



The MHSA Chronicle

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Mexico: No Land of Milk and Honey!

Adapted from "The Mennonite Legacy of my 'Kanadier' Grandparents: Heinrich Bergen and Margaretha Rempel"
by Hilda M Riediger Dueck pub. 2022

Growing up listening to my Mother's stories, I imagined her family as gypsies because they had lived in so many different places. Wanderlust was in her Sommerfelder Mennonite family's DNA, but political upheaval and broken promises also played a part.



Hilda M. Riediger Dueck

In researching his story, I found Norwegian sailors shipwrecked on Netherland shores and Anabaptists fleeing to Prussia and then Russia because of persecution. Searching

(See Mexico on page 8)

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A Journey Under God's Providence (part 2)

By Dave Loewen

The Loewen Home – A Refuge

The Loewen home became home to not only the Loewens, but also to the newly arrived relatives from the Soviet Union. They shared many happy moments, as well as the sad news contained in the letters from siblings and parents in the USSR. On Sundays, the sizeable group worshipped together in the Loewen home. Abraham Loewen became their spiritual leader in this respect. Services usually consisted of several songs and a sermon read from a church periodical ("Der Bote" or "Die Rundschau"), which arrived weekly in the mail. Maria Loewen always read a children's story for the young children, and in fact, Anna recalls that initially, that was all the "worship" they experienced in the first years—Bible stories read by her mother.

Before the pump organ made its appearance in the Loewen home, hymnal singing was led by Abraham, as the "Vorsaenger" (a voluntary song leader, who led by singing each line first, followed by those assembled repeating the line). Anna recalls that his singing was unbearably drawn out. All praying was done silently, and it wasn't until attending Bible School that Anna recalls experiencing audible prayers for the first time.

The Loewen neighbours, distant as they may have been in the Alberta



Dave Loewen



Extended Loewen family at the Simon's Valley farm, ca. 1947

(See Journey on page 3)

"Save the Dates"

Cross Canada Russlaender 100 Tour
And the Fall Conference - Deutsch Wymysle

See the posters on the back pages for more details

Editorial Reflections

by Dave Toews

History is not there for us to like or dislike. It is there for us to learn from. And if it offends us, even better. Because we are less likely to repeat it, it is not ours to erase. It belongs to ALL of us. Anonymous



Dave Toews

The time between the March and the June issues has flown by! It has been a hectic but satisfying time to help organize the Alberta Russlaender Tour events and the Deutsch Wymysle Fall Conference and bring the June Chronicle to print.

We have two continued pieces in this issue: *A Journey Under God's Providence and Migration from Ukraine to China*. Bill Franz has very ably written a review on *Mennonite Farmers; A Global History of Planning and Sustainability*. And I had an epiphany of a sort writing about *What Do*

You See in the Photograph? It gave me a lot of satisfaction with how that article turned out.

Continuing on the theme of all the Mennonite anniversaries, we are celebrating this, and in the next few years, Hilda Dueck has penned an article with information gleaned from her book on her maternal grandparent's journey to Mexico and back, *Mexico: No Land of Milk and Honey*. We are also including the late Rev JJ Thiessen's 1964 first-person account of how he escorted his first trainload of Russlaender from the Lichtenau station to the Latvian border in 1924. *Russian Mennonite Exodus to Canada 1924* is a fact-filled, often tense account of what transpired.

As always, I would like to thank 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 dmtoews@gmail.com or 780-218-7411 cell with any questions, suggestions or comments. ❖

Chairman's Corner

by Katie Harder

Attending a large event might give you pause to think slightly differently about something that you thought was clearly established in your mind. Just recently, I attend-



Katie Harder

ed a memorial service for a senior in a neighbouring church in our community. This man, his parents and his siblings had formerly attended the Bergthal Mennonite Church, where I attend. In his later twenties, he met his wife at the former Brethren in Christ Church (now the Evangelical Missionary Church) in the town of Didsbury. He chose to join her denomination and continued to worship there for the remainder of his life. His large memorial service was attended by various people and, of course, individuals from the church he had attended in his youth. It was indeed a celebration of a life well lived. Again and again, it was mentioned that his actions and involvement with people portrayed his love of God; it was said he walked the talk. The congregational pastor mentioned his Mennonite roots several times and how they had shaped his life in his formative years.

This July, we are celebrating the reenactment of the historic migration of 21,000 Mennonites from Russia to Canada between 1923 and 1930. It was with the help of established Mennonites in Canada that these migrants found new homes in Canada in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution. The

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gentleman whose memorial service I attended was a grandson of the Gerhard Neufeld Family that originally hosted numerous Russian Mennonites. Gerhard Neufeld was one of the original founders of the Bergthal Mennonite Church. Today most of the Gerhard Neufeld descendants worship in churches other than Mennonite, but mainly the Evangelical Missionary Church of Canada. I keep asking why have they joined this denomination? The EMCC values state that their Missionary Church background brought Anabaptist values of community, mission, and discipleship to the newly merged denomination. They value their heritage not by trying to recreate the past but by following the path of God's calling, which led their predecessors to bless and serve all people in the name of Jesus and to invite others to follow him. One difference is they baptize by immersion, whereas GC Mennonites sprinkle, pour, immerse, and MB Mennonites only immerse.

When we gather with others to worship God, we commune with God himself. God's people experienced that connection to Him when they gathered in Jerusalem in ancient times for their yearly festivals. These gatherings were times of solemn remembrance, worship, and rejoicing with family and others. That is what the memorial service exemplified for me, it was a gathering of worship to God with family and friends, but it was also a time of remembrance of a man who had chosen to follow God in a denomination that does not champion Mennonites, but nevertheless, he was a sincere believer.

The Russlaender Centenary Tour in July of 2023 is close at

hand. The tour should cause us to reflect on how it is that we came to be here and perhaps some of the lessons we, as Mennonites, have learned along the way. Will we use our experiences from the past to make new and wiser decisions in the future?

Soren Kierkegaard said, and I quote, "Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forward." ♦

(Journey from page 1)

prairie, came to understand that "on Sundays you don't do business with the Loewens". Sunday services were always followed by a dinner, which was enjoyed by all. When their first car was purchased, they managed occasionally to make the 50-mile drive to Didsbury, where they attended the Bergthal Mennonite Church.

The farm in Simons Valley became the social center, not only on Sundays, but also at special seasonal times of celebration—Easter, Thanksgiving, and Christmas. In later years, once their children were married, Maria Loewen expected her children and grandchildren to be home on those occasions. Eleanor Loewen, a grandchild, recalls that for the first 10 years of their married life, her parents, Martin and Sara Loewen adhered to those expectations.

One Christmas 30 people were stranded on the farm, due to weather. With four bedrooms upstairs, the six grandchildren were on the floor in a large closet, and the adult men and women slept separately. "The gang was there for three days, enjoying themselves hugely", recalls Sara Loewen. Maria Loewen never let on if she had had too much.

Maria Loewen had a large garden, that was her pride and joy. It was a standing rule that during the summers, no one was allowed into the garden unless accompanied by an adult. This concern about her grandchildren was not unfounded. It occurred on one Pentecost Sunday, when the family was together, as usual. Maria had 'set the turkeys on eggs', which her daughter, Tina, had advised her to delay until after everyone had left. The grandchildren (8), not mentioned by name out of respect (some live in Alberta), got into the coop and spoiled every nest. There were no turkeys that year. Maria had been sure that the nests would be safe, despite her daughter's adamant counsel that she wait until everyone was gone.

Reiseschuld And A Frugal Lifestyle

Like all the other families who came to Canada, thanks to the generous assistance of the CPR, Abraham Loewen had a travel debt (*Reiseschuld*) to pay off. Abraham and Maria Loewen had vowed that they would neither purchase nor set foot in a car until that debt was paid off. They were, therefore, quite upset and disappointed with son, Martin, when he purchased a car for \$360.00, before the debt had been paid.

The car was a good deal and not to be missed, thought Martin. In fact, his mother was much more upset with Martin than his father was. Abraham was able to see the value in having a vehicle, whereas Maria was noted for her frugality, and this was certainly not a priority for her. The money needed to pay off the debt was in fact, on its way from that au-

(See Journey on page 4)

(Journey from page 3)



Simon's Valley farm yard on a weekend gathering, ca. 1938

turn's harvest (1929), but that was not good enough for Abraham Loewen, and certainly not for his wife, Maria.

The Loewens did not own a car for the first three years in Canada, but eventually they bought a car; it was a little coupe, with the back converted into something resembling a truck box. Three could sit in the front and another two or three in the back. This car was traded several years later for a larger car—a “touring” car with curtains. Martin had met someone in Calgary with a Dodge, like the Loewen car, only it was a sedan. This man had always wanted a coupe, so an even trade was arranged. Of course, the sons did all the driving. They were now able to attend the Mennonite church in Didsbury, but only once per month – it was all they could afford. It should be noted that Abraham Loewen never learned to drive a car, even after 50 years in Canada.

The car purchase had not been the first time that Martin had surprised his parents and siblings with his impulsive spending. In the very first years of farming in Simons Valley, the Loewens had been involved, in one way or another, with breaking horses. Martin had broken horses on the Colpitts ranch where he was a hired hand, and through his connection, the Loewens were also able to benefit materially by housing horses on their farm and breaking them. On one occasion, Martin was charged with taking these horses to the auction in Calgary, a distance of about 20 km. Abraham sent a steer along to sell for cash to make a payment on their CPR travel debt.

At the auction, Martin noted a beautiful “pump” organ on which the bidding was not very high. According to a brother's account, Martin had felt it a shame that such an opportunity was not being taken advantage of and so he entered a bid of \$25.00 and became the proud owner of a pump organ. According to a sister's account, the price was only \$5.00, and Martin had bid in error. Regardless, at that time, \$25.00 was a good month's wage and it should not be surprising that Abraham was disappointed with Martin's arrival home that day – a horse-drawn wagon loaded with a pump organ.

His father's displeasure was mitigated by his mother's (not to mention his sister's) approval. This time the value was appreciated sooner by the other parent. That organ became the focal point of many family gatherings and in the early years, of Sunday morning worship times in the Loewen home, where the extended family gathered. Tina points out that she paid for the organ almost immediately and became the sole player of the instrument in the Loewen family. When the Loewens moved to the West Coast in 1947, the organ also made the move. As a young boy, I remember the

many times we played on that organ, pulling the “stops” and pumping the pedals to get the organ to make a sound. The organ was sold in the 1980s when Tina sold the home and moved to smaller accommodations. The organ found a home, for a while, as a prop in an Abbotsford shoe store.

Abraham and Maria's frugality was modeled not only to their children, but also to their children's spouses. On one occasion, Maria Loewen asked her daughter-in-law, Sara Loewen, if they had already repaid the travel debt. When Sara enquired why she was asking, Maria replied that she noticed that Sara was wearing a new dress. On other occasions, shortly after marriage, Sara experienced visits in their Calgary home from Abraham, who came into the city on errands, and upon seeing objects or clothing in the home that he felt were unnecessary luxuries, he would remark, “Musst du dass haben?” (Do you really need that?) Many years later, when living next door to Abraham and Maria in Abbotsford, Sara enjoyed friendly ‘ribbing’, by asking her father-in-law, Abraham, whether he really needed “that”, referring to some item they may have purchased for themselves. Apparently, Abraham enjoyed the ‘payback’ comments.

On the day that Abraham Loewen stood behind the counter at the office where he was to repay his loan, another gentleman stood on the other side and was astounded that the loan had been repaid in only three years. That gentleman was none other than Dr. Drury who had been in Russia administering medical tests to prospective immigrants and had had the authority to grant or to deny permis-

(See Journey on page 5)

(Journey from page 4)

sion to emigrate to Canada. He had almost denied Abraham Loewen permission because of his deformed thumb, the result of a heavy trunk falling on his thumb. But here he was, paying back the loan in three years. This was quite an accomplishment, considering how many never paid their debts, and still others who were unable to pay their debts until the 1950s.

There were 11 people in the Loewen family to pay for. Of course, the four oldest, Lena, Abe, Martin & Isaac worked very hard in the first years and gave their entire earnings home so that the loan would be paid off. Some say it was only because Abraham had lots of sons (5) who would be able to help carry the burden of paying for the trip, that Dr. Drury gave his permission.

Paying For The Farm

After 10 years of making payments on the farm loan, Abraham Loewen found that the entire principal remained unpaid. The contract had been a 10-year contract that had provided a tidy sum for the vendors. They were promised half of everything produced on the farm, leaving the remaining half for sustaining a large family, covering all farm expenses, and for paying off the farm loan. Henry pleaded with his father to get legal advice and to “take the rascals to court” but Abraham Loewen felt bound by his word and would not entertain the idea.

In 1937, at the termination of his 10-year contract, Abraham Loewen signed another 10-year contract. The new contract did not materialize without some ‘negotiating’ by Henry. According

to his account:

“Finally I told Fisher Williams, our landlord, that we would no longer pay him half of everything. He got so mad at us and said, ‘You darn Mennonites are all the same, but I’ll fix you in court and I’ll chase you off the place!’ I said, ‘Go ahead. Take us to court and let’s be done with it.’ He went away and Dad just about cried. ‘Now look, he’s going to chase us off the farm and we haven’t got a thing!’ He can’t chase us off the place,’ I said, ‘I’m not afraid of that!’ An hour later, Fisher came back and said that he didn’t want his name in the paper and was willing to give us a different contract. It was just before Christmas, and he asked us to wait until after New Year.”

As it turned out, Fisher only stalled for more time, forcing Abraham Loewen to apply to the Debt Adjustment Board. Fisher quickly responded in an effort to avoid court. In actual fact, Abraham wanted nothing to do with court either, and it was only Henry’s insistence and coaching that forced Fisher William’s hand. This time, the contract was more agreeable to Abraham Loewen’s interests. The terms called for 1/3 to go to Fisher, and 5% interest on the loan instead of 6%. Now Abraham was in a position to pay off the farm, which he did in the next 10 years.

Not only did Abraham Loewen finally have a fair contract, but by 1937, economic times were also improving. At this time, Abraham Loewen began to invest more heavily in hog farming. Henry had advised his father to put as much feed into hogs as possible and pay off the cattle and machinery first. That would provide insurance against a forcible removal from the land; they would still have something to start over with. When World War II broke out in 1939, demand for hogs rose and so did the hog prices.

Recognition of Their Children

Abraham and Maria Loewen had not taken for granted the role their children had played in allowing the family to become established in Canada. With time, each child’s contributions were recognized. Abraham had wanted to help each of his sons become established on a farm. A ¼ Section of land, east of Didsbury, was purchased for son, Abram. Martin had no interest in farming, since his philosophy of farming did not agree with that of his father, and furthermore, he felt he could do as well, if not better, on his own.

Martin was always exploring other options. One summer, he decided his “fortune” would be sooner attained through gopher hunting than by working for nearby farmers. The provincial government had offered a bounty for every gopher tail provided. Martin was right; he and Jacob Sawatzky had a successful “hunting” season. They collected bounty on the tails and sold the gophers to the Colpitts Fox Farm for food.

It was not long before Martin left for the city and discovered what



Gopher Bounty Hunters, Jake Sawatzky & Martin Loewen, ca. 1930

(See Journey on page 6)

(Journey from page 5)

would become his life's occupation – a produce wholesaler, in Alberta and later, in British Columbia (B.C.). He purchased produce, like cucumbers, corn and potatoes, as well as eggs, in Gem, Alberta, and transported them to Calgary in his 'jalopy', where he would sell it. By 1936, he could afford a new GMC truck. Martin's contributions were recognized at the time of the farm sale in 1947.

A ½ Section, also east of Didsbury, was purchased, which was intended for Isaac and for Henry, but Isaac had other ideas as well. He wanted to have 40 acres of irrigation land near Brooks, Alberta. This arrangement never materialized and during the war years, Isaac moved to Calgary where he took up carpentry work. Like Martin, his contributions were recognized in 1947. Henry, who did want to farm, did not want land in the south where he would have to irrigate. He remained at home and helped his father farm his land for many years. He was remunerated for his many years of helping his father at the time of the farm sale.

Dan had been in Alternative Service during the war. When he returned from Alternative Service, he and Henry discussed the matter of who would stay with their father to carry on the farming and who would farm the ½ Section of land intended for the two of them. They came to a mutual agreement that Daniel would farm that land, and Henry would stay with their father. Daniel purchased an additional ¼ Section from his father and both he and Abram rented the other ¼ Section from their father. Daniel farmed there for eight years and then moved to the city to take up carpentry in the house construction industry.

The daughters, excluding those who married, were recognized for their contributions to the family during the early years of settling in Canada. Their parents reimbursed them as well, for contributing through the performance of household duties, gardening, milking of cows in the earlier years, plus a variety of other duties.

In a letter, dated May 9, 1965, addressed to Abraham Loewen and signed by all his children, they agreed that an additional sum might be paid to Lena. Their reasoning was that as she had made regular payments to him in their initial years in Canada, it was reasonable to assume that those payments had had an indirect impact on a successful farming experience in Simons Valley. Lena had requested that this sum be paid out over a three-year span, after which she would begin collecting Old Age Pension and would not be in as great a need of financial resources.

This communication coincided with the sale of Abraham Loewen's property in Abbotsford, B.C. to Tina in that same year. Another letter dated the same day, signed by all the children, advised on a selling price generous to Tina, with monthly payments at no interest.

After the parents moved to B.C., Abram rented his father's land and later purchased it. Full mineral rights, the deed to which remained with Abraham Loewen, (later the "Family Mineral Holdings"), accompanied that parcel of land. It became a topic of discussion at many family gatherings and also a common item of discussion around our dinner table. I often heard my father refer to "when the ship comes in, we will...". My father never did see that ship, nor has anyone, to this day. The mineral rights remain with some members of the family with no greater



Loewen family in 1947 - Golden Anniversary
Back Row (left to right): Mary & Dave Dyck, Sara & Martin, Lena, Tina, Henry, Abram, Daniel
Front Row (left to right): Zana (Isaac, absent), Anna Barg, Maria & Abraham, Justina (Henry), Betty (Abe), Margaret (Daniel)

(See Journey on page 7)

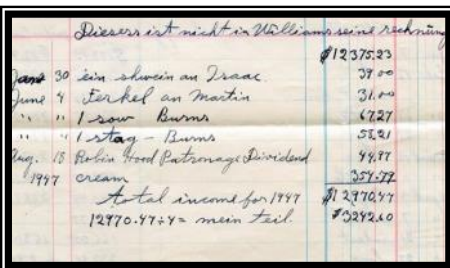
(Journey from page 6)

promise of “striking it rich”.

Farewell to Simons Valley

Abraham and Maria Loewen had lived in Simons Valley for 20 years, and in 1947, they celebrated their Golden Wedding anniversary. Abraham and Maria acknowledged the Lord's providence in their lives and that they wanted to continue to put their trust in Him. As the congregation stood, the Loewens and their children knelt, as the blessing was pronounced.

Abraham had decided it was time to retire; he was 73. Even though the farm was not sold until late 1948, livestock and grain was gradually being sold throughout 1947. Notes in his own handwriting indicate that he had been selling his livestock (cattle and hogs) and grain (wheat and flax) from January through to December, resulting in total sales of \$12,375.21. On the reverse side of the page a grand total of \$12,970.47 is shown



Diezern ist nicht in Wallimose's Rechnung

| | | |
|---------|----------------------------------|--------------------|
| Jan 30 | ein Schwein an Isaac | \$12,375.21 |
| June 4 | Stierkel an Martin | 37.00 |
| " " | 1 sow Burns | 31.00 |
| " " | 1 stag Burns | 47.27 |
| Aug. 15 | Boilin Hood Paternage Swindled | 58.21 |
| 1947 | cream | 34.77 |
| | Total income for 1947 | 351.77 |
| | Total income for 1947 | \$12,970.47 |
| | 12,970.47 ÷ 4 = mean tail | \$3,242.60 |

Final tally of farm grain and livestock sales, 1947. Note that total was divided four ways; one quarter for Abraham and remaining portion for three sons who chose not to farm.

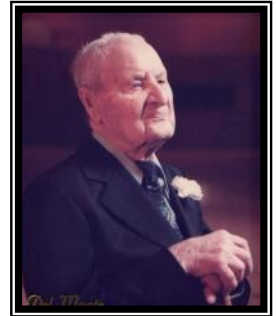
as divided into four equal shares, with a note (in German) stating that his (Abraham's) share was $\frac{1}{4}$, or \$3242.60. The other shares would have been for sons who had chosen not to farm.

In early 1948, Abraham and Maria moved to Abbotsford, B.C., where he received the final letter, dated November 6, 1948, from his solicitor regarding the sale of his property to a Norman R. Bills of Airdrie, Alberta, in the amount of \$25,598.40, less legal fees of \$120.88. The sale price of the farm was based on \$39 per acre.

The Twilight Years

Abraham and Maria Loewen purchased a 2-acre lot for \$1000 next to Martin and Sara's farm in Abbotsford, B.C. They were joined by their daughter, Tina, in a new house built for them by Martin and Henry. Henry and Justina Loewen, with their young family, moved to Abbotsford as well, but managed to stay only one year, after which they moved back to Didsbury, where they purchased a farm.

The Abraham and Maria Loewen attached themselves to the West Abbotsford Mennonite Church and would live to celebrate their Diamond Wedding Jubilee. Upon reflection of their life's journey, they said it was the Lord God that had given them direction and strength throughout, and for that they gave Him all the glory. That same year, Maria Loewen died. Abraham lived another twenty years, enjoying good health to the end, and reading the Bible through, once for each year of his life. He died in 1977, a few months short of his 103rd birthday.



Abraham Loewen at age 100, 1974



Abraham and Maria Loewen, 1957

Tribute to my Grandparents

Abraham Loewen lived each new day to the fullest and spent little time worrying about the future. He never drove a car but walked daily. As long as his health allowed, he enjoyed physical work, including mowing the lawn with a push-mower, pruning berries and fruit trees, and cutting wood and storing the winter supply. Health concerns were all addressed with home remedies, until a more serious heart condition took him to the hospital for the first time, at age 92.

His pocket watch and knife represent the essence of my grandfather. The watch – a simple one – still keeps time, which symbolizes the faithfulness my grandfather held, both in God and in his family. The knife blade shows evidence of many sessions at the grindstone and is as sharp as the day my grandfather last used it. The fact that this knife never lost its usefulness or was discarded for a newer one symbolizes many qualities my grandfather had: frugality, pa-



Abraham Loewen's watch and pocket knife

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tience, loyalty, perseverance, and contentment. His needs were few, and his lifestyle was simple. He left an indelible mark on the lives of those who knew him.

Maria Loewen was a godly woman. She had deep respect for and loyalty to her husband, giving him the support he needed during their times of struggle. She and Abraham appeared to complement each other in quiet ways, not always obvious. She was a prayer warrior who interceded for her family unceasingly.

Maria loved to crochet, and her skill was obvious to all. She never used patterns, but simply worked from photos, and anything less than perfect was unacceptable. She was also known for her baking, especially the animal-shaped, sugar/raisin cookies and the ammonia cookies at Christmas. To say she showered love and affection on her family would be an understatement.

I particularly appreciate the fact that my grandmother valued her family roots, and that she was meticulous in keeping family records. Without her pages of notes, we might not have the details we appreciate today. This is an important part of the legacy she has left me. ♦

| Die Großeltern | | |
|----------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Jakob Loewen geboren | 1800 Juli 20 | |
| Helena Blaup | 1801 Juli 24 | |
| Die Eltern | | |
| Jakob Loewen geboren | gahowen | gahowen |
| Jakob Loewen | 7 August 1829 | 16 Oktober 1875 |
| Katharina Gander | 23 Juni 1834 | 1883 |
| in der Gahowen 1854 | | |
| Söhne Gahowen | | |
| Johann Loewen | 2 März 1855 | 2 April 1884 |
| Anna | 27 Bornambur 1856 | 8 " 1884 |
| Jakob | 2 Oktober 1858 | 25 Bornambur 1878 |
| Katharina | 30 August 1860 | 22 Juni 1908 |
| Julius | 16 Februar 1862 | |
| Helena | 14 August 1863 | 23 August 1938 |
| Margaretha | 13 Bornambur 1865 | 18 Bornambur |
| Heinrich | 2 April 1867 | |
| Martha | 12 " 1870 | |
| Margaretha | 21 " 1872 | |
| Abraham | 30 " 1874 | |

A page from Maria Loewen's family register



The wedding of Heinrich Bergen (1879-1943) and Margaretha Rempel (1881-1951), July 17, 1900

From Siebertville, AB to Gouldtown, SK

In 1918 the family moved to a farm in Saskatchewan, two miles west of the Gouldtown Sommerfelder church, and the school-age children were immediately sent to the Sommerfelder private school near their home.

But unsettling changes were afoot. Canada was involved in a war, boys were being conscripted to fight, and legislation had just been passed making English the sole language of instruction. So that fall, the Bergen children began attending the Gouldtown public school.

Meanwhile, Heinrich, who never liked farming, was again working away from home, mostly running steam engines for threshing or logging outfits or working on his inventions. Money was in short supply.

Preparations for the Move to Mexico: 1922

When people started talking about moving south to Mexico,

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for land and religious freedom, they moved from Chortitz to Bergthal. They emigrated to the East Reserve, then to the West Reserve, before heading even farther west to homestead in Siebertville, NWT (became Alberta in 1906). There were more moves: Gouldtown, Saskatchewan, Mexico and back again to various places in western Canada.

Heinrich and Margaretha were married on Jul. 17, 1900. Until their move west in 1901, their contacts were primarily their own Mennonite people. But with no Sommerfelder church or parochial school during their 17 years in Siebertville, non-Mennonite influences began to creep into their growing family. Eight of their ten children were born in Siebertville. The parents became alarmed when their elder daughters, ages 17 and 15, began taking an interest in "Englisher" boys. It was time to find a Sommerfelder community!

(Mexico from page 8)

Heinrich was enthused. Three delegates were chosen to travel to Mexico with Herb Wiebe, a real estate agent from Herbert, Saskatchewan. They returned with glowing reports. Everything sounded so good, almost like they were being personally invited to Paradise!"

What happened next is described in their daughter, Margaretha Bergen's memoir and adapted by Hilda Dueck.

In the spring of 1922, at the age of 10, I (Margaretha Bergen) had to leave school to help my Dad and 17-year-old brother Pete earn money for the trip. My 15-year-old brother, Frank, stayed home to help Mom with the farm work and the youngest four children.

My sisters, Helen and Justina, already safely married to Mennonite boys, stayed in Saskatchewan. Everything we could possibly get along without was sold to pay for our fare on the mixed freight and passenger train that had been chartered. It left Herbert, Saskatchewan on Dec. 16, 1922, heading south with about 30 other families. After travelling for twelve dusty days on the train, we finally arrived on the bare Mexican prairie on New Year's Day, Jan. 1, 1923, just outside of Cusiuhiriachic (Cusi), Chihuahua.

Life in Mexico

What was supposed to be "The Land of Paradise" was a disappointment from the start. When we arrived, we were told that the land that had been promised was no longer available. The deal fell through, and because we had ex-



The Bergen home Heinrich and his sons built in Mexico L-R Sarah (the author's mother) Agatha, Susan, Henry, Margaretha, and their father, Heinrich Bergen

changed our land in Canada for the land in Mexico, we lost it all. This was always called "the land swindle." The agent informed us that there was land available on the other side of a mountain. We had no choice but to go. It was a long, difficult journey! Thirty families, packed in cars like sardines in a tin, travelling six to eight hours a day at 20 to 25 mph. The journey of 959 miles took about six days.

Jitomatera (La Jito), Michoacan

When we arrived at La Jito, Michoacan southwest of Mexico City, we found abundant grass, but it was dry and bitter, unfit for the cattle. Water was available only where the Mexicans had settled. We were all taken to an empty Mexican "Rancho" (hotel). Dad tried to dig, then drill a well for the new house he would build. But no water. Our people were disappointed. Some moved back to Canada right away, and a few settled with the Old Colony Mennonites, prosperous farmers living some twenty miles north of where we were.

A deadly fever swept our area, and some families were helped back to Canada by their former churches. Finally, all the other people had moved away, and we were alone in La Jito.

Dad and the boys built up the start of a house with laths and peeled logs for the frame and used big rocks and clay for the mortar on the outside walls. As soon as the roof was on, we moved in.

We had to haul our water from about seven miles away. There were severe thunderstorms and torrential rains, so there was water in the sloughs



From Cusi, Chihuahua in the north, to La Jito, Michoacan SW of Mexico City in the south

(See Mexico on page 10)

(Mexico from page 9)

for a while. Mother planted a garden, but it was too dry, and I don't recall using any of it.

My father found work running a gas-threshing outfit for the Mexicans in Jiminez, Michoacan, about 100 miles southwest of our home in La Jito. The crops there were unbelievable, and Dad wanted to move there, but Mother refused because it would have been a totally Mexican environment for the family.

The Mexican Indians at La Jito

We never went very far from home for fear of getting lost. From the west, there was a trail, and sometimes we would see Indians coming out of the forest. They were tall and slim with dark brown skin. Their hair was course, straight and black, cut straight across all around, just below the ears. The top was held back with a kerchief tied snugly around the head. The women wore short blouses and a loin cloth, and the men just a loin cloth. On their feet were sandals made of a piece of leather with holes for leather straps.

They would run single file; the first would break into a trot, then the next, and so on. In this way, they covered a tremendous distance in a short time. After a while the first one would slow to a walk, and the others would follow one after another. By the time the the last one was walking, the first one was already loping again.

The Indians sold stacks of woven baskets. Even though she had no words to make conversation, Mother could barter and buy. Mexican money was about half the value of Canadian money at the time. When they found out that Mother made good buns, the Indians quickly bought three buns for ten cents. Mother also taught our Mexican neighbour how to mix and bake buns....Now she could treat her friends to "Americano pahn" too.

A Mexican Travelling Salesman

More often, it was Mexicans on the trail, with mules, oxen or donkeys hauling loaded wooden carts that had two screeching wooden wheels.

We, kids, caught on to the language quickly, so we did the talking when Mexican salesmen came to the yard with their wares. One older man had his donkey loaded with cloth. He would smooth it out against a child as he talked about what a nice dress or shirt it would make or let it hang down from a woman's waist, saying "Chal-dee-co," which is how he understood the Mennonites to pronounce the word "Chalduke" or apron.

Dad Travels to Saskatchewan

One fall, Dad went back to Saskatchewan by train to run the threshing machine steam engine for a fellow he knew. Wages were good \$20.00 per day. Travelling expenses took quite a slice from his earnings, but he did bring home some badly needed clothing and even had some money left over for groceries. While Dad was away in Canada, Mother became very sick with malaria. A neighbour lady came over to make the bread at least once. After that, my brother Frank learned and did really good bread baking.

Without inoculations, many people died. People across the road lost three children. The father and eldest son died in another family, leaving the Mother with three kids.

In the rainy season, thunderstorms were very severe. During one of these storms, our two cows were killed by lightning. Now we had no milk, but our resourceful Mother had stashed away some butter, so at least we had that. When Dad came home, he bought another cow that was supposed to freshen in a couple of months. It turned out - the animal was long past calf-bearing age - so one more bad deal!

The Farm in a Sommerfelder Community

Our family moved from Jito back north to a small four-room house on a farm in a small community of Sommerfelder Mennonites in the state of Cusihuiriachi, Chihuahua. The nearest town was Cuauhtémoc, formerly San Antonio, nearly 14 miles to the north.

Gleaning for Food

Food was scarce. One time we went toward "Ojos Azules" (Blue Eyes) with Dad and a Mennonite widower and his son, a distance of 32 miles away, to pick up the little potatoes after a farmer had gathered the big ones. This we gladly did. Little spuds are better than no spuds when you're hungry!

Going to School in Mexico

We hadn't been attending school, but a young couple left the Sommerfeld settlement, and their house became our school. Someone manufactured three or four benches with desks attached. Each

(See Mexico on page 11)

(Mexico from page 10)

bench held about six kids. A Jacob Friesen volunteered to be the teacher, but after a few days, he concluded that some of the kids knew German better than he did and resigned.

Another man eventually took on the job. He was old and had a continual shaking of the head. The desks were moved into his front room, and presto! School. We used slate and slate pencils for everything except for penmanship when we were given a quarter of a ruled scribbler page to copy what the teacher wrote on the blackboard. Recess was a quick dash to the "little house," first the boys and then the girls—no nonsense like playing outside. Like in the Sommerfeld school in Gouldtown, we learned the multiplication table by a sing-song chanting; we learned reading from the 'Fiebel,' followed by the New Testament, and then the Old Testament, all in German. Our memory work was the Catechism. Singing was done by "ciphern" (numbers instead of notes). The teacher got quite irritated and would tap the blackboard with his walking stick. After that teacher left for Canada, we had to walk to Eichental, the village south of us, to continue our so-called "education" in an unfinished lean-to. There, another elderly man volunteered to teach. He seemed to have a better education and was more likeable.

Scouting Trips

Dad was always on the lookout for better land. At one time, he, Mr. Schlichting, and Mr. Quiring went on a scouting trip to the West Coastal region in the Sinaloa Valley, Mexico. Orchards of various

fruits grew there. The only inhabitants were Mexicans. Dad was eager to move, but Mother was unenthused, and the scheme fell through. A few of Dad's trips are still a mystery to me. Dad was going to La Capilla on some business, and for some unknown reason, my younger sister Sarah (about age 10) and I (about age 12 by then) got to dress up and go along. As soon as we got to the village, Dad took us to a house of people we had never met. A big girl took us into a big empty room. Along the walls stood nicely varnished wooden chairs. She motioned for us to sit down, and we sat in silence until Dad came to take us home again. Why this trip? I shall never know! Another time, Sarah and I went with Dad to Cusi. He took us into a grocery store and told us to stay until he returned. We did not even get a few *centavos* to buy a treat. Why did Dad take us along, abandon us right away, and pick us up only when he was ready to go home?

Sarah and I were also allowed to ride along to San Antonio (Cuauhtémoc), where our friend Mary Rempel, the daughter of Gustav Rempel from next door, had now moved. We knew where she went to school, so we raced across town to the school as soon as we got off the wagon. It did not take long until the class was dismissed, and we went home with her. We never saw her again. It was rumoured that our friend had been married off to a Mexican, either through some 'deal' or that she was 'sold' to the man. Desperate times: desperate measures.

The Encinillas Adventure

Many Mennonites were leaving the villages to return to Canada or join the Old Colony Mennonites. Dad joined in scouting for a place to live in Encinillas, about 119 miles northeast of the Sommerfeld settlement near Cusi. He came back with a good report.

We sold some of our meagre possessions, and Dad built a shelter with a roof on a wagon to carry what little we had left. He rode with us as far as San Antonio, where we camped overnight and bought groceries for the trip. From there, Dad took the train so he could go on ahead and build a shelter for when the family arrived. Our trip was slow. We were herding the cattle on foot ahead of the wagons. We older kids walked much of the way with our friends. We thought it was fun! We travelled north to Santa Clara, where we rested the whole outfit for a day. Mother was so pleased when the Klippensteins, distant cousins of her's came to our wagon to visit. She made *Faspa* and chatted just as long as possible. What a lift that was for her. In the morning, we turned from Santa Clara eastward into the mountains, travelling on roads with sharp switchbacks. Going down a steep grade, as we were coming out on the east side of the mountain chain, the left front wheel of our overloaded wagon disintegrated and pitched the load forward. Thankfully, the horses could brace themselves so the wagon did not roll over into the ravine beside us.

With the help of other men, my brothers, Pete and Frank, fixed our wagon as best they could, and we limped out of the mountains. In the distance, we could see Dad waving at us. To the west, we could still see the mountains, but to the east stretched an endless sea of waving grass. But alas! The grass was so tough and sharp when the cattle tried to graze that their mouths and noses were cut.

(See Mexico on page 12)

(Mexico from page 11)

We camped beside the railway and used water hauled there by the trains. Just a stone's throw south were a couple of adobe houses where Mexicans lived. Articles were going missing from our camp. One day, some of us kids went over to the Mexican's house, and there, hanging on the wall was the frying pan Mother had been missing. But missing utensils was the least of our troubles.

The delegates had neglected to get a clear statement from the land agent regarding their settlement plans. So when the newcomers wanted to survey the land in a solid block for Mennonite villages, the agent said, "Not so!" He wanted the Mennonite village dispersed between the Mexican villages. This, the would-be settlers would not agree to, so the deal was off. Again, some decided to join the Old Colony Mennonites. Many returned to Canada, but others, including our family, decided to return to San Antonio. My brother Pete and his wife returned by train, but this time Dad travelled with us by wagon.

Preparations for the Trip Back to Canada

Less than three years after we arrived in Mexico, our family had to admit financial defeat. For some weeks after we came back to San Antonio, our family of eight lived in one huge room with the Diedrich Gerbrands, a family of eleven. Each family had their own cook stove, table chairs, cupboards and beds at their respective ends.

To earn money to return to Canada, we kids went with Mother to chop cordwood in the forest to sell to the Old Colony about 25 miles away. After selling everything we had, save the clothes on our backs; Dad scraped together enough money to bring us back to Canada.

Dad and Mr. Abram Goertzen rode the train to Chihuahua City, where they each bought a heap of junk they proudly called "cars." Both were touring cars of ancient vintage. Mr. Goertzen, a very "humble" man, removed the side windows from his car because he didn't want to drive such a fancy vehicle. They didn't even have side curtains to keep out the wind and rain. Dad built or borrowed, a trailer to carry our baggage. Some goats managed to climb onto our Maxwell and tore up the canvass top, and it was Mother's job to make the repairs! We were two families: packed into two cars, each no bigger

than a Model T Ford. Both cars bulged at the sides; they were so full.

The Trip From Mexico to Saskatchewan:

Jun. 11 - Jul. 15, 1925

We set out from San Antonio on Jun. 11, 1925. The roads were mostly dirt with occasional gravel. Sometimes they petered out, and we would cross a field to the next road.

The tires were 30 inches by 3 and 1/2 inches, so we travelled slowly and repaired tires often. Dad was driving 15 miles an hour. He turned down the carburetor trying to save gas, and going down hills he would turn off the motor and forget to turn it back on in time to get up the next hill. So despite being disgruntled and embarrassed with it, we kids had to get out and "Push"!!!

At times we rented a cabin and could sleep in style. Sometimes we camped by a river under the open sky for a day or two. That's when we would bathe and wash clothes. It wasn't so much fun when it rained. Mother would make a fire with twigs and cow chips that we kids gathered while she peeled spuds. Frank brought water from the nearest source, and Mother would set the pot and fry pan on an iron frame Dad had made and cook our meal. Our suppers were simple. Fried meat and boiled potatoes, canned soup, or fish soup mother made. We ate picnic-style, sitting on the ground around a blanket. Our noon meals often were bologna sandwiches and coffee.

About at Gillette, Goertzen's car broke down. While the repairs were being sent for and installed,

(See Mexico on page 13)



The trip from Mexico to Canada

(Mexico from page 12)

our mothers took the opportunity to wash the clothes we had been wearing. Near Denver, Colorado, on a switchback road, we counted five levels. When we reached the top, the engines were naturally hot, and the radiators were boiling. We stopped to cool them, and we kids ran across the highway to relieve ourselves in the bushes. Our four-year-old sister started to follow, walking slowly with her head down. My brother saw a car coming, so he dashed across and was going to grab Agatha, but he lost his footing, slid, and fell. The car missed Agatha but ran right over Pete. I saw him rolling under the car against the back wheels. His clothes were tearing. He was doubled over with pain when he got up, so we drove back to take him to a doctor. He had a couple of broken ribs, and the doctor taped him up and told him to rest for a couple of days.

During this time, Dad was making something out of lumber. The men standing around watching him heard the even strokes of the saw, and one of them offered him a steady job carpentering right on the spot. Dad would have stayed right then, but Mother said a decided, "No!"

Shortly after crossing the border into Canada, we parted company with the Goertzens and continued on to my sister Justina and her husband Abe Janzen's farm near Gouldtown, Saskatchewan. When we were about a mile from our destination, the car finally stripped a gear and gave up. It's a wonder it didn't happen much sooner, considering how overloaded it was, but it must have been the hand of God that kept the car going for us.

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What Do You See in the Photograph?

By Dave Toews

Every picture tells a story. This is true even when, to the casual observer, the picture, due to complexity or utter and abject simplicity, leaves no more than an unanswerable question what in the world was this woman or man thinking? Even a masterpiece such as the Mona Lisa leaves questions about itself: what was that indecipherable smile all about anyway? Every



This is a 1905 photo of my extended Toews family in the village of Osterwick, Chortitza Colony, Russia/Ukraine; the occasion for the picture is Unknown Rear L-R: Isaak I. Toews, Isaak I. Toews (4) Tina Klassen, Jacob J. Klassen, Bernard I. Toews (2) Unknown Redikopp, Johann I. Toews (7) Maria J. Toews (3) Centre L-R: Agatha I. Toews, Johann I. Toews, Agatha (Funk) Toews, Sarah Toews, Katherina (Funk) Toews (6) Isaak Toews (5) Maria (Braun) Toews (8) Front L-R: Henry I. Toews, Sussana Grunau (foster child), Kathrina I. Toews, Johann J. Toews (11) Isaak J. Toews (10) Bernard J. Toews (9) Peter J. Toews (1)

(See Photo on page 14)

(Photo from page 13)

picture may even be worth a thousand words.

We often look at old photos without reading the captions and wonder: who are these people? Why are some dressed so plainly and others so stylish? Why do most of them look so serious and unsmiling?

So what do we see? The Toews, by and large, are a thrifty, fairly serious dower bunch. I will not introduce you to all of them. But my frowning countenance should come as no surprise to anyone. My mother often told me, "Don't look so cranky!"

Two people in this photo are very prominent to me! But first, let me mention my three-year-old father, Peter Johann Toews (1), the innocent-looking little boy on the far right in the sailor suit leaning against his mother's knee. Innocent enough in this picture, he would become a man who took life very seriously; he would say to me, "Son, life is serious; no time for jokes, laughing or sports."

The most striking person for me in this photo is the dapper dandy in the bowler hat; fourth from the right in the back row, he doesn't fit the Toews mould at all. Nineteen-year-old Bernhard Isaak Toews (2), my great uncle, my grandfather's brother, the son of a farmer, would never be a farmer. Bernard trained as a teacher but went on to be an accountant with the Badowsky company in Alexandrovsk, Russia. Later in Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, Bernard, as well as his wife Helena Heese, would be outstanding leaders in business, church and community.

In the back row far right in the flowered hat is my very attractive then ten-year-old Aunt Maria J. (Klassen) Toews (3), an excellent student who was denied girls high school by her maternal grandmother. Margaretha (Harms) Braun emphatically told Maria's father, "You will not fill my granddaughter's head with worldly ideas! In this photograph, Maria is only nine years from her wedding day. She would marry the neighbour's son from across the Middle Chrotitza River in Osterwick, Peter Klassen, raise six children, and eventually retire to a fruit farm near Virgil, Ont.

Again in the back row, second from the left, is Great Uncle Isaak Isaak Toews (4); he would move with his family to the new daughter Colony, Arkadak, in Siberia in 1910. And there, at the hands of the Soviets in 1937, he and his youngest son Peter would suffer the same fate as so many, shot! (*No One Knows* by Dave Toews, Oct 2020 *Chronicle* p 33)

My Great Grandparents, Isaak Isaak (5) (in the peaked cap) and Katharina (6) (Funk) Toews, in the centre row second and third from the right, moved from Kronswende to Osterwick shortly after their wedding on Dec 1, 1864. They are noted in the Toews Family Registry as thrifty hard-working farmers. Katharina Funk came from a wealthy, powerful, well-educated

family that included high school teachers, church Vorsaeuger (song leaders), a clockmaker, a silver-smith, a lawyer and a church Aeltester (bishop). And none of this rubbed off on me!

My Grandparents, Johann Isaak (7) and Maria (8) (Braun) Toews, the couple on the far right in the photo, were prosperous farmers in Osterwick. My brother Ernie remembers that our father Peter told him that grandfather Johann was a progressive man, one of the first people in the village to subscribe to a weekly German newspaper to learn what was transpiring in the world. Tragically grandfather died of typhus on Apr 8, 1918, at age 52, causing much hardship for the family. Grandmother Maria was an outspoken, opinionated woman used to doing things her way. This became very evident when Grandmother Maria living with my parents at Mayfair, Saskatchewan, in 1944, criticized my Mother, Helen (Kroeger) Toews, for putting too many raisins in the New Year's Kuchen. In January 1945, Grandmother went to live with her daughter Katharina (Toews) Nickel in Black Creek, BC.

Also in the picture are my father's brothers, my Uncles Bernard (9) (on his mother's lap) died in a tragic logging accident in The Pas, Manitoba, Nov 3, 1923, Isaak (10), front right (did not come to Canada) and next to him Johann (11). Uncle Johann (John) and Aunt Helen (Siemens) Toews, with their eleven children, lived next door to us on the farm at Mayfair, where we spent many happy hours.

What is it about looking at old family photos? Sometimes what we see is someone young who we only

(See Photo on page 15)



My 10-year-old father, Peter Toews, in 1912

(Photo from page 14)

knew as old. Sometimes we recognize that the strong jaw, sorrowful eyes, and distinctive nose on ancestors we never met are the same as what we see in the mirror or in our children's faces. They have been gone a long time, and yet some of their DNA courses through our veins. Oh, no, I'm turning into my father!

An individual studio photo of my 10-year-old father, Peter Toews, in 1912. As far as I am aware, there is no studio picture of any other family member. Why just my father? And why is he dressed like that? Why the military-type dress? He came from a peace-loving pious Mennonite family in Russia.

And what's with the buzz cut, the cadet collared double-breasted tunic complete with a wide belt over the top and button-down shoes? I don't understand; this doesn't fit the template at all. I should have asked him! How many of us have lamented this same question over and over?

So why didn't people smile in photos of days gone by? In the early days of photography, it took several minutes to take a picture because cameras relied on slow chemical reactions. If subjects moved at all, the image turned out blurry. A smile was more difficult to hold for an extended period of time, so people grimaced or looked serious. However, technology had improved enough by 1845 that the exposure time was under a minute. But smiling in photos didn't become the norm for another three-quarters of a century. Another possible explanation could be that photos, like portraits before photography, were serious, expensive

undertakings that might only happen once in a lifetime. So were the Toews wealthy? Prosperous, maybe, but not rich. People believed such a weighty event required a serious facial expression. Mark Twain once wrote, "A photograph is a most important document, and there is nothing more damning to go down to posterity than a silly, foolish smile caught and fixed forever!"

This was my mother's favourite family picture; it is the only one with all six of us present. The photographer's wife was blowing soap bubbles. You can see Ernie and Rudy smiling, watching the bubbles float through the air as the photographer's wife blows them off through the heart-shaped bubble handle. I am saddened to see the bubbles bursting on the floor. Mother said the more children she had, the younger ones were happier and happier as they came along. And here is the family portrait to prove it.

This photo does not require a long description. As you can see, only five of us were there three months later. You can see the anguish, grief and grim despair on our faces and in our body language. A horrible tragedy robbed our family of cheerful, happy baby Rudy. Mother mourned Rudy's passing for the rest of her days.

(Death in the Family: An Eyewitness Account by Dave Toews, Preservings #35 2015 p 74).

Writing a piece often takes on a life of its own. I have taken you for a brief tour of glimpses of the highs and lows of my Toews family life from 1905 to 1950. This was going to be an article about what you see in photos, but it also turned out to include a bit of family history.



The Happy Toews Family Mar 1950
L-R Ernie, father Peter, David, baby Rudy,
mother Helen, Anna Marie



The Grief Stricken Toews Family
June 23, 1950

Sources: Toews Family Registry, Arthur Toews 2000, Toews Family Archives, Ernie Toews email, Internet: About Photographs, No One Knows by Dave Toews, Oct 2020 Chronicle and Death in the Family: An Eyewitness Account by Dave Toews, Preservings #35 2015. ❖

Migration from Ukraine to China (part 2 of 3)

By the late Lena (Wiens) Sawatzky

Translated from German by nephew Hartmut Wiens

Trans Siberian Migration - Zagradowka to Shumanovka

The Soviets took all the land and distributed it evenly among all rural residents who wanted to farm. The original land owners were always seen as criminals and evil doers. The poor, whether guilty or innocent, were always seen as noble and oppressed. They were continually incited against the wealthy. This caused a lot of annoyance and anger. In the autumn of 1921, the men were mobilized. They had to perform their service to the homeland, some in forestry and some in legal firms. The oppression continued at home. In these circumstances the fields could only be worked very poorly, some not at all. Since 1921 was a very dry year, the crop was almost a total failure that year. As a result, there was a great famine. In the spring of 1922, the houses where there was still bread were almost always surrounded by starving people. There were people laying down and dying under hedges and along fences. My grandpa and grandma Fast and parents Franz and Anna Wiens still had something to eat. My parents also fed many hungry people. But they couldn't feed everyone. Thousands of unemployed and starving people flooded the area. During this time the American kitchen was established (by Mennonite Central Committee). This was in the early summer of 1922. It really helped in this time of great need. In this same year, a typhoid epidemic erupted, and many more people died of this disease. As already mentioned, during the spring of 1922 these villages were swamped with hungry strangers. Home invasions and theft of food became so overwhelming that something had to be done to keep the settlement from being taken over by the bandits. There were no police or even authorities to whom residents could turn for help. Commissions for the fight against banditry were established. The idea was good in and of itself, but the way it was carried out in several villages was not good. It was a very nasty time.

In 1922 the harvest was poor, but at least good enough to provide bread for the people again. But frequently not as they had been accustomed to before. Still the killing and robbery went on. The Forester's family was misera-

bly slaughtered. Even if people who had some grain were on their way to the mill, their wagons would be robbed and the people cruelly murdered – some were strangled with their harnesses. Even children and old people

were killed. In the autumn of 1922, a little more security returned to the country. Assaults and murders became less common. The government grew stronger. Now the people were robbed and bullied by legal means. More and more communists from outside the area were sent into the villages. They assumed control everywhere. These people who were now in charge, almost all belonged to the terrorists, and many of them were common criminals.

In such circumstances many people wished to leave Russia. When such an opportunity arose, many went to Canada and South America from 1924 to 1927. In 1924 things started to get a little better. The government gave the people more freedom, and it was easier again. But then the government suddenly changed their tactics again in 1928. They strictly implemented collectivization. The people were regarded as enemies of the state. Nobody was allowed to emigrate anymore. A great many families were exiled to Siberia in the cruelest of circumstances. With hard work and very little to eat, many, perhaps most, died. We learned about the situation of the exiles in Siberia from letters. People were driven to their death by slave labour. They had to work day and night for 200 grams of bread. Old women with their feet swollen from hunger, young girls with bleeding shoulders from dragging wood ...

Grandpa Fast and my father Franz Wiens felt threatened because they were landowners. Emigrating legally was no longer possible because exit permits were no longer being granted. Now our grandparents and parents decided

(See Migration on page 17)



Nestor Makhno, anarchist, in centre

(Migration from page 16)

that our father should go to Siberia to find out whether the political circumstances were better there. So, our father took the opportunity to go and scout out the Amur area, where Mama's sister, the wife of David Friesen had just settled. When he had surveyed the region and the people living there, he made up his mind that if Grandpa Fast agreed, they would liquidate their estate in southern Russia and move to the Amur region. We had a very large and beautiful estate, with a large garden and an orchard with sour cherries, apples, apricots, and many varieties of plums and mulberries. There we children sometimes would eat to our hearts' content. We could eat whatever we wanted. I can still remember the day when everything was sold and then how grandpa and my father felt so very insecure. At night they were in hiding somewhere out of fear that they would be robbed.

In late autumn of 1927, my parents with 6 children, and grandpa and grandma, along with my uncle, Abram Wiens, with their 5 children (father's brother) bade farewell to the beautiful Zagradovka. We had lived there in the village of Steinfeld (No. 14). My siblings were Johann, Suse, Abram (Hart's father), I (Lena), Franz, and David. So, Grandpa and Grandma and our parents went to the train station with heavy hearts and much fear. It was a dangerous journey because so many were attacked along the way and brutally murdered, even children and the elderly. We traveled by rail to the Amur region, (a distance of more than 8,000 kilometers) where Uncle David Friesen picked us up from the train station. That winter Grandpa,

Grandma, and our family with 6 children lived with the Friesens, who were also at the very beginning of their new life in the Amur region and living in makeshift shelters.

My father made preparations for us to settle on new land, which was 20 kilometers from the village of Shumanovka (where the Friesens lived). I was 7 years old then. Once we were settled, my parents lived here together with Grandpa and Grandma. Grandpa was still considered the head of the family. Grandpa sometimes punished us children too. In short, Grandpa believed even here, that he had to decide everything and he did not even consider leaving decisions to his son-in-law. This was often not easy for my parents. But I never observed any big arguments between my Grandpa and my father. By the spring my father had finished the house on our new settlement in the village of Osorne to the extent that we could move in. This was in 1928.



A scene with horses in Shumanovka

In the spring of 1929, our parents had twins born to them: two boys, Jacob and Heinrich. Heinrich only lived 10 days before he died. In the late autumn of 1929, my grandmother suffered a stroke, which made her severely disabled. She had to be cared for like a baby. So, my mother had her hands full now. Because my father was not at home, Grandpa helped to look after our sick Grandma.

In 1929 there was a flood in our village of Osorne. So, we had to move and we bought an abandoned estate in the village of Friedensfeld. My uncle Abram Wiens moved in there. My parents moved to the neighbouring village of Shumanovka and stayed with David Friesens (mother's sister) again that winter.

Grandpa Fast and my father had bought a steam threshing machine together which my father used to thresh grain in the Russian villages as a means to earn some money. My brothers Johann and Abram (note from Hart: Abram is my dad) often helped with this. Because in the Amur region it always rained a lot in the autumn, the grain had to be threshed at the beginning of winter when everything was frozen solid.

In the winter of 1929, the steam threshing machine was moved to the village of Shumanovka. Grandpa Fast and my father then contributed the threshing machine to the Shumanovka communal enterprise. My father then worked in this communal enterprise with the steam threshing machine.

In January 1930, Grandpa died after almost 10 days of illness. Grandpa was 73 years old when he died. Then Grandma died on March 20, 1930 at the age of 69. TO BE CONTINUED ❖

Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society AGM

report by Eugene Janzen

In April, I left Alberta to visit family and friends in Saskatoon and Winnipeg. At the latest board meeting of the MHSA, I learned about a meeting, like ours, in Manitoba. And it would take place during my Manitoba visit and occur at the historic Mennonite village, Neuberghthal. This village is very attractive for any Mennonite with a historical inclination, and we have visited it several times before. To hear the WSO's "Beethoven in the Barn" in the village some time ago was an unexpected highlight. Visitors were considered welcome to this meeting, and I wondered if Historical Societies elsewhere planned any actions or events that our Society could consider as well.

Next year, 2024, is the 150th anniversary of Mennonites in Manitoba, more precisely, in western Canada. Mennonite families often moved from eastern Manitoba, where those first groups had been invited to settle, to other areas in the West. The Canadian prairies most resembled their previous home in Ukraine (South Russia at the time), and settlement in the western Canadian Territories occurred even before they became provinces or the Russlander immigration of the 1920s.

The above was the first item we learned from President Stoesz while attending the AGM in the historic village of Neuberghthal on the 29th of April, southwest of Winnipeg, some 15 km north of the US border. In addition, he noted that the 2024 anniversary was a prelude to the 2025 500th anniversary of Anabaptism.

President Conrad Stoesz, Archivist from the Mennonite Heritage Archives at Canadian Mennonite University (CMU), led a meeting very similar to the one we had here in Alberta. The reports from the standing committees demonstrated that the upcoming anniversary next year had many plans for recognition and commemoration. But additionally, we learned that MMHS has many affiliated organizations that work together to preserve and share historical information important to Mennonites.

Professor Aileen Friesen, U of Winnipeg, reported on the activities of the Plett Foundation, one of the affiliated organizations that funds several projects for their Society as well as ours.

The Mennonite Heritage Archives reported that ongoing visits to the Archive Collection confirmed that Mennonites continue to reflect on our past and are determined to leave a legacy for our future generations. Like our Alberta group, considerable effort has gone into developing an Archival



Eugene Janzen



Krahn Housebarn that hosted the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra's Participant

Website, and that effort is ongoing. Other support would be that evidence is there that archival accretions continue to accrue.

A discussion led by Professor Ben Nobbs-Thiessen, Assistant Professor, Chair of Mennonite Studies, illustrated the intense investigation and study of all aspects of Mennonite history at the University of Winnipeg and CMU. It was also noted that the current conflict in the Russian-occupied Ukraine areas meant that some of the collections documenting more unstudied Mennonite history were likely destroyed.

Board members from the Mennonite Heritage Village and Mennonite Brethren Studies reported on the results of their meeting deliberations and resulting work. Several other groups also provided updates on the year's past activities and those in the future. Among these, we learned that EastMenn had developed the Peace Trail, and WestMenn created a similar Post Road Trail and was planning for a Bicycle Tour.



Conrad Stoesz

President Stoesz then officiated over the new elections, highlighted items in the summarized reports and outlined an action plan. The Annual General Meeting was then adjourned.

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As an attendant at the MMHS's AGM, several tasks in the reports were noteworthy. The report and discussion showed the value of further emphasis on developing the Alberta Mennonite Archives and encouraging awareness of them. However, collaborating groups and organizations' role in amplifying our mandate was a main "take-away."

Given the formal hybrid Mennonite History Courses that faculty at the University of Winnipeg and Canada Mennonite University deliver, it would seem most appropriate that our organization ensure that contact information for these courses is well distributed to our members and beyond.

This meeting in Neuberghthal certainly corroborated the view that our historical organizations play a fundamental role in shaping our communities' understanding of who they are. To quote Conrad, "Let's remember that we're not just collecting dusty books, torn documents, or broken furniture, but we are helping our communities to define and understand their identity-our identity."

We came away from this AGM and the coffee break thereafter appreciating the effort to celebrate our Mennonite Heritage and how that history fits into today's surrounding community.

Eugene Janzen transitioned as a Clinical Faculty Member at both Western Canadian Veterinary Colleges in 2019 but continues to serve as an Emeritus consultant or lecturer when asked. He currently lives in High River and attends the Trinity Mennonite Church in De Winton, Alberta. Eugene has two sons,

Mark and Jeremy and two granddaughters. His interest in Mennonite History was stimulated by Grandmother Janzen in his very junior years. In addition, his partner, Ms. Carole Grier, also has a special interest in Mennonite history and volunteers at the MMHS archives. He looks forward to more formally participating in further exploration of our Mennonite history in Canada. ❖

Mennonite Farmers: A Global History of Place and Sustainability

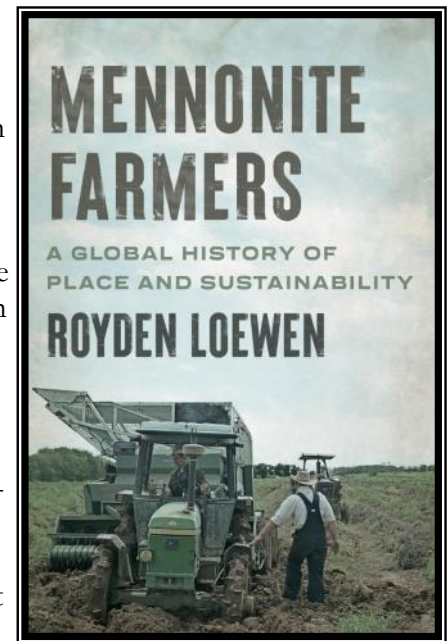
By Royden Loewen, 2021, University of Manitoba Press,

Reviewed by Bill Franz

Mennonite Farmers is a comparative, world-scale environmental history, drawing on a multi-year study of seven Anabaptist communities around the world, in Bolivia, Canada, Indonesia, the Netherlands, Russia, the United States, and Zimbabwe. This is an academic book, scholarly in tone, but readable if you have some understanding of agriculture and an interest in Mennonite history. Royden Loewen is, in fact, a historian, a Professor Emeritus at the University of Winnipeg and the former Chair of Mennonite Studies. He was born in Steinbach, Manitoba and raised in Blumenort, where his father was a poultry farmer, grew wheat, and was the chair of the Steinbach Credit Union. Royden himself grows wheat.

The book is the product of a research-grant proposal to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada in 2012, titled "Seven Points on Earth: Mennonites and Farm Culture in the Twentieth Century World." At the heart of its methodology is the idea of a research team coming to understand the local agricultural community within a global context. Royden chose to focus on Mennonites because, in history, they have been a disproportionately rural people who have given a great deal of thought to sustainable agriculture. In this study, he has included Amish, Brethren in Christ, and Siberian Baptist farming communities.

Royden formed a team of young scholars, who together developed the interview questions. The interviewee was asked about their Life History (biography, religion, and farm history). Farming questions were asked about seasonality, farm methods, traditional ways, and education. Social Relations questions were asked about gender, family, community, prestige or status, and class. The interviewee was asked about religion and Mennonite identity. The questions on Social Boundaries asked about government relations, marketing, transnationalism, and urban relations. The final topic, Nature,



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(Farmers from page 19)

asked about the weather (including climate change), animals, food ways (what the farmer eats), soil, wilderness, and environmentalism.

There are, of course, similarities and differences both within the seven communities studied and with other farming communities in the global context. The case study approach is commonly used in agricultural research because there are commonalities, but also differences, that are location-specific. The soil, the weather and the climate (the local environment) determine what can be grown. How crops are grown, and animals are raised (and utilized) reflect both historical settlements, rural development, political history, religious beliefs, modernization, proximity to markets and degrees of separation from the larger society.

The chapter titles intrigue, and are an apt description of what lies within. Chapter 1 is titled, *Sect and Settler in the North: Plowing Friesland, Iowa, Manitoba, and Siberia*. Chapter 2 is titled, *Peasant and Piety in the South: Planting Java (Indonesia), Matabeleland (Zimbabwe), and Bolivia's Oriente*. This is followed by *Something New under the Mennonite Sun: A Century of Agricultural Change*, then *Making Peace on Earth: An Agricultural Faith of the Everyday*. The next chapter is *Women on the Land: Gender and Growing Food in Patriarchal Lands*, followed by *Farm Subjects and State Biopower: Seven Degrees of Separation*. The final two chapters are *Vernaculars of Climate Change: Southern Concern, Northern Complacency*, and *Mennonite Farmers in "World Scale" History: Encountering the Wider Earth*. A common theme explored throughout are the differences between the Global North and the Global South.

One of the quotes on the back cover aptly states, "Wonder what a group of farmers from four corners of the globe might discuss if they all came together for a coffee hour? Royden Loewen enlightens us by addressing how culture undergirds agriculture and how belief influences the business of farming. *Mennonite Farmers* confirms that commitment comes at a cost but can also sustain farm fields and families alike." - Debra R. Reid, Curator of Agriculture and the Environment, The Henry Ford Museum. ❖

of Peter and Anna (Foth) Schmidt.

This is the story of a couple who never lost their faith in God or each other. Anna and Peter persevered with strength, resilience and optimism through great difficulties and despair to build a new life in peace in a nation where their children could prosper.

Peter and Anna got to know each other in the Warsaw hospital. Peter was there because he had lost his lower left leg in a construction accident and would walk with a prosthesis for the rest of his life. In a failed robbery attempt at her employer's residence, Anna had a bullet lodged against the vertebrae at the back of her neck, a memento she would carry until the end of her days.

And so began Peter and Anna's life together; soon, WWII forced them off their Wymyschle area farm and into a refugees' difficult way of existence. Their former farmhand Stashek danced on the dining room table set for company, saying, "This is all mine now!" They fled through Poland to Germany and on to Paraguay; along the way, they suffered the heartbreak of losing two children; only Mathilda survived. Another infant would die in the early days in Paraguay.

In their nine years, Anna and Peter prospered reasonably well in Paraguay, but they always yearned to move to Canada, where Anna could be close to her family. In 1957 Anna's brothers Ed and Frank Schmidt sponsored them to come to Edmonton, Canada. Now with four children, Peter and Anna would soon be able to afford their own home with the help of reparation funds from Germany.

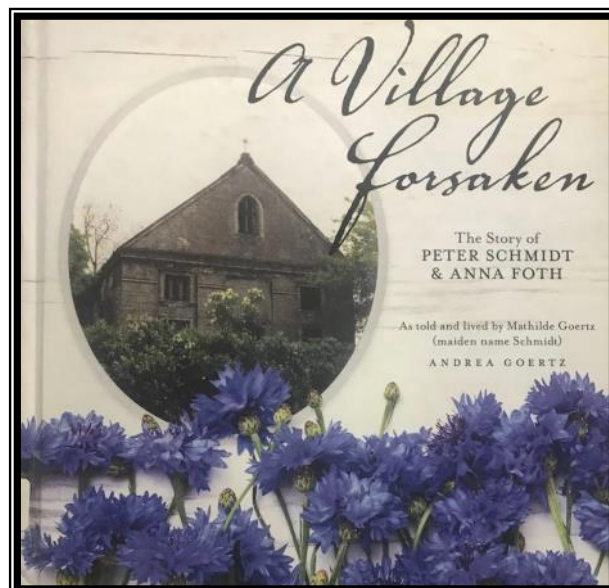
A Village Forsaken

By Andrea Goertz

Reviewed by Dave Toews

The Story of Peter Schmidt and Anna Foth. As told and lived by Mathilda (Schmidt) Goertz.

This is a timely review as Wymyschle, **A Village Forsaken**, is the subject of the 2023 MHSA fall conference at Lendrum Mennonite Church, the home congregation in Edmonton



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The author writes: *Mathilda (Schmidt) Goertz has been a constant source of strength and inspiration to me. She and her parents endured incredible challenges and stayed strong throughout, never wavering from their values or respect for others. Mom asked me to write this story so we could share it with our family. I have cried and laughed with her as I have attempted to capture the emotion, spirit and context within which it was told to me. I hope that all of us find Peter and Anna's journey inspirational as we put into perspective our own challenges, drawing strength from how our ancestors overcame some of life's greatest adversities.*



Tribute to Henry Epp

Henry Epp was born Feb 18, 1939, in Saskatoon, SK, to Henry and Helen Epp and passed away on Friday, Feb 17, 2023, at 83 years.

Henry is survived by his loving wife Lois, sons Mike and Len, and sisters Irene Redekopp, Helen Horton (Ted), and Herta Epp, as well as his many brothers and sisters-in-law, nieces and nephews. Henry was predeceased by his parents, Henry and Helen (Lehn) Epp.

Henry was an environmentalist who spent his career working on environmental management plans, laws, and concerns, including inter-provincial water management, for the Saskatchewan Government. Henry was a member of the Saskatchewan Archaeological Society. He attended and volunteered for Mennonite groups throughout his lifetime, including Trinity Mennonite Church.

Henry published and edited several books on archaeology, plus

over 100 scholarly and professional journal articles. His memoirs, which were just completed, are most precious to his family.

Henry was serving on the board of directors with the Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta at the time of his passing. He wrote a number of outstanding academic articles for the MHSA Chronicle, and most recently, he wrote a tribute to his friend John Hans Kroeger. We are grateful for Henry's contribution; he will be missed.

The MHSA invites its members to make donations in Henry's memory to the: Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta,

210 - 2946 - 32 Street NE,

Calgary, AB T1Y 6J7

Memorial Services were held at Trinity Mennonite Church, DeWinton, AB, on Friday, Feb 24, 2023. ❖



Henry Epp

Russian Mennonite Exodus to Canada, 1924

By the late Rev JJ Thiessen, Translated by Herbert P Enns

This article appeared in the German language paper "Der Bote" on July 14, 1964. I (Herbert Enns) have translated it for anyone else who might be interested in reading about the historic trip our parents undertook to escape from a land of utter chaos and revolution. Although Rev. J.J. Thiessen wrote the article on the occasion of the fortieth-anniversary of our coming to Canada, the translation was done in the fall of 1981, 57 years later. - Herbert P. Enns.

Rev Jacob Johann Thiessen (1893-1977) was born in Klippenfeld, Molotschna Colony, Russia to Johan J. and Margaretha (Nenfeld) Thiessen. He attended the Gnadenfeld Zentralschule and later studied in Halbstadt to become a teacher. From 1915 to 1917, he served as a conscientious objector, first in a Russian forestry camp and later with a road-building crew. In 1924 he served as co-chairman of the All-Ukrainian Mennonite Conference held in Kalinowo. In 1926 he came to Canada with his family. In 1927 he began working as a Reiseschuld (travel debt) collector. J.J. and Katherine, his wife, became members of the Rosenorter Mennonite Church at Rosthern, Saskatchewan, in 1928. In 1930 he accepted duties with the General Conference Mennonite Church Mission Board as a part-time minister to Mennonites living in Saskatoon. This became full-time the following year. The Thiessens also founded the Saskatoon Maedchenheim (girl's home), a place created to meet the social and religious needs of young Mennonite women coming to work in the city. Thiessen was ordained as a Mennonite minister by Bishop David Toews in 1932 and as bishop in 1938. J.J. died in 1977, and his funeral was held in the First Mennonite Church in Saskatoon. For at least two decades, he was the most prominent leader of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada. He had broad church involvements within his own denomina-



Rev JJ Thiessen

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tion and also in the context of inter-denominational ventures.

Letter from the Chairman It was in the month of May 1924 when, in a letter from the chairman of the Assembly of Citizens of Dutch origin, Rev. B.B. Janz, I was asked to take charge and oversee, during the summer vacation, the transportation of emigrants through Russia, to the border station of Sebes, in Latvia. My duty was to protect the emigrants from undue duress and promise the authorities that no illegalities on the part of the departing would be attempted. The reason for this safeguard, for either side, but especially for the emigrants' side, was that the emigrants did not possess individually prepared passports with accompanying photographs but had received permission to leave as a group, bound for Canada. Following a thorough orientation process concerning my duties, I agreed to accept the assignment. My acceptance papers are dated June 5, 1924.

My First Assignment The chairman of the Assembly, Rev. B.B. Janz, had successfully negotiated that the Russian authorities did not require personal passports. The Assembly had prepared a list of names, which had been reviewed and scrutinized by the police division of the Joint State Political Directorate (OGPU). According to these reviewed and accepted lists, the visas were issued. Rev. Janz gave me a list with 1,250 names into my possession, which I was to take to Moscow to obtain the necessary permission for departure.

I went to the shipping company, Ruskapa, announced my presence and was introduced to the representative of the CPR, Mr. Nikita Th. Peschkow. He, in turn, introduced me to the director of the CP.R. (overseas division), Mr. Ovens. Together with him, we discussed the imminent departure of the group in great detail and thoroughness.

My next visit was to the Moscow Soviet. The chairman, whose name escapes me, received me with a long face and angry eyes. I introduced myself as the authorized representative of the Assembly and asked for the necessary visas. He listened to me quietly but was obviously highly irritated. After I had completed my case, he yelled at me: "You come from that man Janz. I have not crossed myself for three years, but I would cross myself three times if I could free myself of him." Finally, he took the list with the names into his hands. examined it and dismissed me with: "Come back tomorrow!" When I got out onto the street, I realized how highly charged the atmosphere had been in the comrade's office.

How Wonderfully God Helps Next morning, I accompanied Mr. Peschkow to the foreign department; some passports for foreigners needed to be completed. In due time this was done, and we sought a quiet place to talk undisturbed. We talked about why our people wanted to leave and the difficulties the government officials placed in the way, thus preventing a smooth exit. He also made me aware of how in 1923, similar trains of emigrants had been detained, and the authorities had permitted personal encroachment on the lives of the departing. He believed that the departure-kommissariat should be informed of the occurrences to prevent them from

happening again and generally shield the unsuspecting and frightened group. I immediately set out to do just that.

I walked into the office of the departure-kommissariat and presented the concerns to a woman whose responsibility was to provide passengers with safe conduct. When she learned that it was the Mennonites we represented, she listened intently and repeated the name "Mennonites" over and over again, as if in deep thought. She gave the impression that she was trying to recall something from her past, which had to do with the Mennonites. Now she had it. She related to me how she had worked with Mennonites in the Red Cross during the first world war and how a particular individual had left an indelible impression on her. I soon discovered that I could help her complete her recollection, that she was thinking of a man named Boschman, who had been a teacher in Halbstadt. She also inquired about his brother, who, at the time when I had my conversation with her, had been killed by bandits: but this I did not reveal to her. She promised that her influence and instructions would bring forth the letter of protection I asked for. It took hardly an hour when she returned with a copy of the telegram directed to the stationmasters from Moscow to Lichtenau. The latter was the departure point through which the emigration train would pass. The telegram, in Russian, translates as follows:

"Jekatcrinoslav. Charkov. South-rail, Kursk, Orjol, Moscow, White-Baltic Rail. Smoljensk, Moscow Ruskapa. Supplementary to telegram #22/70928 of May 28 in Lichtenau,

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ordering 50 railway cars to be at the disposal for 1,250 Mennonites. The departure of the Eschalon on June 23, as a military train, over Fjodorowka. Char-kov, Kursk. Orjol, Brjansk, Smoljensk, Witjibsk. Polotz, Sebesch. Eschalon must arrive in Sebesch on June 28, consistent with the agreement and the ship's arrival at Libau. Junction stations will provide, on time, necessary locomotives to avoid unnecessary delays. Departure and train arrival, surrender from one rail line to the next, and arrival in Sebesch to be confirmed by telegram."

With the telegram safely deposited in my briefcase, examining the document today, it is almost unbelievable that all this took place forty years ago. I hurried back to the office of the Soviet to see what progress had been made in readying the necessary departure permission for the emigrants. Here too, I discovered no hindrances. The comrade had kept his word and confirmed permission to leave. With a glad heart, I made my journey home.

Station Lichtenau Arriving home, I went to the stationmaster at Lichtenau. I was surprised when I discovered he had already received the aforementioned telegram. He informed me that the train cars had been ordered and should arrive shortly. "Hurry and get the emigrants to the station: the train must leave Lichtenau on June 23," he said, visibly excited.

Notices were now sent out to the villages notifying the people of the departure date and the day of departure arrived. That was a busy day, beginning soon after breakfast. Some people arrived on hay wagons, on which they had loaded

their packed belongings, some came on foot, and others arrived on horseback. Some came to leave Russia, others bid farewell, and others came out of curiosity. It is perhaps an understatement to say it was a colourful crowd, somewhat disorganized, which gathered at the Lichtenau station.

The practicality of the people soon became evident. First, all the train cars (freight cars) received a thorough cleaning, making them comfortable for travel.

Then, groups were formed and assigned to cars, the baggage stowed and inwardly prepared to take their leave of the loved ones who would stay behind. And the time for the final goodbye came. The shadows of the day were getting longer; the sun was setting.

The time to say farewell was at hand: from your native soil, the villages, its arrangements, and from friends and relatives. It was a time for goodbye! . . . even the strong and the brave wept and sobbed openly! Perhaps not all realized the finality of their leaving, an almost holy gravity was visible on the faces of the people. The parting hurt! One part of the people were going, and the other part remained.

Suddenly the bell sounded once and then again. Everyone knew only a few more minutes were left before the final parting. The throng of people became visibly restless. Now all those leaving had to board their cars, and those remaining had to go. One more firm handshake: a last embrace; tears flowed over there. Yes, parting hurts! Three sounds from the bell, the train began to move out of the station-"Auf Wiedersehen! Follow us!" "Auf Wiedersehen in eternity!" one traveller called out. I looked out once more to the crowd, which remained Elder Abram Klassen: teacher Kornelius Wiens: teacher Peter Giesbrecht; teacher Philipp Cornies, the vice-chairman of the Assembly; Heinrich Bartel, the treasurer. Finally, I saw only a great mass of people with prospects of an uncertain future.

On the train, all was silent; each one absorbed in their own thoughts. It

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Departure from the Lichtenau train station,
families saying their
last goodbyes
Photo credit MHA



Mennonites boarding the train at the
Lichtenau station

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was evening now; someone began to sing: "Wer nur den lieben Gott laest walten!" ("If thou but suffer God to guide thee"). Soon everyone sang. "Befiehl du deine Wege!" ("Commit though all thy griefs"). More songs were sung. How wonderful that in times of joy and sadness, one could sing the songs of the church that suited the occasion, songs acquired by memorization and now sung with all the fervour of the individuals. Slowly the singing faded. They had sung themselves to sleep. I listened to the wheels' rhythmic clanging, allowing my thoughts to wander.

Alexandrowsk, The railway officials adhered to the instructions from Moscow. We had not expected such precise acceptance of instruction by the officials. And the train travelled at speeds as if possessed, without stopping. Arriving in Alexandrowsk, a friend of mine, Diedrich Walde, confronted me: "Man, can't you do anything with that engineer? He drives the train like a madman, and without stopping. Grandmother fell off the board bench onto the chest, and broke the lid." (This sentence loses a lot of its humour in translation from the Plattdeutsch-low German). What could I say in reply? We had hoped to make good headway. I was glad when the conductor signalled, "All aboard," We hurriedly sought our places in our respective cars. Stops were made only in large cities, such as Sinjelnjikowo, Losowaja, Charkow, Kursk, Orjol, etc. The passengers tired of the continuing speed, without stops, and were glad whenever the train was shunted onto a less used siding, where cooking, roasting, eating, resting, and washing could be attended to.

A Miracle Before the Eyes of the World I think it was in Orjol when the train had barely stopped; the stationmaster approached me and asked where we had come from and where we were going. "Actually, the question was superfluous, as he knew the answer. However, I quietly answered him: "The people are emigrants and are on their way to Canada." The man stood before me as though stunned. "For three years, I have run my head against the wall of bureaucratic red tape in order to get a visa to leave this country, always without success. And here you come with 1,250 people, with permission to leave. . ." he was not the only one who marvelled at the possibility of such a large group leaving the country. It was a miracle of God's doing in



A Mennonite couple with their seven children and all their worldly goods ready for departure

the eyes of the world.

The Trip via Smoljensk to the Border The trip through the glorious forests of west Russia was beautiful and, at times, even enchanting. Most of the travellers had never before seen such vast forests. Whenever the train would make an unexpected stop along the way, the passengers would leave the train, quickly pick flowers, cut evergreen branches along the railway right-of-way, and decorate the cars. Naturally, such stops also afforded the opportunity to do some visiting in other cars and compare experiences made along the way. No doubt many remember the saying: "Shared joys increase to double joys, and shared griefs decrease to half the grief."

The Sick Car The long train also had a special car, staffed with a nurse, to provide needed service and aid for the sick. This medical car proved to be a very practical and wise arrangement. Several children were born during the trip. Only one child became seriously ill and eventually died. The body was buried at Sebesch. Rev. Jacob Reimer, Rueckenau, spoke words of comfort at the graveside.

Who is holding you up? Usually, on arrival at a station, I would seek out the stationmaster to determine what length of time the train was scheduled to stop and whether it was worthwhile for passengers to leave. When I again sought out the stationmaster on one such occasion, he asked: "Who is holding you up? It is annoying having to wait here at the station until midnight for a military train and then discover it is a train

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filled with women."

Will there be War? In

Smoljensk, I had to telegraph the Riga authorities about the train's arrival and impending departure for Riga. I drove into the city in a horse-drawn carriage (taxi) to send the telegram when suddenly the driver turned around and asked: "Will there be war?" I asked him what made him ask such a question, and he answered: "The war commandant and his staff left yesterday for the border, and today a military train equipped with mine-laying devices is coming through." I realized that our train of emigrants, registered as a military train, was creating uneasiness among the populace.

At the Border As we came closer to the border, the atmosphere became tenser. The question was asked over and over, is everything in order? Suppose someone is discovered by the border authorities who was an illegal passenger who was not entered on the official list, someone who might try and slip through. Suppose these authorities discovered something in the papers which was not according to the agreements I had made in Moscow? How would I look in the eyes of the authorities, the representative of the Assembly, and the Assembly itself? What bad image would I create for future groups wishing to leave? Much depended on the honesty and thoroughness of this initial trek in order to accommodate future groups.

Most of us on the train were anxious the closer the train came to the border. The time of proof soon arrived. The train had barely

stopped when the assistant to the inspector of police stood in front of me. His greeting was friendly. I reported the exact number of passengers and of the trip itself when he suggested that we go to the staff quarters of the police. Here I again had to report, in greater detail, registration, border passage, etc. I was asked whether there was personnel on board the train who could assist in recording the names of the emigrants into the border book. I reported there were 28 teachers (male), nine female teachers, several post-high school graduates, and many high school graduates. It did not take long, and 16 secretaries busily registered every emigrant. This went on all night. The inspector was amazed when I came forward with another 16 secretaries to relieve the first set. He could hardly contain himself and finally blurted out: "And you are leaving the country? Our land needs people like you desperately!"

Customs Check The duty of the customs official in any country is to see that no prohibited goods or articles enter the country illegally; likewise, no specified goods or articles are taken out of the country illegally. Such rules are all good if the examining officials adhere to these rules. However, it is unpleasant when customs officials intimidate helpless passengers with belaboured questioning. Some of the officials were friendly, and their work progressed smoothly. Others were indifferent and hostile. They dug among the belongings of the emigrants, who became scared of what might happen. Under such circumstances, Mr. J. had his camera and equipment confiscated. He reported it to me. I begged the official to return the articles because Mr. J. hoped to earn his living with them in Canada. Mr. J. was a photographer. "I will leave," said the official



The Red Gate at the Russian
Latvian border

to me. "and then you can return the camera to the man." "No," I replied. "I will not return the equipment behind your back, but here, in your presence, I will give Mr. J. what you confiscated. I had Mr. J. brought into our car, and he received his camera and attachments and left happily, and the checking continued without further incident.

At the Red Door Crossing the border from Russia into Latvia, the train had to pass through a door painted red and decorated on top with a star. At this gate/door, border guards had treated the 1923 emigrants miserably. Expecting a repeat performance on this trip, I asked the customs inspector to accompany the train to the border. He agreed. The train had to stop before passing through the door and had barely stopped when a big fat "official" began ordering all wooden planks, which had served as beds

(See Exodus on page 26)

(Exodus from page 25)

and benches, to be removed from the train. How surprised and irritated. I'm sure he was when he saw his superior on board, who immediately ordered a stop to any further "enthusiastic" instructions his underlying might have. To have the official come along to the border foresight turned out to be a wise move. With the last whistle from the train on Russian soil, the train slowly passed through the door onto Latvian soil. The emigrants wept and waved to me, some, no doubt, that at last, they were in a free country: others, perhaps, felt sorry for me that I had to return into a lion's den, as it were. I, too, was overcome with emotion and wept. When the official noticed I was crying, he said: "Well, even their leader weeps." When I was able to reply, I said: "Comrade, how can I remain without any sign of feeling and emotion when over one hundred of my former students have left this country?" To this, the customs official replied: "Platschtje Towarisch!" ("Cry Comrade").

That summer, 1924, I accompanied three emigrant groups to the border. Of the 2,526 persons who left Russia that summer, at least 90% were farmers: 113 had a high school education, 51 had a post-high school education, 60 were teachers, and two were university graduates. Aside from this, this group included business people, labourers, office workers, nurses, photographers, land surveyors, engineers, accountants, etc. I accepted these assignments as a privilege and an opportunity to serve the brotherhood in this way.

During that summer, my involvement in this work brought me in contact with officials of the CPR and other shipping companies associated with the Ruskapa. It was also my privilege to make contact with other foreigners on these trips: foreigners who were visiting Russia. Under extraordinary circumstances, I established acquaintances with Mr. and Mrs. Vincent Massey in Sebesch.

We travelled together to Moscow, dined together and talked about many things. I was able to provide some enlightenment on conditions in Russia, but as a result, I almost lost my life. When, on my next trip, I entered the dining car. and being

recognized by the waiter, he approached me: "Are you alive?" "Why not?" I asked. He replied: "It was the intention of the GPU police, who were on the train, to have you removed from the train before arriving in Moscow." I surmised that carrying on lengthy discussions with foreigners

was not advisable. Later, Mr. Massey wrote to me inviting me to come to Canada and teach in Mennonite schools where the English language was not accepted. In 1932 Mr. Massey and I met again in Canada at Knox Church, where he and Mrs. Massey were reporting on a trip they had made to China and from which they had just recently returned. Later he became Canada's High Commissioner to London, followed by his appointment as Canada's Governor General a few years later.

Since 1924, 40 years have passed. In reminiscing on what has been, many of the events are vividly recalled, as though they just happened. Many who came to Canada in 1924 are no longer with us. Our emigration from Russia and immigration to Canada remains a miracle in many people's thoughts. Have we recognized-have we appreciated our rescue from a land of slavery in this light? Undoubtedly, many individuals have written down experiences of the old homeland and the early pioneer years in our newly adopted homeland. It would be too bad if such accounts were to go unnoticed or even lost.

I send greetings to all immigrants who have come to Canada, especially remembering those who came in 1924, who, no doubt, will celebrate the anniversary of their coming to Canada with thanksgiving.

Source: Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario Newsletter, Sept 1994. ♦



Mennonites from Russia arriving at the Ros-thern, Saskatchewan train station in the 1920s



MENNONITE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF ALBERTA

2023 Fall Conference



Frieda Claassen

**Lendrum Mennonite Church
11210 – 59th Ave NW
Edmonton, Alberta, T6H 1G3**



Wymysle, Poland

Saturday, Sept 23, 2023

Conference - 2:00 PM - doors open 1:30

Bringing **“Deutsch Wymysle”** a forsaken
Mennonite Village, back to memory



Wojtek Marchlewski

- Reminiscing - Frieda (Prochnau) Claassen & Wojtek Marchlewski
 - Mennonites in the Mazovian Region - Wojtek Marchlewski
 - Research Interests - Wojtek Marchlewski & Colin Neufeldt
 - Future Developments – Frieda Claassen & Wojtek Marchlewski
- Questions & Answers

Zoom link - TBD

Conference Registration \$20.00 per person at the door

Zoom participation \$10.00 per screen e-Transfer

Light lunch & socializing to follow

To pre-register, email Dave at dmtows@gmail.com



MC Colin Neufeldt



Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta

presents the Alberta portion of the

Cross Canada Russlaender 100 Tour - July 2023

in partnership with the

Canadian Mennonite Historical Society and TourMagination



Thurs. July 20, 2023 – 2:00 PM tour arrives at the Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Village east of Edmonton for a tour, authentic Ukrainian meal, plus a discussion with Mennonite and Ukrainian historians

"Private Function" TourMagination Group Only

The Tour departs for overnight stay in Red Deer



Fri. July 21, 2023 - 11:00 AM arrive at Bergthal Mennonite Church, Didsbury, for lunch, Russlaender sponsorship accounts, map of Mennonite Churches of Alberta today, posters showing when various Mennonite settlers first came to Alberta and heritage piano selections



- 4:00 PM tour arrives at the CC Toews

(Evergreen) Farm, Linden, for sharing

5:00 PM - Western Barbeque Supper

Russlaender sponsorship stories,

entertainment by Cowboy Poet Doris Daley

The Tour leaves for Edmonton for evening departure to Abbotsford, BC

All locals are welcome to attend "Bergthal & CC Toews Farm"

"Preregistration is required" email DaveToews at dmttoews@gmail.com

For complete tour information, see the TourMagination website

<https://tourmagination.com/tour/cross-canada-russlaender-centenary-tour/>