Maria and Jacob B. Epp Boissevain ca 1955

Brandon, Manitoba, where their first three children were born. Then in 1935, they purchased a mixed farm near the town of Boissevain. They gave up the farm in 1956 and moved into town. My dad found employment as a carpenter. Compared to the turmoil of their childhood in Russia, their lives had become stable. They had the leisure to participate fully in church activities and they could send their children to a Mennonite private school. My mother could garden to her heart's content, and she could enjoy a satisfying social life with her friends and relatives. With time her life became enriched with grandchildren. Canada had been good to her!

cousin Ernie G Dyck in drawing to my attention my mother's emigration reminiscence and sharing information about our mutual family ancestry.

More information about the life of my mother's family in Russia can be found in the book edited by Anna Ens, *The House of Heinrich*, 1980, which can be googled on the internet and downloaded in PDF format for free. It includes on page 154 a detailed map showing where her family settled in Canada. The book *Beckoning Hills Revisited*, 1981, by the Boissevain History Committee, has a list of Mennonites who settled the area 1924-1930 on pages 134-136, an account of the Mennonite settlement in

the area on pages 146-171, an account of my mother's family on page 561, and an account on page 387 of the Wilson family, whose huge farm operation of about 3,300 acres my mother's father and his siblings and in-laws bought with no money down and parceled out among themselves. The above-mentioned map shows the location of these parcels. This book too can be downloaded from the web. The obituary of my mother can be found in *Der Bote*, Winnipeg, Manitoba, on page 19 Apr 2000.



Author's father John Fast cutting an oat crop using a Cockshut 60 to pull a converted horse binder.



Rear L-R Jacob(Jack),Elsie, Henry(Hank)
Front; Helen, Werner(Vern) family farm ca 1946

Henry (Hank) Fast and his wife Barbara live in Edmonton. Married 51 years, they have two daughters and a granddaughter. Since 1989 he has been active in Habitat for Humanity, both in Winnipeg and Edmonton. His teaching career before that over 26 years spanned the Canadian west from northern Manitoba to Winnipeg and Calgary and across the Atlantic to Germany. His childhood church was the Whitewater Mennonite Church in southwest Manitoba. ❖

Note from the author: I wish to acknowledge the collaboration of my

Then and Now: An Introduction to La Crete History Volumes

By brothers Peter Janzen (La Crete) and Abe Janzen (Calgary)

Near the beginning of Volume I, *Then and Now, The History of La Crete* there is a quotation by Jan Gleysteen that reads: '*A people who have not the pride to record their own history will not long have the virtues to make their history worth recording; and no people who are indifferent to their past, need hope to make their future great*'.

In 2020 the La Crete Agricultural Society took the wisdom of Gleysteen's words seriously and published three volumes of *Then and Now, The History of La Crete*. It's a tremendously ambitious project in which, it appears the writers and the committee that made it happen consulted pretty much every business, every church, every service and every family that has been part of the Mennonite Story in La Crete.

For the reader who is interested in the early years, volume I includes significant acknowledgements of pioneers who preceded the Mennonites in Northern Alberta. This volume goes back to the European origins of the Mennonite faith and culture with Menno Simons and the early Anabaptists, briefly takes the reader through what is now Prussia to Southern Russia and in the 1870s to Manitoba, Canada. By 1931 early settlers were moving to Carcajou from Saskatchewan and a few years later they relocated to La Crete, from where there were migrations to Belize, back and forth to Bolivia, beginning in 1966, and also to other settlements in Alberta and Northern BC.

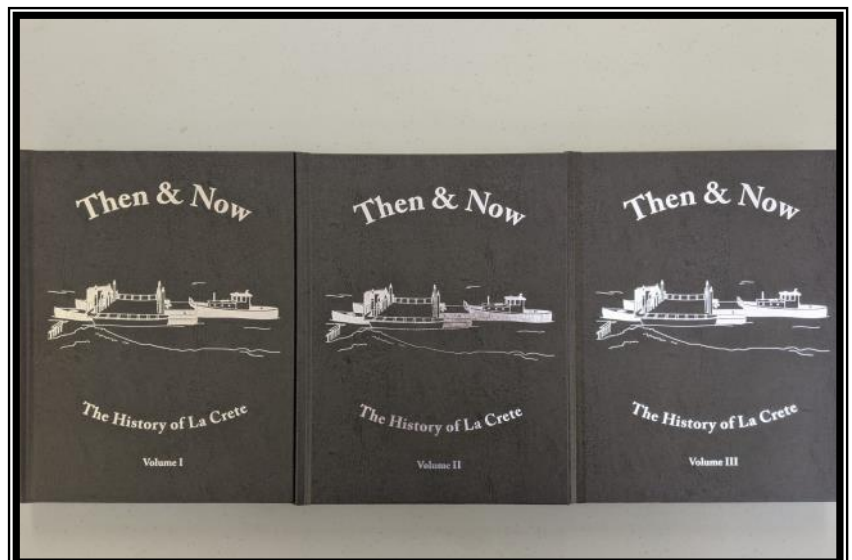
Many of the early settlers - including those who were there before the Mennonites - are named and their stories are referenced in volume I. But this volume also describes the establishment of early schools, the arrival of the first electric generator in 1957 (privately owned by Isaac Knelsen), the beginnings and growth of local churches, the advancement of businesses and services including restaurants, parks and campgrounds, athletic facilities, health services and local government. All the elements, the pillars that bring stability to a community, attract investment and people, and that encourage further development. It's a reader-friendly volume because every business, church, public service is named in the table of contents with a brief history in the pages to follow. A little like paging through a photo album, you can quickly pick and choose where you want to go as you walk through this collection of stories that make up the much longer story of La Crete.

Volumes 2 and 3 are equally reader-friendly; these volumes are a vast collection of family stories ... almost 900 pages. At least 485 family stories are briefly recounted, many including photos of buildings and family members, where anyone who is interested can take a quick snapshot of a relative, an acquaintance, a neighbor, or a complete stranger. But once you take a peek, it will be

hard to walk away. This collection of families in volumes 2 and 3, each with their own unique history is also what made volume 1 happen; these are the families who, with a lot of sacrifice, suffering and endless courage built La Crete and the extensive agricultural and business community that it is today.

You may read all of the pages in the 3 volumes or you may never finish them, but it will be easy to go back at any time, and read a few more of the individual church, business or family stories that have, over all these years, painted this fascinating, bigger picture of La Crete: a community where people obviously feel at home, where they have put down roots and where they are building a future. A story of many, that makes up a whole.

Thank you, people of La Crete, for not being indifferent, and for having enough pride, enough wisdom and discipline, and the sense of your own history to put together this wonderful collection that makes up a part of your most interesting story. ♦



Mennonite Churches in Alberta: Creating a Mennonite Map

By Abram Janzen

The idea of a map of Mennonite churches in Alberta formed over a period of months, but perhaps, actually, over the last 25 years, whenever I travelled to visit churches in any of the far reaches of this province. Unlike other provinces, Alberta has people, including Mennonites, living pretty much north to south, east to west, across Alberta. Everywhere. Then, in 2019, I spent 4 months in Bolivia with MCC and visited 40 of the 106 Mennonite Colonies there. I met David Enns, an older gentleman who was making a map of all the colonies. The end product was tremendously useful for anyone interested in where the Bolivian Mennonites live. Mr. Enns also included a print of the layout of most colonies on the backside of his map, which was extremely helpful in finding my way.

Back in Alberta I began to do some work with MCC (Church Relations) and with CFGB (Canadian Foodgrains Bank – Outreach to Low German Speaking Mennonites). I already knew that the Low German Speaking Mennonites (LGM) far outnumber all other Mennonites in Alberta, and that they are rapidly growing and migrating to many parts of the province. I was also aware that Mennonites of more mainstream groups are often surprised to hear about how many LGM there are and where they now live and work. The LGM are a diverse people, and they likewise don't always know where other Mennonites and other LGM communities are becoming established, or when, sometimes,

new congregations with new names are born.

So, I started to think that we might all benefit by at least having a map of where we all are and who we all are, and I have come up with the version that you see printed here in the Chronicle. It still leaves out a lot of information, and I hope to keep improving it. One person suggested that it might be a good idea to add the names of the leaders of each group or conference. A gentleman from the Holdeman Community near Stettler has offered to digitize the map so that a pin will pop up for each church with more precise location information, names of church leaders, membership numbers, and perhaps a brief historical comment. While this will never become a formal 'data collecting project', over the next months I do hope at least to gather more information about numbers. It's a common question.

My own background is Old Colony from Saskatchewan. I'm finding the map project personally interesting, and the more I learn about 'us Mennonites in Alberta', the more that knowledge seems important. There are at least 15 different groups of Mennonites in Alberta, and, while we occupy this common space, we don't have very much to do with each other. We are all busy, as we should be, in our own ministries, but it's also true that the church of Christ is bigger than any one group. So, maybe even a map contributes to building the body of Christ. None of us are the only ones here!

What I have found perhaps most interesting is how large our numbers are, how widespread we are across Alberta, and how much movement there is from place to place. This is especially true among the Church of God in Christ (Holdeman), the Nationwide Fellowship (Whitecaps), and all the Low German speaking groups. They move to find work, they open businesses, they start new churches, and they build their local communities. They don't seem afraid to pick up, move, and start over. The entrepreneurial spirit that I see especially in those three Mennonite populations is remarkable. It's also present, perhaps in a different way, in the other Mennonite communities. However, among the mainstream conferences who have been here longer, the roots are a little deeper; there is less movement.

I've had several visits with an MB pastor in Linden about this map. Kris is an amazing pastor. He has a large congregation to look after, and I am sure he does it very well. But he also goes out of his way to get to know the broader community of which the Holdeman Mennonites are a major part and which also includes a small group of Low German Mennonites who have moved in from Belize. I asked Kris if he is recruiting them to join his congregation. "No," he said, "I just want to us to be good neighbors." And that curiosity, that interest in who we share space with is, I think, what this map idea is about. It's also what being Christ followers is about ... at the very least, to be interested in, and curious about each other. ❖



Tabor EMC Church

(See Map on page 22)

Affiliation & Location 128 Churches

By Abe Janzen

Mennonite Church Alberta Conference

- First Mennonite Edmonton
- Holyrood Mennonite Edmonton
- Christian Life Community Edmonton
- South Sudanese Evangelical Edmonton
- Bethel Intl Oromo Ch Edmonton
- Trinity Calgary
- First Calgary
- Foothills Calgary
- Calgary Chin Christian Ch
- Didsbury Bergthal
- Lethbridge Mennonite
- Springside Mennonite

Evangelical Mennonite Conference

- High Level
- La Crete
- Buffalo Head Prairie
- Grande Prairie – West Pointe
- Calgary – Abbeydale
- Calgary – Love in Action
- Picture Butte
- Tabor
- Coaldale

Nationwide Fellowship (also known as Whitecaps)

- La Crete
- La Glace
- Peace River
- Two Hills
- Spruce View
- Duchess
- Tilley
- Coaldale

Sommerfelder

- Wilson Prairie
- Blumenort
- La Crete East
- Blue Hills
- Osterwick
- Deadwood (Manning)
- Vauxhall

Old Colony

- La Crete
- Buffalo Head Prairie
- Blue Hills Tompkins Landing
- Blumenort
- Two Hills (being built)
- Warwick
- Blueridge (Whitecourt)
- Worsley
- Cleardale
- Grimshaw
- Bassano
- Barnwell
- Nobleford
- Vauxhall
- Winnifred
- Grassy Lake
- Carmangay

Northwest Mennonite Conference

- Bluesky
- Bethany Smith
- Edson
- Salem
- West Zion
- Carstairs
- Red Deer
- Duchess
- Chestermere
- Brooks
- Medicine Hat
- Lethbridge

Friedensfelder (Peace Valley)

- Chin
- Grassy Lake

Bergthal Mennonite Conference

- Blue Hills
- La Crete
- Country Side – La Crete
- Cornerstone – La Crete
- Peace River North
- Clairmont
- Slave Lake

Independent Mennonite

- Tofield Gospel
- Calgary Intermennonite
- Calgary Vietnamese
- Rosemary Mennonite



Springridge Mennonite Church, Pincher Creek

Kleine Gemeinde

- La Crete
- Worsley
- Willingdon (Two Hills)
- Grassy Lake
- Bow Island

Reinlaender

- Peace River
- Worsley
- Two Hills
- Vauxhall
- Hythe
- Brooks
- Tabor
- Seven Persons

Old Reinlaender

- Vauxhall

Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference

- Vauxhall Mennonite Gospel Church

Church of God in Christ Mennonite (Holdeman)

- Fort Vermillion
- Silver Valley
- Hythe
- Crooked Creek
- Westlock
- Dewberry
- Edberg (Ferintosh)
- Stettler
- Rimbey
- Sunnyside
- Linden
- Swalwell
- Pincher Creek
- Bow Island

Why I wrote *Mutti and Papa, A Love Story*

By Bill Franz

Why? Who, what, when, where and why are fundamental questions underlying any good story. We want to know why, or at least, I did as a four-year-old who apparently was always asking why. I think we all want to understand our place in the world, how we came to be here.

These days there's a heightened interest in telling our stories and learning those of our ancestors. If your parents are gone, as mine are, it's almost like detective work. You know the family stories, what you heard around the dinner table or perhaps when you went fishing. You may have original documents that your parents and

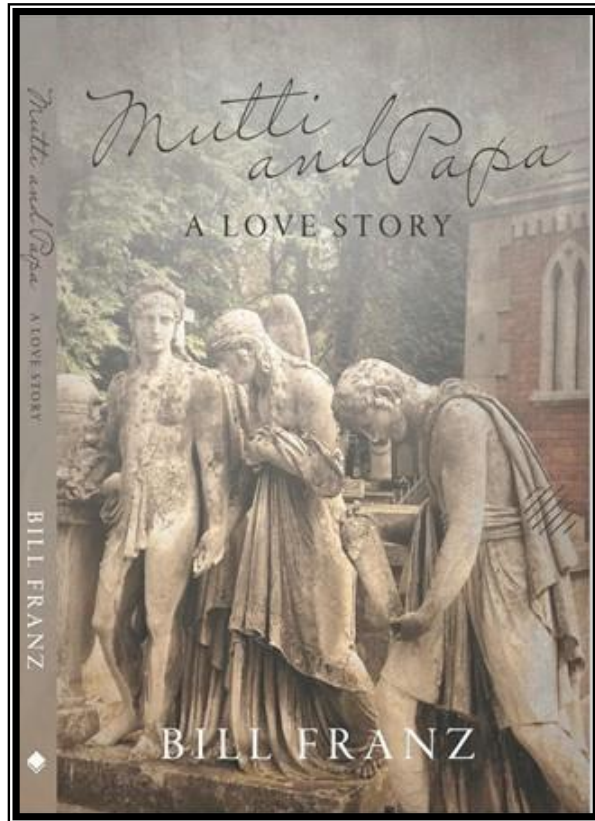
grandparents kept. There may be family photos. There may be letters.

I had access to much of the above. In addition, the World Wide Web places other resources at our fingertips. I needed to place the lives of my parents and grandparents in both a historical context and a geographical one.

My parents met as young people in a Mennonite Central Committee refugee camp in Germany after World War Two and sought to come to Canada to start a new life. My mother, Ella, came first on her own in 1949 at the brave young age of nineteen. Her fiancé, Johann, who would become my father, followed later that year with her family.

I wrote *Mutti and Papa* to honour my father and mother and grandparents, primarily as a family history book, for their descendants. I'm hoping it will be of interest to the Mennonite community, and perhaps also to the larger community. My father would be "blown away" to learn that there are now more refugees in the world than there were at the close of World War Two.

It's taken me about twenty years to write this book, but I've been thinking about it for a lot longer! Travelling to Ukraine and Poland in the fall of 2018 with my sisters to see some of the places where our family had lived helped bring their stories to life. I then travelled on to Russia to meet family



Bill Franz

in Siberia for the first time. An account of "A Journey in Time" is available in The MHSA Chronicle at <http://mennonitehistory.org/wp-content/uploads/Chronicle-No.-1-March-2019.pdf>

Mutti and Papa, A Love Story is being published by FriesenPress with a target date of Thanksgiving, 2021, for release. ♦

Virtual Spring Conference 2021 Report

By Bill Franz

Around 100 people gathered round their computer screens to attend MHSA's first conference by ZOOM on April 24, 2021. People didn't have to travel, of course, which allowed people from further away to attend. There were no major issues with ZOOM, but "Kuchen und Kaffee" (cake and coffee) and visiting were missed!

Katie Harder, our host, opened with a reading from Ecclesiastes 3:1-8: "*To everything there is a season, And a time to every purpose under the heaven...*", followed with prayer.

Bill Franz read from the introduction of his soon-to-be-released book, "*Mutti and Papa, A Love Story*". From the back cover, "The product of more than sixty years of reflection, *Mutti and Papa* is a family history that traces the love story of the parents of author Bill Franz, Mennonite refugees fleeing war-torn Europe, over the course of World War Two."

"Volendam, A Refugee Story", Andrew Wall's award-winning documentary film, was live-streamed. "A feature documentary examining the story of Russian Mennonite refugees who fled west

(See Conference on page 25)

(Conference from page 24)

with the retreating German Army during World War Two, desperate to escape the horror of Stalin's Soviet Union. The Mennonites, with nowhere to go, would end up stranded in refugee camps throughout Holland and Germany in an unfolding two-year saga. Eventually a risky plan, involving the American Military, multiple governments, aid organizations and the Queen of the Netherlands would come together. It would all hinge on an old transport ship called Volendam..." Various viewing options are available at <https://www.refuge31.com/project/volendam/>.

A commentary and Q and A followed with our volunteer archivist, Ted Regehr, who was consulted in the making of the film, *Volendam*. Ted D. Regehr is professor Emeritus of History at the University of Saskatchewan and the author of "Mennonites in Canada, 1939-1970: A People Transformed", which is Volume 3 of *Mennonites in Canada*.

Ted shared from his research into Canadian Immigration policies of the day and the efforts of MCC workers (e.g., Peter Dyck and C.F. Klassen) to present a favourable impression of Mennonite refugees to the International Refugee Organization (IRO). Those in the audience had a number of personal family connections to those perilous times.

A big thank you to our program host (Katie Harder) and our technical co-hosts (Dave Neufeld and Marie Moyer) for handling the ZOOM! James Friesen closed in prayer, thanking God and asking the Lord's blessing over our families. ❖

Take Care that Your Hearts be not Heavy

By Alfred Klassen

Thank you, Editor Toews, for printing Dave Hubert's article "Saved from the Russian Famine in 1922". It put me in mind of the letters my parents received out of another famine that occurred in the Soviet Union 10 years later. I'm sending one of them because it speaks volumes about the plight of famine victims of all times and places.

The 1933 letter is addressed to the letter writer's cousin by marriage, my maternal aunt Agnes Dyck, who arrived in Canada with her father's family, the Jacob N. Dycks, in 1928. It was penned by a young mother, Tine [Katherina] Willms, of Lichtfelde. S. Russia, who recently found herself separated by an ocean from her husband's cousins and uncle. [Tine is pronounced Teen.]

I recall my mother, Marie Dyck Klassen, speaking fondly of her cousin "Grisch", [Gerhard Willms of Steinbach, Manitoba] from time to time while I was growing up. Several months after my parents' death in 1983, I examined the contents of the "under-the-stairs box", expecting to find a letter or two from the old country. Among the letters from our Klassen relatives, I found four that didn't fit the mold. I filed them under "Hans und Tine" and forgot about them for a few years. Only later, while translating them into English, did I discover our family's Willms connection.

The doors to emigration from Russia clanged shut in 1929, leaving millions at the mercy of Stalin's socialist experiment. A few years later, around 1934, the "iron curtain" dropped on communication with foreigners. The letter below is but one example of thousands of cries for help deriving from all parts of the Soviet Empire during those years.

Today, with famines stalking helpless victims around the globe, Tine's cry for help has universal relevance.

Sincerely,

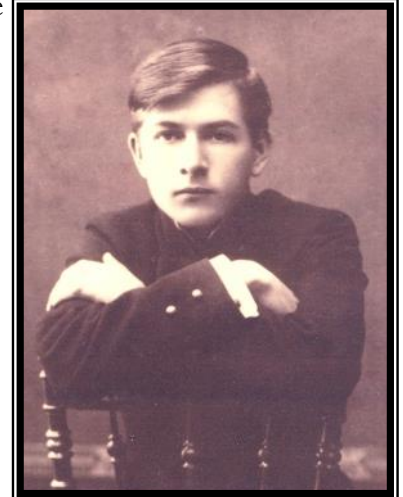
Alfred Klassen

The 8th of February 1931

Dear Cousin, [Agnes Dyck, Coaldale, Alberta]

I wish all of you good health and God's blessing and support. Received your letters and photos yesterday. Many thanks, and I now will become more acquainted with them. I am Hans' wife; (1) I hope we can address each other with "du" [the informal word "you"]. I don't mind writing letters and will answer everyone that I receive, as long as we survive and stay healthy. Our family is two boys, Freddy 6, and Arthur 3, and a girl, 1 month. Mother is at Anna's for now (2) because our bread was taken. From Anna, she intends to return the Crimea, to "Miche" [Maria]. (3) Da-

(See Hearts on page 26)



Gerhard "Grisch" Willms and his spouse Mary "Mimi" Martens with two daughters immigrated to Canada in 1926 and settled near Steinbach, Manitoba

(Hearts from page 25)

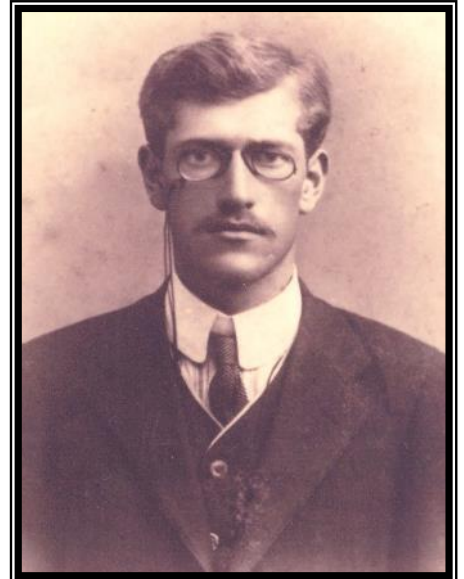
vid is a teacher there, and they still have enough to live well. I'll send her your letter at once. We live with Mama. (4) You probably already know that Aunt Lena has died. (5) We always console ourselves that it was good she could go home, and she won't have to fear death by starvation, a fear that grips almost all of Russia. It's simply frightful here; most people survive on beets and onions, and that will soon be at an end. No one knows what will come next. We still have some potatoes. When they're gone and no help arrives, we too will have to starve, for there's nothing to be had here. I'm so sorry for my little ones if I have to watch them starve. Until now we always had some cornmeal, but two weeks ago that was taken from us. (6) Maria Wiens (7) sent us a bit and it was a tremendous help. Until now the Lord has not abandoned us, and He will continue to care for us and will soften more hearts so that we can receive help. My dear Hans is in demand from 3 a.m. until 8 in the evening. (8) No Sunday, no day of rest, and always under such poor provisions as we have here, no lard, if only we had bread we wouldn't ask for a thing; we'd gladly work anywhere, but all that we earned with hard labour in the spring and summer has been taken from us. I found a verse in my basket ["Ziehkasten"]: "Take care that your hearts not be heavy with concern for nourishment." It was a great comfort to me when we had to surrender our flour; and yet when our oldest son asked whether we wouldn't get any flour to bake our bread, my heart sank as I saw how even a small child takes up the burden. I told him that God the Saviour won't allow us to starve, and we should place our hope in Him, He will take us through. And if it should be His will that we die of hunger, He will even then give us grace and strength. Many starving beggars pass here, and one cannot help them because we too have nothing. Dear Agnes, (9) I must ask, please do you have anything to share, and would you please give this letter to your employer to read, (10) perhaps he will contribute something also. The Lord and Father will bless you, and we might be helped, and perhaps, later on, be able to repay you. Hans really wanted to write to your Papa (11) but he has no time. You could forward this letter and then they too will know everything. We don't have his address either. What America has done for Russia till now is impressive; everyday packages and letters arrive here. Many have been saved by their friends in America. It's too long until the fresh [produce]; the crop was good, and all was harvested, but we couldn't consume it. Of livestock, we actually have nothing, only a few chickens that soon will die of starvation, so that we have no an-



Maria (Willms) Wiens approx 18 years of age in 1913. In 1964 her sister Lena wrote that Maria, her husband David, and a daughter Edith were all living in Alma-Ata. (present day Almaty, Kazakhstan)

ticipation of eggs. Milk is rationed here, ¼ litre per person per day, and it does help somewhat but not enough. Sister Lensch (12)

[Lena] also is doing poorly. They live in Crimea. Franz (13) is a doctor in Alexanderwohl; he has enough to eat. Now I want to end



Franz Willms approx 23 years of age was a gifted violinist. In the early 1930's he was a doctor and his wife Elsa a pharmacist in Alexanderwohl

this begging. It's not easy to write this kind of letter: things may eventually improve and then we'll write proper letters. Don't be mad at me for addressing you with "du"; I'm hoping that you'll do the same for me. We're relatives and sisters in the Lord, as I have read in your letter. Please pass my greetings to Maria Wiens [a Coaldale acquaintance of Agnes] if you chance to meet her. Are there any other Russians that know us? Hans asks that you greet your parents from us. In love, we remain your,
Hans and Tine [Willms]. (14)

[Note on the margin:] Another

(See Hearts on page 27)

(Hearts from page 26)

month's worth of beans if we can keep it.

[Bottom note inverted] The page is for your employer. May you could give it and read it to him.

[An address is added to the bottom of the page. I can make out the words "Melitopol and Ukraine."]

- (1) According to the GRANDMA data base, the children of Franz Johann Willms b.1860 and Katherina Barg b. 1868 were as follows: Franz, Katherina (Tina), Gerhard (Grisch), Maria, Anna, Lena, Johann (Hans), Heinrich (Heinz).
- (2) Katherina Barg Willms is visiting her daughter Anna (Unruh).
- (3) Maria married David Wiens.
- (4) Hans and Tine Willms live on his mother's farmstead.
- (5) "Aunt Lena" is Helena Barg, who lived with her sister Katherina Willms.
- (6) Food was levied to be shared communally.
- (7) See #3
- (8) Hans' hours of work bring to mind Colin Neufeldt's extensive paper, "The Public and Private Lives of Mennonite Kolkhoz Chairmen in the Khortytsia and Molochansk ... (1928-1934)
- (9) Agnes Dyck, who moved to Canada in 1928.
- (10) Like many other girls of Mennonite immigrants, Agnes found work as a maid in Lethbridge.
- (11) Her husband Hans would have liked to write to his Uncle Jakob N. Dyck but couldn't find the time to do so. See #8 above.
- (12) Lensch is an endearing name

for her sister-in-law, Lena. The e is sounded like the i in Mike.

(13) Her brother-in-law Franz Willms serves as a doctor in Alexanderwohl. His wife Elsa is a pharmacist.

(14) Letters from the surviving family members in the 1960s reveal that Hans and Tine, Franz and Elsa, were "taken." The word "taken" probably is a euphemism for "banished" or "shot" because even at that date the citizens of the Soviet Union didn't trust their mail service. The personal profile for Dr. Franz Willms #1293773 in GRANDMA bluntly states that both Franz and Elsa were shot. The Willms were likely accused of being sympathetic to the German invaders.

Alfred Klassen is a retired teacher, now a farmer in the Coaldale area. ❖

Get to Know Your Board Members - Brent Wiebe

My name is Brent Wiebe, my wife Marcia Gail and I have four children, aged 4 to 15. We live in Stettler, Alberta, but for five years, from 2008-2013 we called Samara, Russia home. There we served as volunteers with our church's Bible and gospel literature distribution program. While in Russia, we were able to get acquainted with many of the Low-German speaking people living in Siberia, in the Orenburg area. This helped foster an interest in our own background. We are members of the Church of God in Christ, Mennonite (Holdeman). My wife's great-great-grandfather Samuel Boese was one of the first two Holdeman settlers to move to the Linden area in 1902.



Brent Wiebe

Since 2013 I have worked in building design together with my dad. Much of our focus is on Mennonite and Hutterite churches, schools, and other buildings. I am also interested in a variety of things relating to the historical material culture of the Russian Mennonites, with a focus on architecture and the day-to-day lifestyle of our forefathers. This includes furniture, clothing, farmyards, and village designs, etc. Collecting historical building prints provides an interesting comparison to the modern design we do.

Another hobby is language study and sitting with Russian maps or studying archival documents is one of my favourite ways to unwind. My knowledge of Russian has opened doors through social media to foreign researchers who otherwise would be difficult or impossible to communicate with. I have a weaker knowledge of German as well.

My greatest passion is mapping, and I have recently been able to access some exciting "new" maps of the Mennonite communities in Russia. I believe these maps will be an important contribution to Mennonite historical studies and I plan soon to make them available to the public. I enjoy modern advancements and hope to be an asset to the MHSA as we adapt to changing times and technologies. I have been inspired by the obvious enthusiasm and willingness to work evident in the board members. My goal is to work together to help preserve our history and making it accessible to all. ❖

Pathway Through Peril; A Journey of Hope

By Agnes H. Thibert

Reviewed By Dave Toews

The book "Pathway Through Peril; A Journey of Hope," was inspired by a true story although we don't know which parts of it are true. I appreciated the book because the storyline is very familiar to me as I am the son of Russlaender parents who had many of the same experiences as the book's characters. These stories were a constant narrative as I was growing up on a small Canadian prairie farm.

The plot and characters are well developed. The Schroeder, Boldt, and Lentz stories come alive as their families are caught in the web of warring armies, bandits, and revolutionaries raging back and forth across the idyllic Russian countryside (present-day Ukraine). Fear, tension, and murder hover like the black angel of death at every turn.

"Iryna's body gave a jolt at every thudding sound of the earth being thrown into the open pit onto her still form. The silence was broken only by Ivan's weeping." Ivan and Simon are all alone in this inhospitable land now that their sister is dead.

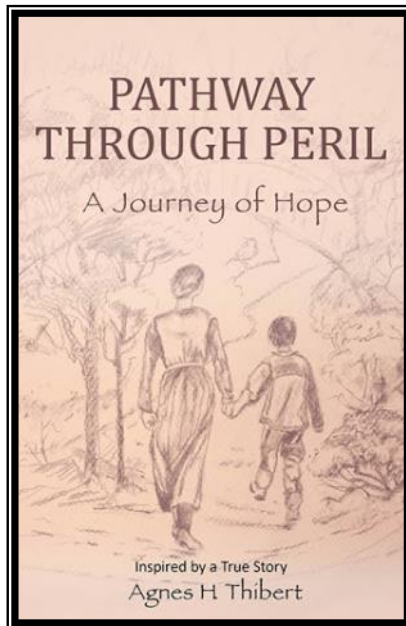
Tina faces many difficult choices. To leave or to stay becomes the riveting question: to immigrate to Canada, the great unknown, or to stay with the familiar? "Do not fall in love with someone else's child," Hilda warns Tina, but it is too late. After the orphanage closes, who will take care of Ivan? Tina will be torn from her family if she goes with her husband Franz and his mother.

I highly recommend this book to all who are interested in Russian Mennonite history. The story left me emotionally drained, but it was well worth the read.

Agnes Thibert was born in Coaldale, Alberta, where her parents lived after emigrating from Ukraine. She spent most of her school years in Coaldale and graduated from the University of Lethbridge with a B.Ed. in 1982. After an extensive teaching career, she retired in 2000 and now lives in the rural Lundbreck area, near Pincher Creek, where she and her husband raised their family.

Mother of three, grandmother of six, great-grandmother of two, Agnes is an avid researcher into the lives of her family members who lived through the tumultuous years of Revolution and Civil War in Russia before they immigrated to Canada.

The book is available for purchase from a wide variety of booksellers, including FriesenPress, Amazon, Indigo, eBay, and booktopia as an eBook, paperback and hardcover. Prices range from \$4.99 eBook to \$35.08 hardcover plus tax and shipping where applicable. ❖



"Faith of Our Fathers," Plague and Pandemic: Mutual Aid, Vaccinations and Social Restrictions

By Arnold Neufeldt-Fast,

Records and Maps by Brent Wiebe

Pandemics and epidemics were part of the longer Prussian-Russian Mennonite history. What can we learn from our Mennonite ancestors and their reactions?

Danzig: plague and pestilence

Russian and Prussian Mennonites trace their history through Gdansk and the region for at least 200 years. They also saw their share of epidemics. According to the *Encyclopedia of Plague and Pestilence*, the 1602 plague killed 19,000 people in Gdansk. [1] In 1653 the city recorded around 600 deaths from plague "weekly", with 11,116 people dying in the course of the year. Four years later, during the Swedish War, another 7,569 Gdańsk people died of the plague, compared to 2,569 births. And again around 5,515 people died of the plague in 1660, compared to 1,916 births in the city. [2]

We do not know how this series of plagues affected the Mennonite community for over seven years. But after a natural disaster in 1667 broke dams and the country was flooded, a powerful government official from Pomerellen (near Gdansk) argued that God was now punishing Poland and Gdansk for their tolerance of Mennonites. The official found broad support among the nobles in the state parliament for his plan - a complete expulsion of all Mennonites - which fortunately did not

(See Plague on page 29)

(Plague from page 28)

materialize. The memory of the sixteenth-century martyrs was the lens for their suffering; in 1659 the *Martyrs Mirror* was published.

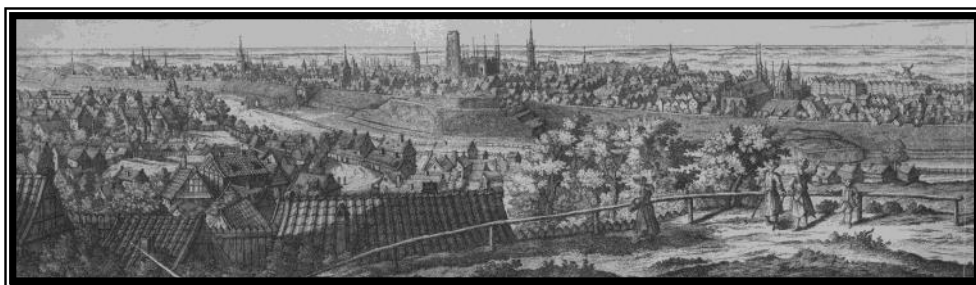
However, Gdańsk's worst plague occurred in 1709. [4] The city had a population of about 50,000 and recorded an average of 2,000 deaths from plague per week in September and October. The city council was forced to hire two plague preachers to visit the sick and conduct funerals for the poor. Plague deaths in Gdansk this year: 24,533 people, or about half of the city's population.



Samuel Donnet's copperplate depiction of the plague of 1709 in Danzig

The few who recovered and were discharged from the hospital were not allowed to go home, but had to "spend time in quarantine in empty houses in the suburb of Petershagen" [5] - the location of the Flemish Mennonite community in Gdansk and next to mostly Mennonite suburb of Old Scotland.

According to the Flemish-Mennonite community in Gdansk, there were only 15 deaths in 1707, in 1708 only 17 deaths, but astonishingly 409 deaths in 1709; then in 1710 again only 9 deaths. [6] The



Danzig

community recorded thirteen deaths on September 18, 19, and 20 alone - more than a typical year.

Ten days earlier (September 9th) elder Christof Engmann had died along with five other parishioners. [7] Visiting the sick was part of his duties. In a congregation of about 1,000 adults and children, 160 baptized members and 249 unbaptized followers died that year. [8] On the last page of the community's death register, completed a century later, the elder wrote: "There have never been as many deaths as during the plague of 1709." [9]

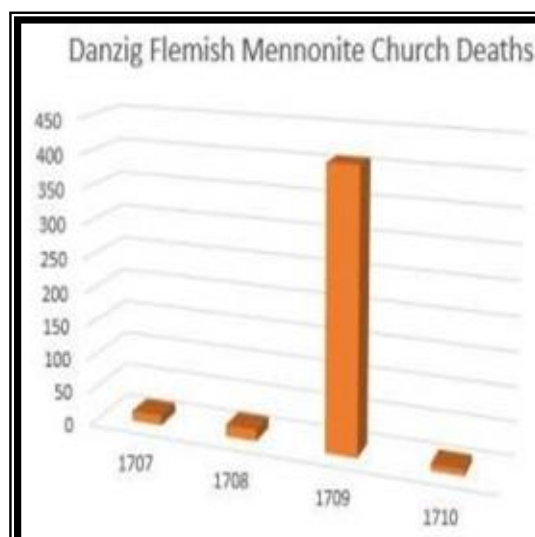
How was the conservative Mennonite community prepared for such disasters? And how have such events shaped the spirituality of tradition?

The plague of 1709 led to a new "beautiful custom" in the Gdańsk Mennonite community, namely to leave bequests for the poor of the community and to arrange for their "burials."

Help. This actually became a tradition two centuries later, according to an elder. [10]

Both the Frisian and the Flemish Mennonites had prayer houses directly in front of the city gates (Neugartener Tor and Petershagener Tor) and each congregation also had its own poor house / hospice under the direction of deacons. [11]

In a medical report the next year, it was stated with confidence that the



An early map of Danzig showing Petershagen just outside the city wall.

(See Plague on page 30)

(Plague from page 29)

plague hit Thorn, an area further south that has also been home to Mennonites since 1586. This 1710 report ended with a prescription for pharmacies and a list of what to and shouldn't do. [12]

The Danzig doctor warned against buying gimmick remedies from drifters or barkers. He also observed that those who visited many people and those who were alcoholics died first. The consumption of "Brandwein" (schnapps), which was also brewed by Mennonites at the time, was particularly harmful. "All stink and uncleanness are most harmful," but the good doctor adds that it is "great medicine" to be calm and trust God, which is also "to be recommended to all". [13]

Chortitza immunization 1809.

In 1801, the number of deaths in the village of Khortitza was twice as high as the number of births - due to a fever epidemic. In 1802 the situation improved with two births for every death in the entire colony. [14]

A few years later (1809) most of the children in the Chortitza colony - 393 children from 205 families, most of them under six years of age - were vaccinated against smallpox. [15] There is no record of any Mennonites refusing to take this step.

List of children by family in the Chortitza Colony who had received the smallpox vaccination with the names and ages for each child as recorded on 12 August 1809		
	Name of the children and their father	age
	Chortitza	
1	David Epp his son David	4
2	Gerhard Willems his sons Gerhard and Johann	1
3	Herrman Bückert his daughters Elisabeth and Maria	3
4	Jacob Wiens his son Peter	1/4

The disease reached the Molotschna Mennonite district in the fall of 1830, and by mid-December hundreds of Nogai indigenous deaths had been recorded in the villages adjacent to the Mennonite colony.



Johann Cornies

When the Mennonite leader of the Molotschna, Johann Cornies, first became aware of the deaths in connection with cholera, he recommended to the Mennonite district office on December 6, 1830, to stop all traffic and all incidental contacts with the Nogai. [18]

Cornies praised the state's decisive measures to isolate the virus and enforce quarantines. Where there is good, wise, and strong government, Cornies saw the protective hand of God at work.

"All streets are blocked and nobody is allowed through without quarantine. It is impossible to thank God enough for his paternal tutelage over our administration, which protects us through its shrewd measures." [19]

"If we follow these rules exactly, all we have to do is pray honestly and submit to God's will." [20]

On December 30, 1830, Cornies wrote to his friend Johann Wiebe in Tiege, West Prussia, about the situation. He described

(See Plague on page 31)

Johann Cornies and the Cholera Pandemic, 1830

Asiatic cholera broke out across Russia in 1829 and -30 and continued in Europe in 1831. It began with an infected battalion in Orenburg, and by the fall of 1830 the disease had reached Moscow and the capital. [16] Russia imposed drastic quarantine measures and, similar to today, infected regions were cut off and domestic trade restricted.

"Government offices, schools, businesses, theaters, and other public places have been closed and quarantined. Rumors spread, this time accusing authorities and health care providers of deliberately spreading the disease. When doctors recommended liquid antiseptics such as chlorinated lime solution or vinegar for cleaning hands and faces, conspirators called them poisons. Doctors and those who followed their recommendations were brutally attacked." [17]

(Plague from page 30)

the aggressive "precautions" they had taken, but also offered a biblical framework:

" Our villages exist like an island in an ocean of cholera, and evil is everywhere."

.. In each [Mennonite] village, two men visit each house daily to check the family's health. In order to separate the sick from the healthy, a house was emptied for use as a hospital . "

" Next to each village office there is a large bathtub, etc. We don't know what the future will bring. Only Eternal God can see it. We must build on his grace and ask him to avert this plague from our kingdom and our villages . "

Cornies' correspondence repeatedly indicated that the Tsar and his government were God-ordained, God-directed, and absolutely reliable.

" With full confidence in the wisdom of our government, we wait without fear for the ordinances of the Almighty."

"May every Christian, every thinking person have a personal conviction that everything that comes from God will serve our good. May this highest wisdom divinely enlighten the immortal spirit of man, who was created in his image, and throw light into the darkness of our earthly path. "

"We do not strive against God's will by using our minds to take precautionary measures against illnesses and to combat disturbing forces of nature. We use our talents from on high, submit them to his wise advice, and glorify his holy name. As you know, some people consider precautionary measures to be sinful here. Others continue to indulge in frivolity, even during this depressed, discouraging time. "[21]

Within a few months, the pandemic also broke out in Gdansk, despite a 20-day quarantine against people and goods from Russia. On

June 16, 1831 Prussia began to treat ships from Danzig "as if from Russia". [22]

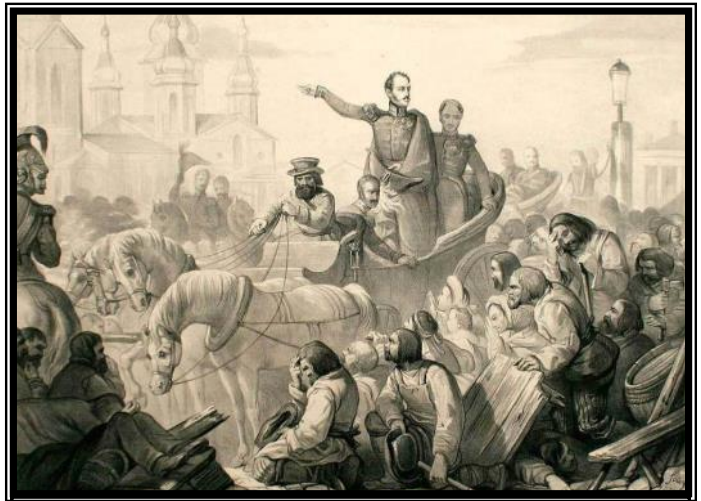
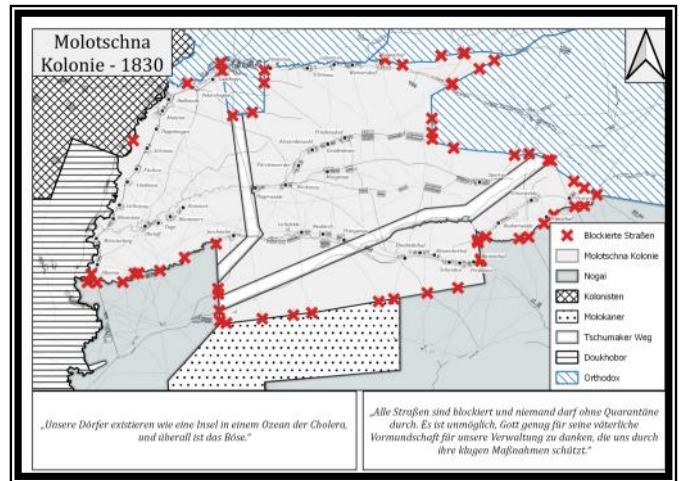
In total, the pandemic in Russia claimed around 250,000 lives, with the death rate among those infected being 50%. [23]

The Mennonite and German colonies in southern Russia

were spared a cholera outbreak. On September 18, 1831, Cornies wrote:

" So far, our church has been spared, although we have felt besieged since May ... I don't see a doctor as God and medicine as a savior, but I firmly believe that if God doesn't bless our daily bread or medicines, they will." neither nourish nor heal . "[24]

What was important to Johann Cornies? Informed and determined action; Trust that the sovereign God works through earthly rulers; and prayer. Just like that, Cornies can confidently submit to God's will.



The tsar reassures protesters

Enough

The global dimensions of the pandemic, the large number of deaths, the state-enforced quarantines, the crippling economic consequences, the strong resistance of the masses and the existential fear of death - all these aspects bear a remarkable resemblance to our time.

Perhaps there will be a treasure in 2020 that can still be found in the beliefs and actions of our conservative ancestors in Prussia and Russia so many generations ago.

References available upon request

This article first appeared on *Trails of the Past* website Aug 2020, used with permission. ♦

MHSA 2020 AGM Report May 29, 2021

By Bill Franz

Our Annual General Meeting was again held by ZOOM because of public health restrictions necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. We are hopeful that our Fall Conference will be held in-person! Over 30 members participated in the AGM, and it was appreciated that travel was not required.

Chair Ken Matis opened with a “Spruch”, a saying from the 70th anniversary book of the Coaldale Mennonite Church, which was founded ninety-three years ago in 1928. The poem opened in German with “Wo kommst du her? Wo willst du hin?” Where are you from? Where do you want to go? This is very fitting as we prepare to celebrate the hundredth anniversary of the second wave of Russian Mennonites (“die Russländer”) emigrating to Canada in 2023. Ken then led us in a prayer of thanks.

As our last AGM was held in November, 2020, reports were fairly brief. The reports were presented and accepted as follows: Chairman’s (Ken Matis), Treasurer’s (Jake Retzlaff), Chronicle & Media (Dave Toews), Archives Task Force (Dave Neufeldt), and the Archives & Library (Ted Rehger).

The **Cross Canada Russlaender Centenary Tour** will be held from June 30, 2023 to July 20, 2023 (dates are subject to change according to the train schedule). More details are available on the TourMagination website at <https://tourmagination.com/tour/cross-canada-russlaender-centenary-tour/>. There has been a schedule change since as the Saskatoon to Edmonton segment will now be by bus, departing Saskatoon July 20 instead of July 14. The itinerary is broken into three parts: Québec City to Kitchener, Toronto to Saskatoon, and Saskatoon to Abbotsford, B.C. MHSA has a committee working on the Alberta portion of the tour. Donations are welcome at any time.

The 2021 budget proposed by Treasurer Jake Retzlaff was presented and discussed. A small change was made, transferring \$100 from the Honorary line item to the Hosting line item. The proposed budget was then accepted. Ken thanked Ellie Janz for her diligence in bookkeeping.

New business: Dave Toews was elected to another three-year term (2021-2024). Ken thanked Dave for his many contributions as editor of the Chronicle, preparing the AGM report package, preparing posters for events including the Spring and Fall Conferences, as one of the two Facebook ad-

ministrators, and as a member of the MHSA Russlaender planning committee.

Fall Conference: Secretary Bill Franz proposed the 2021 Fall Conference be held in Red Deer, as its Central Alberta location make it quite accessible from Edmonton and Calgary and points further away. The date proposed is Saturday, November 6, 2021 from 2:00 to 4:00 p.m. A committee was struck, chaired by Ken Matis, with members Bill Franz, Brent Wiebe, and James Friesen. Bill lives in Red Deer and will investigate venues. Bill’s first book, *Mutti and Papa, A Love Story*, will be published shortly and the Fall Conference will serve as the book launch in Alberta. From the back cover, ... “*Mutti and Papa* is a family history that traces the love story of the parents of author Bill Franz, Mennonite refugees fleeing war-torn Europe, over the course of World War II.” “Set against the backdrop of the cataclysmic events of the Holocaust and Second World War, the love story of Ella and Johann is at once a fascinating historical account, a happy romance, and an earnest examination of what it’s like to strive for a future while struggling to cope with life as a refugee.” ♦

“We think sometimes that poverty is only being hungry, naked and homeless. The poverty of being unwanted, unloved and uncared for is the greatest poverty.”

— Mother Theresa