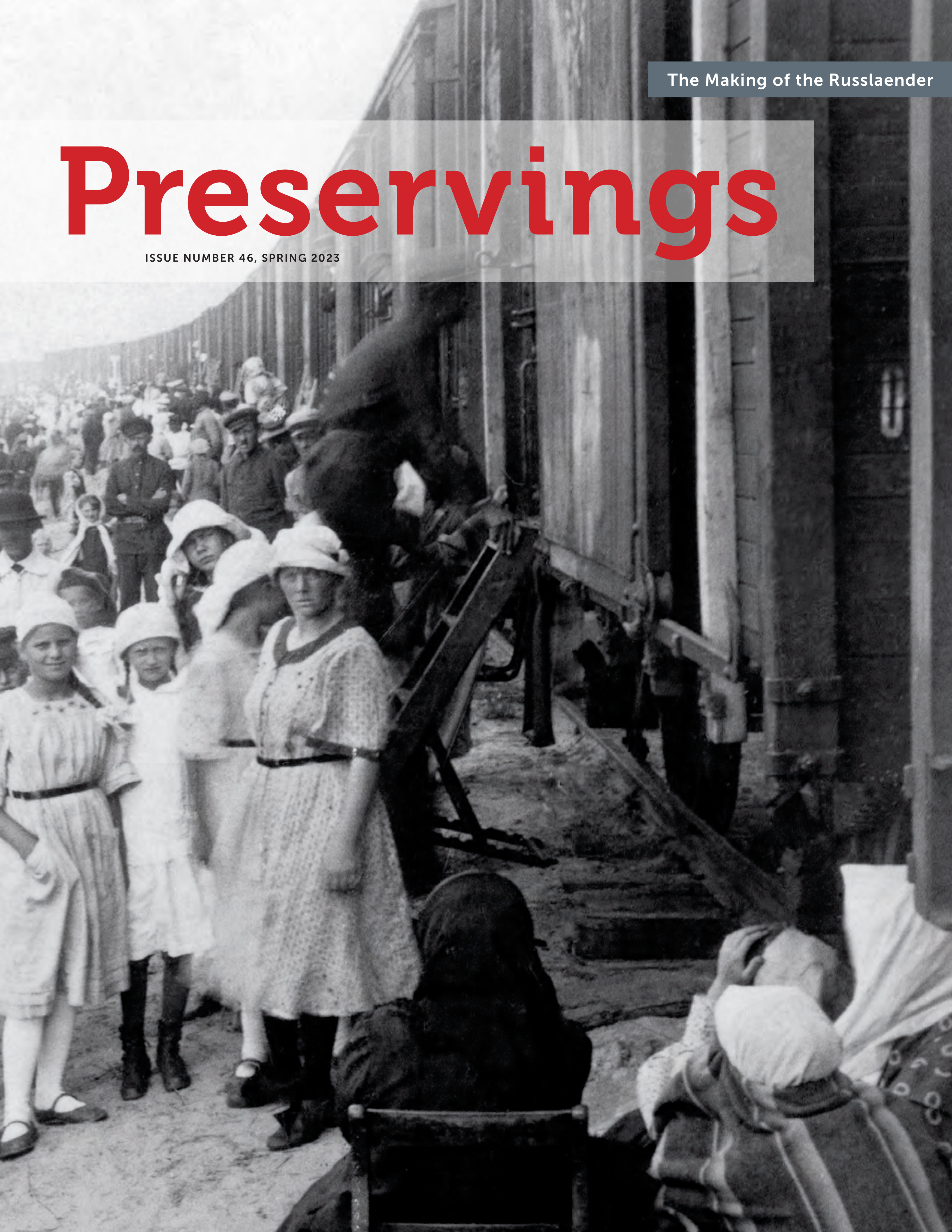

The Making of the Russlaender

Preservings

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MISSION
To inform our readers about the history of the Mennonites who came to Manitoba in the 1870s and their descendants, and in particular to promote a respectful understanding and appreciation of the contributions made by Low German-speaking traditionalist Mennonite groups of the Americas.

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COVER IMAGE
Departure by train from Lichtenau, Molotschna.
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INSIDE BACK COVER IMAGE
A crowd gathered at the Chortitza train station.
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Out of the Ashes of Revolution

Aileen Friesen

This summer Mennonites will be commemorating the beginning of the Russlaender migration from the Soviet Union to Canada through the Memories of Migration: Russlaender 100 tour. The provincial societies constituting the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada have planned events across the country to memorialize this event that transformed the life trajectories of many families, forging new paths for our community. The purpose of the tour is not to reminisce, but to remember. To remember is to bear witness to pain experienced, to contemplate difficult decisions made, to acknowledge adversity weathered, to be thankful for unforeseen blessings bestowed. But to remember is only possible if we know our own history.

It was Catherine II, a Romanov through marriage, who first opened the door to mass foreign immigration to the southern steppe of the Russian empire in the late eighteenth century. Mennonites soon joined the influx of migrants. Out of their two original settlements, Chortitza and Molotschna, grew thriving communities that spread across the empire. Hard work, in combination with privileges conferred by the tsar, fertile land, and a booming wheat market, would propel Mennonites into an era of prosperity. No longer the quiet in the land, in time they entered politics, becoming mayors of major cities like Ekaterinoslav (present-day Dnipro); they started successful enterprises, with business transactions reaching into the millions of rubles; they expanded their local educational system, while also sending their youth, both men and women, to universities in Europe and the imperial capital of St. Petersburg.

Life was not perfect. Do not be fooled by the photographs of neo-Gothic and neo-classical mansions, of multi-story brick mills, of grand estates. This was not a paradise that we lost. By the late nineteenth century, as the empire lurched and swayed towards greatness or catastrophe, Mennonites did not stand on the sidelines, aloof and separated from the realities of modernity. Even along the fruit-treed streets of Mennonite villages we can find signs of the deeply embedded tensions that existed in the rest of the empire. Land hunger divided Mennonites into the haves and have-nots; religious divisions tore apart families; quaint and quiet Mennonite villages were transformed into multi-ethnic and multi-confessional industrial centres that employed Ukrainian, Russian, German, and Mennonite workers, some housed locally in barracks.

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Banner declaring "Long live the enlightenment of the people."

THE FIRST WORLD WAR

The start of the First World War papered over these differences and tensions, at least in the beginning. Mennonites joined others in pledging their loyalty to the state, to the defence of their homeland, donating money and goods to the war effort. Young men, eager to be useful while remaining true to their beliefs, served on medical trains, treating the war wounded. In this issue of *Preservings*, the recollection of Johann G. Rempel illustrates that medics were not sheltered from the trauma of the war. They carried its horror with them to Canada. Young Mennonite women took care of farms, sewed, and volunteered as nurses. The wartime contributions of Mennonites were recognized by some in positions of power and authority, but others refused to see past their identity as "Germans," and excoriated Mennonites as traitors who never truly belonged.

It is hardly a wonder why Mennonites, along with millions of souls fatigued by the war, welcomed the collapse of the Romanov dynasty in February of 1917. A telegram issued on behalf of the inhabitants of the Molotschna district praised the people of the empire for "overthrowing the old power that has driven our fatherland to complete ruin," pledging the support of the local population to the Provisional Government that replaced the hapless Tsar Nicholas II. Mennonites joined in political debates about the future of imperial Russia, embracing the ideas of "freedom, equality, and fraternity" proclaimed in the streets. For many Mennonites, the only way to achieve these goals and protect the rights of minorities was the establishment of a decentralized democratic republic. For many of their Ukrainian and Russian neighbours, true equality could only be achieved through a government that acknowledged the necessity of redistributing land.

CIVIL WAR

It was the next revolution, the Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917, that brought Vladimir Lenin to power and ushered in a new world order. Some celebrated this event as the overthrowing of a corrupt bourgeois culture that lived off the exploitation of workers. Others viewed it as temporary madness that would never last, a fleeting moment that, too, would pass before life returned to normal. And yet it never did. The Bolsheviks initiated a social and economic experiment that would define a century. After capturing the Winter Palace and arresting the Provisional Government, they declared power to be in the hands of the soviets, or councils of workers, peasants, and soldiers.

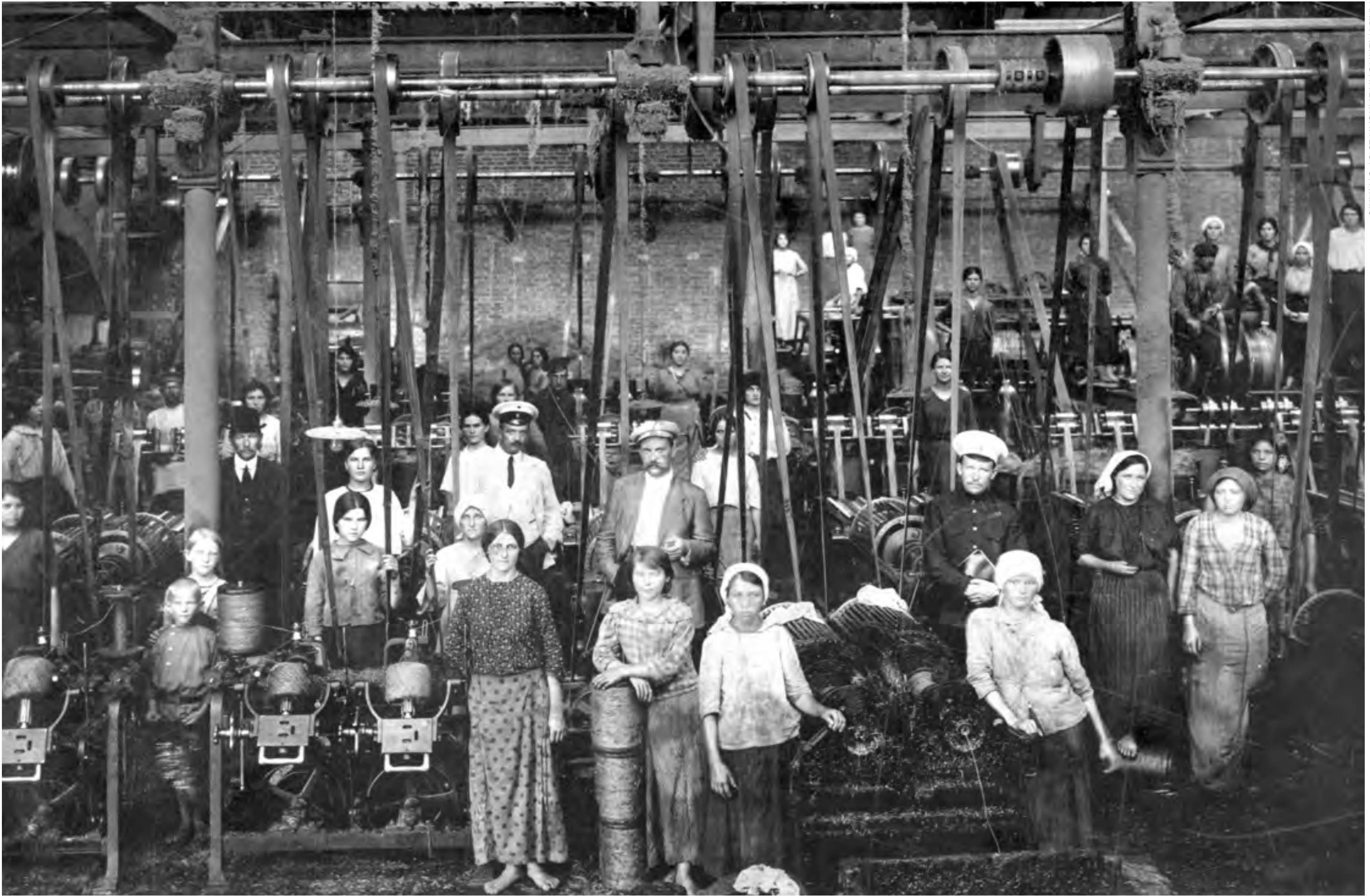
While news spread quickly of the unrest in Moscow and St. Petersburg, the reality of the regime change only became apparent in the Mennonite colonies of Ukraine in January of 1918. Armed men, members of the Red Guards, arrived in the Chortitza district and confiscated money, horses, and weapons from Mennonite households. To ensure full payment, they took hostages from among Mennonite leaders. Millions of rubles had to be collected from the wider community to secure their release. Extortion along with unofficial acts of vigilante justice for past crimes pitted people against each other. In Halbstadt (Molochansk), arrests led to executions, with several Mennonites and a Slavic boy losing their lives. Some Mennonites, albeit a minority, embraced this overturning of the old system, throwing their support behind the new regime.

The arrival of Austro-Hungarian and German troops in April halted, briefly, the exercise of Soviet power in southern Ukraine and the frequent armed robberies that terrorized Mennonites families. Mennonites welcomed these troops as liberators from the arbitrary rule of an illegitimate Bolshevik government. This was not a response of the politically naïve, but rather an acknowledgement of the independence of the Ukrainian National Republic, achieved with the Brest-Litovsk treaties in February and March of 1918. Mennonites looked to this new political circumstance with hope, not only for themselves, but also for their Ukrainian neighbours. The line between liberation and occupation, however, was not entirely clear, and by the end of April, General Pavlo Skoropadsky formed a new government that favoured the wealthy over the peasantry, leading once again to instability. With the encouragement of the German and Austrian forces, Mennonites would establish self-defence units, the *Selbstschutz*, ostensibly to protect people and property, although for certain units, confiscation and retribution also formed part of their repertoire. Armed Mennonite men patrolled the streets, becoming symbols within the community of either how bad things had become or how far Mennonites had strayed from their values.

But the worst was yet to come. By the fall of 1918, the southern Ukrainian steppe disintegrated into a dizzyingly complex and brutally violent civil war. It was a time of mass panic, of confusion and rumours, of fear and exhaustion. In some cases, villages were burned to the ground, children spent terror-filled nights in the fields, and entire families were massacred. B. Schellenberg's article in this issue offers a snapshot of the district of Chortitza during this period, as Mennonites and their neighbours were forced to make choices, often with life-or-death consequences.

The trauma of the civil war lingered among Mennonites. In many families the full story of this period remained hidden. Yet while the horror of brutal rapes, of gruesome murders, of humanity's worst might not have been spoken of, it assuredly was never forgotten by those who experienced it. Some who lived through that time tried to comfort themselves and their community with the words of Jesus found in John 11:25: "Whoever believes in me will live even though he dies." For others, no balm could soothe the wounds: they carried the pain until the end of their lives.

In 1919, devastated by violence, and desperate for help, Mennonites reached out to their co-religionists in Europe and North America. Their needs dovetailed with a growing sense among Canadian, American, and Dutch Mennonites of the importance of relief work: that they were called to do more than sit on the sidelines as the world rebuilt itself after a senseless war. By late 1920, the civil war had been decided for southern Ukraine, with the Bolsheviks' Red Army victorious. Many Mennonites were saved by the relief kitchens established by the organization that would become the Mennonite Central Committee, which fed not only Mennonites but, in compliance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Factory workers in late imperial Russia.

with Bolshevik policies, also others in need. Even with their help, hundreds of Mennonites died from starvation.

LEAVING THE SOVIET UNION

But feeding the hungry was not enough. While the Bolsheviks liberalized their economic policy to aid in the reconstruction of regions devastated by war and requisitions, a sense of disquiet still pervaded. In overcrowded villages, teeming with refugees, it was not certain how Mennonites could establish a basic standard of living, let alone rebuild their once prosperous communities. Only in unifying and organizing the Union of Citizens of Dutch Lineage, in Ukraine, and the All-Russian Mennonite Agricultural Union, in Russia, could Mennonites convince the Soviet government to allow them to tackle two imperative tasks: the rebuilding of Mennonite agricultural life and the facilitation of emigration.

Mennonites managed the exodus of a third of their population during the 1920s only because community members were willing to undertake the burden of leadership. Men and women made tremendous sacrifices, often garnering unwanted attention from officials as they maneuvered through the early Soviet system to organize this migration. While everyone knows the name of B. B. Janz, who performed an instrumental role in negotiations with Bolshevik officials in Kharkov (Kharkiv) and Moscow, as the reports in this issue of Johann P. Klassen and John G. Bergen demonstrate, many others contributed their own creative thinking to help shepherd nearly 21,000 out of the Soviet Union before its doors closed.

Creativity was also required by Mennonites in Canada. The memoir of David Toews offers an honest portrait of these years from a Canadian perspective, showing the complexities of negotiations with the government, the Canadian Pacific Railway, and especially other Mennonites. Toews, who became the face of the Canadian response, persevered through the obstacles of the 1919 orders-in-council banning Mennonite immigration, of financing the movement of thousands of people without resources, and of skepticism among Canadian Mennonites about the feasibility and desirability of this endeavour. Toews, together with A. A. Friesen and Gerhard Ens, responded to this unprecedented situation, helping to open the door for Mennonite immigration and procuring financing for their travels and settlement. They did this by creating the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization, which would work to collect the travel debts of the Russlaender and coordinate the response of Mennonites to immigration issues for decades to come.

Most Russlaender did not flee with only the shirts on their backs. This was an organized process, as the journey of Henry Becker, my maternal grandfather, illustrates. The terror of

Following page: A large group, mainly children, at the doorway of an American Mennonite Relief kitchen. MAID: MHA, 665-136.0

MAID: MENNONITE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA. 112-16-2-2013.002.011

A portrait of B. B. Janz's family.

collectivization and dekulakization was still unknown for most of the 1920s, which helps us to understand why people chose to stay and why it was so emotional for others to leave. I often share this story from my own family: My maternal grandmother's father had no intention of leaving the Soviet Union. He knew the culture, he knew the land, he thought he could build a life for his family in Ukraine. He did not want to travel to an unknown place, to be surrounded by a language he didn't know. He left because my great-grandmother told him the family was going. Their early life after the migration was not easy. He never experienced the promise of Canada. But his grandchildren did, as did his great-grandchildren and his great-great grandchildren. This is the essence of the story so often missed: the sacrifices made for future generations.

THOSE WHO REMAINED

Those who remained in the Soviet Union, the majority of Mennonites, followed a different path. As the example of Johannes G. Thielmann shows, some found the capacity to fuse elements of communist ideology with their Mennonite identity. Others within the community strongly felt that God had created an opportunity for spiritual revival. As Jacob J. Rempel wrote: "Here we also have a responsibility. If . . . we want to further the Kingdom of God . . . then it has to be here."[1] Yet, by the 1930s, while the Russlaender in Canada built churches and spiritual communities, Mennonites in the Soviet Union watched their ministers exiled, their pews confiscated, and finally, their churches closed. While the Russlaender educated their children openly in the faith, those who remained spoke of God only in whispers. While the Russlaender lived in safety and security, they witnessed their fathers disappear into the night, never to be heard from again.

CONCLUSION

Before he passed away, my grandfather lent me Dietrich Neufeld's book *A Russian Dance of Death: Revolution and Civil War in the Ukraine*. He said it would help me understand what he had experienced in his village of Schoensee. To be honest, I didn't read it. I was twelve and had other interests. How I regret my indifference. The generation that experienced this period of our history is gone; the next generation is fading. Why does this matter? It matters because many of the paths that were taken, many of the choices we have had the privilege of making, are predicated on these historical moments. To forget is not only to erase our individual family stories, but also to live without gratitude to the people who in a moment of intense turmoil did their best to find a place of refuge for the generations to come. As Heinrich J. Friesen, who arrived in Canada with his family in 1926, wrote: "Even though we had . . . lost much . . . we want to begin over again courageously in Canada, to try to establish a new home for us and our descendants . . . . It is our hope that God will be with us and guide us."[2]

---

1 Alexander Rempel and Amalie Enns, *Hope Is Our Deliverance: The Tragic Experience of a Mennonite Leader and His Family in Stalin's Russia* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2005), 71.

2 Heinrich J. Friesen, *Memories from My Life* (Winnipeg: H. J. Friesen Family, 1995), 59.

Why the Children?

Johann G. Rempel

Translation by David G. Rempel

Once again, it was on the blood-soaked fields of Poland where our hospital train was loaded with the wounded.[1] Each of these trips to the front brings a new experience; this one also. A badly wounded Polish boy, possibly eight or nine years old, is being delivered to our train. He is literally wrapped in bandages and looks like an embalmed mummy. Only a pair of dim eyes, portions of sallow cheeks, a pale nose, and the fever-blistered lips are visible. With great heed the stretcher with its light burden is lifted into my car. Carefully I take the youngster into my arms, and he eyes me with confidence, as if I had cared for him for weeks. He moans continuously, but hardly audibly. Aside from this he has not spoken a single word.

The train is loaded and commences its journey eastward, possibly to Moscow, our usual destination. The doctor and a nurse reach my car by the time the train makes its first stop. While the doctor unravels the boy's bandages, and as I turn the frail body in response to the doctor's directions, the nurse relates the few details she had been given at the station of how this youngster had come to grief. The village in which he lived with his parents had been shelled by our side in attempts to flush out suspected enemy patrols hiding in it. The Polish family, including the children, had sought cover behind the walls of their dwelling. Shell fragments had killed all members of the family except for this boy, who escaped the fate of the others with a degree of life.

As the unwrapping proceeds, the doctor shakes his head more frequently, for shell splinters have mutilated the whole front portion of the boy's body. The uncovered face, but especially the chest and belly, seem to be one continuous wound, which, though not too deep, is already heavily pus-infected. The youngster has kept quiet during the entire process. Only when a doctor reaches a spot where the bandage is dried to the wound does he emit an audible groan, which seemed to say, "It hurts so."

"Won't pull through," the doctor says laconically, as he leaves the car.

Until evening he lies, still moaning quietly. At times I have the impression that he sleeps. Then, either in delirium or while dreaming, he talks at length in his Polish tongue. At dusk he grows more restless. "Panie, na dwir" (Sir, I must go out). I hold him over the toilet bucket and feel the high temperature of his body. He is quiet for a few brief minutes. Then, writhing in pain and cramps, he cries heartrendingly: "Panie, oh Panie!!" (Sir, oh sir!!), a prolonged and loud emphasis upon the last syllable. "What do you wish, little boy?" "Panie," is all he utters, and looks at me with his feverish eyes, which seemed to be full of a thousand wishes, so sadly and imploringly.

I light the lantern and distribute the evening meal among the rest of the wounded. The boy declines each offer of food with a slight shake of his head. But I insist that he must have some tea, and he obediently sips half a cup while I lift his head. Then he grows quiet. The dim light of the lantern gives him the appearance of death.

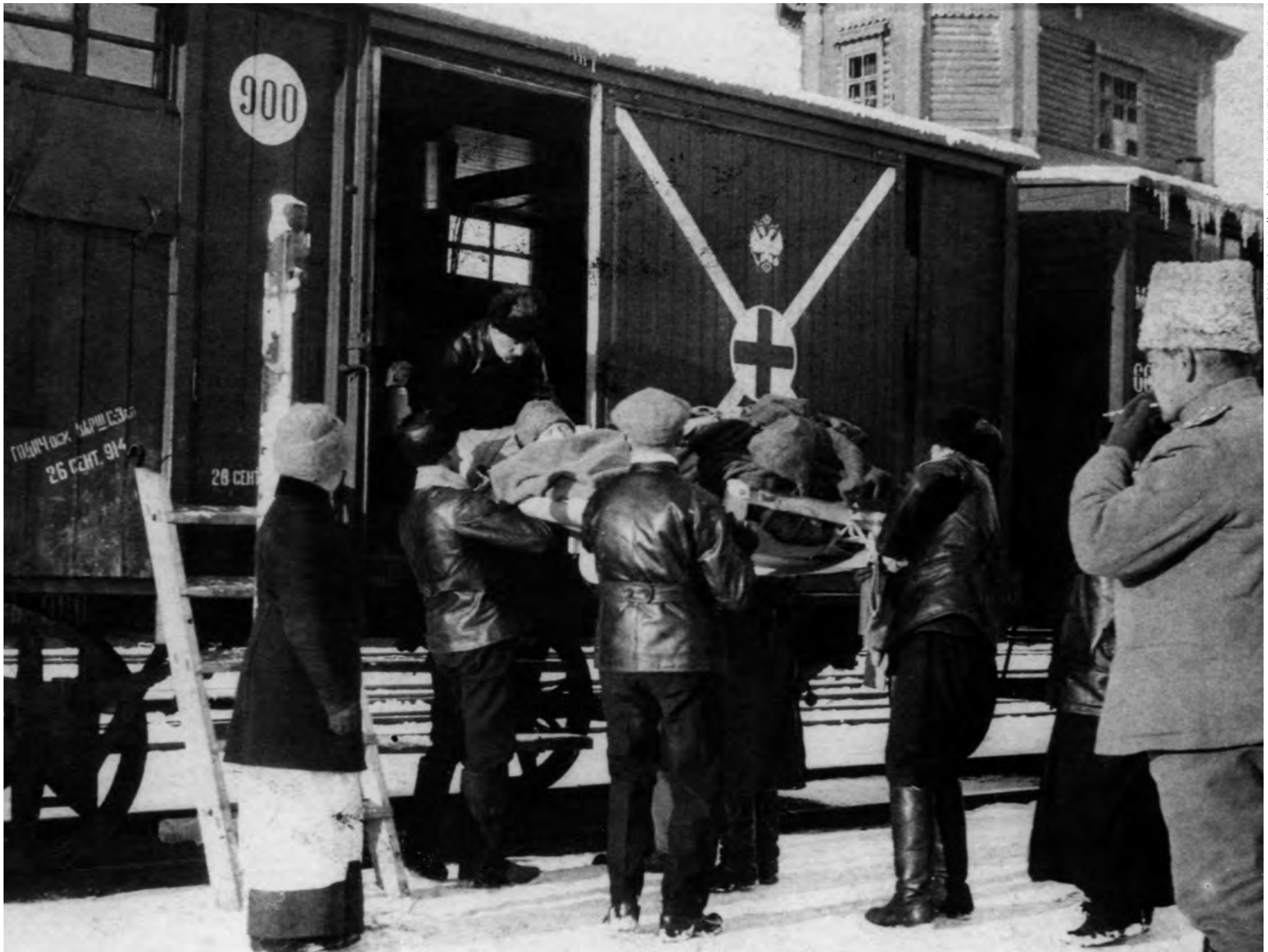
"Panie, Panie," he breaks out again.

"Why does the kid cry so much? One can't sleep," comes the complaint from one of the wounded men. It seems to me too that he could be somewhat quieter, and with some firmness in my voice I tell him, "Please be quiet. What good does it do to cry?" But immediately I regret the use of harsh words, and inquire in as sympathetic a voice as I am able to muster, "Do you want something, boy?"

"In your arm," I make out from his haltingly uttered words of pleading. I take him in my arms and pace up and down the aisle of the car. This seems to have a calming effect upon the little patient. He gathers what little strength he has and occasionally strokes my left cheek with his right hand, and blissfully sounds the words "Panie, Panie." Then his tired arm drops, and I place it ever so lightly against his limp body. I carry him up and down the aisle, until my arms are numb.

I assume that he will not make it until the morning, and therefore resolve to be with him until the end comes. Midnight is nearing. I sit next to his bed, with my back against the wall, and doze off for brief spells. A loud "Panie" startles me, and I ask what he wants. "Mama!" "But you no longer have a mama." "Papa!" comes the pleading. "Papa too is gone. They're up there." I point to the ceiling. "You will soon meet them there."

Toward dawn, the temperature in the car has gotten low, and



MAID: MENNONITE HERITAGE ARCHIVES (MHA) PP-4-044-780.0

During the First World War, Mennonites contributed to the war effort through their work as medics. Their duties included loading the wounded onto Red Cross trains.

I am for some time preoccupied with rekindling the fire in the stove. When finally I return to the boy, I notice that his eyes have a glazed look, and his mouth is partly open.

He certainly is dead, I mutter to myself. My hand touches his, and he responds with a slight movement of the head. A bit of life seems to return to his eyes. "Panie, Panie," he whimpers. His look expresses an obvious plea for something. What favour could I possibly still do for this little patient? I search the small medical chest in my compartment, and all I see is mercuric chloride, some pills, and a few similar things. Dejectedly I close it. Then I spot a few lumps of sugar on a nearby table left over from the evening tea. I show him a piece, and his eyes seem to smile ever so faintly. He wiggles the fingers of one hand, which gesture I interpret to mean that he wishes me to place a lump near him.

In the morning the doctor inquires about the boy. "Is he still alive?"

"Yes, sir, but can't we deliver him somewhere soon?"

"Yes, yes. I have received word that in an hour or so we will unload all patients."

At last the train arrives at the designated station and is being switched to an unloading platform. When the first stretcher is brought to my car, I see to it that the boy is the first patient to be loaded onto it. Yesterday's bandages are soaked with blood and in many places soiled with pus. He says not a word as he is being lifted out of the car, nor while being placed on a stretcher. No groans are heard, and his eyes are dim and lifeless. His heart still beats faintly, and the verdict is that he is being discharged as living. And yet I know that he is a corpse.

Adult men who have never met, who have never heard of one another, face each other as bitter enemies, tear each other to pieces with bayonets and bombs. Why must innocent children pay so heavily for men's supreme folly?

Johann G. Rempel, a teacher, minister, and elder, was born in 1890 in Nieder-Chortitza, Chortitza colony. He migrated with his family to Canada in the 1920s. David G. Rempel was a distinguished historian of Mennonites in imperial Russia and the brother of Johann.

1 Originally published in a series titled "Aus der Kriegszeit" in *Der Bote*. J. R., "Warum die Kinder?," *Der Bote*, Feb. 3, 1926, 6-7.

Chortitza District, August 1919

B. Schellenberg
Translation by Lukas Thiessen

I hereby submit to *Friedensstimme* a concise report on the events of the past year.[1] I start my report from late 1918, since it seems to me that, due to a lack of mail service, messages were sent to this paper rather very sparsely at that time.

We here in the Ekaterinoslav governorate have had to witness and experience many a revolution. Republicans (Petliurists), Makhnovists, Grigorievists, and finally also the Bolsheviks fought for power and more or less exploited the population.[2] The worse elements of the Russian population took advantage of the situation and endlessly terrorized their peaceful fellow citizens through robbery and murder. The German colonies suffered most since they were generally considered rich. We have seen the abomination of devastation, fearfully distorted faces, and horribly mutilated corpses. Hundreds saw death before their eyes, and many were only rescued from the fire like a brand. Many Mennonites, along with others in the evil times under the old regime, wished for a revolution to break with the conditions they believed had become untenable. But it seems to me that we will be a little more modest with such wishes in the future. It is not for believers to rebel against the authorities.

All of them, the previously mentioned parties, preached freedom, humanity, and fraternity, and all of them trampled on all the noblest feelings of humankind in an almost unheard-of way.

After the departure of the German military in autumn last year, the Republicans seized control of the country. It was a time of particular horror; many robberies occurred during this period. Probably almost all landowners were forced to place their estates under the protection of the villages as far as this was possible.

On October 28, Johann Heinr. Peters of Solenoye was one of the first to fall victim to the attack of common murderous thieves. The same robbers raided the estate of the late Jacob Is. Zacharias a week later and took money, food, and clothes. On November 23, Peter Froese from Paulheim (a small settlement around Nikolaipol) was beaten very badly.

At the beginning of December, the Volunteers[3] advanced from the west to Einlage and delivered a battle to the Republicans near Neuenburg (about ten *verst* from Chortitza), in which the latter lost about eighteen dead and eighty prisoners. It was a frightening night for the Neuenburger, but they came out of it, in sheer terror.

A few days later, the Volunteers fired on the Republicans hidden in Alexandrabad from Einlage, but then retreated for good. The Republicans suspected, or pretended to suspect, that Einlage had taken part in the shooting, and launched an investigation, another name for which would be looting, searching for shotguns in the smallest compartments and cans. Many valuables, large and small, were "evaluated." Part of the population fled.

And now the hardships for our *Selbstschutz* (self-defence units) began. They were not really trusted and it was demanded that they turn over their rifles. The colonists emphasized to the authorities the necessity of self-defence against predatory attacks and begged that the rifles not be taken. On repeated occasions they were given friendly concessions. The Selbstschutz was overall poorly organized: we lacked prudent, uniform management, military training, and discipline. It was very Mennonite. We were understandably very undecided in a matter that could have led to the killing of people under certain circumstances. The Mennonite, according to B. Unruh, is instinctively defenceless. Moreover, our district was always greatly affected by the various military movements. If any gained power, Einlage and Chortitza, as permanent positions on the Dnieper and on the railway and as suitable bases of operation, were always occupied very soon. The new rulers were not inclined to recognize another existing military organization besides themselves.

Therefore, rifles were delivered to the Chortitza area before New Year's. Nikolaipol, which is less in the hot spot of military operations, could protect itself longer. Serious fights with smaller and larger gangs took place there, apparently with success. This success spurred on larger operations, and even entire military units (up to two hundred men) were resisted, in concert with the Selbstschutzes of the surrounding Russian villages (Smorid,

Villagers of Blumenort, Molotschna, around a mass grave of family and friends killed in the Civil War.

Bashmachka, Veseloye and Lukashevka). On repeated occasions the Nikolaipol villages (Nikolaipol, Franzfeld, Dolinovka, Dubrovka, Morozovo) were bombarded, even from cannons. Whether the people achieved anything by their defence remains questionable. They had to surrender in the end, but their property was not ruined like in other places.

The Selbstschutzer Friesen (Morozovo), and Peter Enns (Franzfeld) were shot in action. Kornelius Lehn, son of the preacher Kornelius Lehn (Morozovo), was cut to pieces with a sabre. Heinrich Friesen (Dolinovka) only miraculously escaped certain death. His nephew, Abr. Friesen's son, was maltreated and kidnapped, and has not yet returned.

Paulheim suffered very much because, as mentioned, it offered particularly stubborn resistance. Gerh. Friesen from there was killed and mutilated. Many were scourged, and some of them escaped death only in dire need. Many Selbschutzter fled, and in fear and privation of some kind just made it out with their lives.

Some of the things I am telling you here, by the way, already refer to the time of Bolshevik rule. A man from Nikolaipol said to me that there is now a general opinion that it would have been better not to resist. Another village (Gnadental, not far Krivoy Rog) welcomed the Bolsheviks with bread and salt when they moved in. It suffered remarkably little in return. A smaller village was said to have suffered particularly badly under the Bolsheviks because of resistance: all the girls and women who the fiends could capture (from the age of sixteen up to matronhood) were raped, some men shot, their personal property destroyed.

So it then may seem really questionable whether the resistance was of any use to us. What was hailed as a success was perhaps only an apparent, external one. And who wants to judge what may follow! It is difficult to separate appearance and truth. Perhaps no one can make a ruling pro or con, only time will tell.

The real looting began in December; before that there were only sporadic robberies. It was now happening freely and publicly, and on a large scale. During the period covered by the main report, Einlage and Chortitza suffered particularly. Many of the better houses have literally been looted. Their owners fled and had to lead an unstable and restless life. This included Pet. Koop, Korn. Martens, Korn. Hildebrand, Is. and Abr. Heinrichs, Is. Lehn, and Peter Peters (Einlage), H. Epp, Pet. Enns (*Oberschulz* [district mayor]) and David Penner (secretary), and others from Chortitza. Most of them returned home only now in August.

Paulheim was more or less evacuated. In mid-December there was a raid on the house of K. Martens, during which one of the robbers was shot dead. The uncertainty had become general.

In December, the authorities made attempts at mobilization, but without success. There was a lot of turmoil. The young people were indeed recruited, but only in the rarest cases did they get as far as the city, from where they immediately returned without having done anything. Even among the Bolsheviks, there was no shortage of individual attempts later on, but here, too, they were without results.

Lukas Thiessen has an MA in Cultural Studies and is employed as a research analyst on Métis issues.

1 B. Sch., "Chortitzer Gebiet, August 1919," *Friedensstimme*, Sept. 7, 1919, 3–4.

2 During the Civil War, Symon Petliura was supreme commander of the Ukrainian People's Army, Nestor Makhno was commander of the anarchist Revolutionary Insurrectionary Army, and Nikifor Grigoriev was a paramilitary leader who switched sides repeatedly. The Bolsheviks fought as the Red Army.

3 The term "Volunteers" referred to members of the Volunteer Army, which was part of the anti-Bolshevik White movement.

The Chortitza Emigration

A Report

Johann P. Klassen
Translation and introduction by Peter H. Rempel

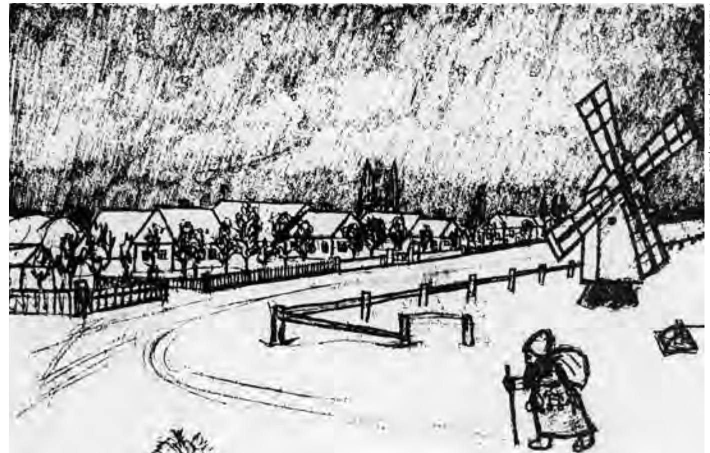
INTRODUCTION

In December 1919 representatives from the Molotschna colony in Ukraine authorized the sending of a "Study Commission" to Europe and North America to appeal for relief aid from their Mennonite kin and to investigate possible destinations for emigration. Over the next year, the original four-man delegation was reduced to Abraham A. Friesen in North America and Benjamin H. Unruh in Europe.

In a series of meetings in 1921, the Mennonites in Ukraine attempted to establish a "Union of Villages and Groups of Mennonites in Southern Russia" to lobby the government for Mennonite interests. In April 1922 the union was registered by the Soviet Ukrainian government under the government-imposed name of the Union of Citizens of Dutch Lineage in Ukraine. It focused on preparing for mass emigration, arranging relief aid, and supporting their several charitable institutions. Its chairman, Benjamin B. Janz, advocated and negotiated for its interests in Kharkov (Kharkiv), the capital of Soviet Ukraine, and in Moscow, the capital of Soviet Russia, often for extended periods. He also exchanged reports with the members of the Study Commission about these matters.

In another series of meetings beginning on January 1, 1922, refugees who had fled from their villages, estates, and smaller colonies to the Chortitza colony formed the Emigration Committee of the Refugees in the Chortitza District. Johann P. Klassen, a trained artist from the village of Kronsgarten, served as the secretary of the committee.[1]

In their desperation to leave and their partial knowledge of the political and practical difficulties, the refugees in the Chortitza region felt that the Union and the Study Commission were not treating the emigration cause with the urgency it required. The Emigration Committee dispatched Johann Klassen to Kharkov and Moscow several times to consult and collaborate with Janz and to intervene with government officials to advance arrangements for their emigration.


MENNONITE LIFE, DEC. 1973, 113

A sketch from Johann Klassen's collection of pen and pencil drawings of village life in the Old Colony.

On February 5, 1923, Klassen reported to representatives of the refugees on his most recent trips to Moscow and provided an overview of emigration efforts since the first meeting of the refugees in Chortitza. When he migrated to Canada with the second group of emigrants in July 1923, Klassen brought along a unique set of minutes, reports, and other documents, including this report, which record the experiences and perceptions of the Chortitza refugees. His report and assessment from a Chortitza perspective supplements, and at points challenges, the accounts of the emigration provided by or based on the reports from the Molotschna-based leaders who dominated the Union and the Study Commission.[2]

THE REPORT

It was just before Christmas in 1921 when we, the refugees of the Chortitza district, held our first meeting to discuss the possibility of emigration, when we hurriedly filled out our forms

MAID: MHA, 665-139.0

The ruins of a building in the Molotschna colony after the civil war.

and sent them with D. J. Zacharias to Molotschna, where he handed them over to B. B. Janz. Janz was very surprised that we of the Old Colony were so quick with the papers necessary for emigration and promised to submit them immediately to the government in Kharkov for confirmation. We know that we owe it to P. J. Baerg[3] that our papers were confirmed so quickly and easily here in the *volost* (district) and in the *gubispolkom* (regional government office). We were full of hope and eagerly awaited good news from Janz in Kharkov and from our Study Commission in America.

Weeks and months passed. From the Study Commission came a report about Paraguay, which offered the most favourable conditions for Mennonite immigration. This news was received with great joy. Janz was in Kharkov. For months he had kept our papers with him, first in Molotschna and then in Kharkov, without submitting them to the government. He only dared to do it shortly before Easter. However, he had already received verbal permission for the emigration of the Mennonite refugees in 1921. The written permission, of which we have a copy, dates from April 24, 1922, thus only after Easter. As Janz later reported, just after Easter he approached the government in Kharkov about our emigration, where he had to contend with great difficulties. But the permit came and our papers, the first list of 2,774 souls, were confirmed. In the month of May, Janz came with the completed permit in hand to Chortitza, where he reported to the representatives of the Union.[4] We emigrants or refugees were not admitted to any meeting at that time.

Then came the [Union] congress in Landskrone, where some delegates of the Union, who were also emigrants [from Chortitza], were also present.[5] The Landskrone congress did not bring us much. We were only assured that everything was going well and that we could hope to leave in the summer.

Again months passed; summer came and the ships did not come. Now we suddenly heard that the Canadian Mennonites had formed a colonization committee [the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization] that promised to coordinate our emigration. Now suddenly they said that we should not go to Paraguay, but to Canada. The Canadian colonization committee had applied to the Canadian government for permission for us Russian Mennonites to immigrate, and immediately the conditions for settlement in Canada were presented as much more favourable than those in Paraguay. We were a bit surprised, but we soon complied, especially when we were told that we would get established farms in Manitoba. It would also be pos-

sible to settle in Mexico and Paraguay, but they said that would not suit us. Canadian Mennonites themselves had moved to Mexico,[6] and Paraguay was too much of a wilderness. It would be better if we came to the established farms in Manitoba. We kept silent because we wanted above all to get out of this country immediately.

In August, Janz came to Chortitza for the second time with a report. Now the [prospect of obtaining] farms in Manitoba seemed uncertain. But we were assured that the CPR (Canadian Pacific Railway) still owned a lot of unsettled land in Canada. However, our efforts to find out where the land was that we were supposed to go, and whether this had already been determined, were in vain. We learned only one thing: that the Canadians had proposed the formation of a joint-stock company, the shares would be sold for $10 million, and then we would see miracles.

In September there was a congress in Osterwick.[7] Janz was conspicuously reserved. Only this much was revealed: the Manitoba farms were out. There was nothing left for us but CPR's land with scrub and forest in northern Saskatchewan and Alberta. Even that would have been fine with us, if they had just been able to take us. But there was still much arguing at the conference about the order of the lists for the emigration. The Molotschnaers did not want to be left behind. Finally it was agreed that the existing order should not be changed.

So we waited again for the ships. But they did not come. We were told that the Black Sea ports were closed because of the cholera epidemic in Ukraine. Nobody thought it would be possible to get out of Russia via the Baltic Sea. So again a lot of time passed. Suddenly the news came that Froese and Klassen in Moscow had obtained permission for the emigration of three thousand Mennonites from "Great Russia."[8] They chose the route via Libau.

Now Janz also went to Moscow and it wasn't long before he aligned completely with those in Moscow. The Moscow government immediately allowed the transit of the Ukrainian Mennonites. Mr. Owen, the official representative of the CPR, had called Janz to Moscow, and together they quickly devised a plan for travel to Libau, and from Libau across the sea. Janz sent us good news through Mr. Hofer,[9] and we almost shouted with joy. At the same time Janz asked for a delegate of the emigrants to come to Moscow to begin the technical implementation of the enterprise. The departure of the individual trains was already scheduled.

There was a meeting of the board of the Union in Schoenwiese[10] and I was sent to Moscow as a delegate. I went there and found Janz and Mr. Owen. I explained that we emigrants were ready to leave at any time, but was told that we should be patient for a while, because an obstacle had arisen, namely with the doctors.[11] I was sent back with the message that we were to be calm and patient, but that we should also be ready to travel and have lodgings available for the doctors. Now the emigrants were getting impatient.

It was not long before I was sent to Moscow for a second time, this time with the order to stay there and work until everything was ready. I went and stayed there for three weeks.[12] And what did I achieve? Everything went well with the Russian government. We submitted a new proposal, according to which the Canadian doctors did not have to come. The Russian government accepted it as well.

However, we received a message from Canada that the emigration was postponed until spring. The reasons were not given. That was a hard blow. Again some time passed. Then Elder Unruh[13] came from America and explained some things to us. Now we saw where the obstacle lay. Over there with the Mennonites. But Unruh did not tell us everything. I had to go to Kharkov to find out more from Janz.

Then came the most recent Union board meeting on January 25 in Schoenwiese. From Janz and at this board meeting it became apparent that our emigration had failed, so to speak, with the American Mennonites. The Canadian colonization committee had fallen into disrepute and collapsed. Among the Mennonites themselves a strong opposition to our immigration was forming. But all this we learned only in bits and pieces; it was difficult, as no one really wanted to come out with the truth, and even today we do not know what actually happened there. The only thing we know is that we have not made any progress.

In vain had we hoped and believed for years, in vain had we put our full reliance in our organization [the Union] and those of the Americans. It was in vain that the Russian government had given us the completed foreign passes in the summer. We did not get out and are sitting where we once sat, only with the difference that we have become much poorer and more despondent. We cannot go on like this. This also became clear at the last board meeting in Schoenwiese.

The emigration effort must not be allowed to fall into the water [i.e., fail] over there, since we see no obstacles from our side. We are allowed to move and want to move, whether it suits our Mennonites in America or not. For all these reasons the determination grew to abandon the charity of our brothers and to set things up on a purely business basis through negotiations with a government, a corporation, or private individuals. Also, the voices saying that we did not wish to move to cold Canada, and that we preferred a warmer and milder climate, became louder and louder. The prospect of going to Mexico, which W. Neufeld described to me in Moscow, is becoming popular.[14]

Taking all this into consideration, at the last board meeting of the Union in Schoenwiese it was decided, at our suggestion, to send a new delegation abroad to revive efforts there. B. B. Janz had rejected the emigrants' request that he go abroad right away to put things in order, so the Union decided to send a delegation of two men to America, one immediately and the other after the harvest, entirely at the expense of the Russian Mennonites. As the first candidate the Union proposes B. B. Janz. Others may be nominated, but the decision will be made at the general Mennonite congress to be held in Halbstadt in early March. The

Following page: Students and teachers of the Chortitza Zentralschule in 1922–23. MAID: MHA, 665-91.0

Johann P. Klassen successfully organized the first group of Mennonites to leave Chortitza for Canada.

delegation will be given the task of clarifying everything abroad and then acting accordingly, whether in connection with the American Mennonites or without them. It is possible that we will have to carry out the entire enterprise ourselves. One way or another, much will depend on this delegation, perhaps our fate for many generations to come. Of course, it is desirable that we keep unity among us, that we stick together, so that our decisions remain valid for all of us and gain strength. Up to now our Chortitza colony has not had a representative abroad. We all feel this lack. Now there is an opportunity to fill this void. Therefore, let us elect a delegation to send to the congress in Halbstadt, with the firm intention to send it abroad as well, if necessary at our own expense.

For we want to emigrate. We hold steadfastly to the decision we have made and are prepared to do everything in our power to try all the ways and means at our disposal, and we will not give in until we have reached our goal. Only if after we have tried everything it turns out that our project is impossible, then will we stop, then will we stop talking and thinking about it, then will it be over – then will we stay here. But for now, we want to leave, to leave at any price!

Peter Rempel is retired from a series of roles with Mennonite agencies including the Mennonite Heritage Archives and lastly MCC Manitoba, where he was executive director. Presently he is engaged in researching aspects of the Russian Mennonite emigration of the 1920s.

1 See the biographical sketch of Klassen in *Shepherds, Servants and Prophets: Leadership among the Russian Mennonites (ca. 1880–1960)*, ed. Harry Loewen (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2003), 213–28.

2 The Johann P. Klassen collection is located at Mennonite Heritage Archives (Winnipeg), vol. 6513; the report is in file 5. For an introduction see Peter H. Rempel, "Records of the Emigration of Mennonite Refugees from Chortitza (1921–1923) from the Archives of Johann P. Klassen (1888–1975)," *Mennonite Historian* 45, no. 4 (2019): 5, 8.

3 Baerg was an administrator in the Chortitza volost.

4 Members of the Chortitza chapter of the Union were at this meeting on May 16

5 This meeting took place on May 29–31. Minutes from the meeting were published in John B. Toews, ed., *The Mennonites of Russia from 1917 to 1930: Selected Documents* (Winnipeg: Christian Press, 1975), 128–38, and in John B. Toews and Paul Toews, eds., *Union of Citizens of Dutch Lineage in Ukraine (1922–1927): Mennonite and Soviet Documents* (Fresno, CA: Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, 2011), 162–73.

6 The mass emigration of Mennonites from Manitoba and Saskatchewan to Mexico, in order to secure their autonomy, had begun in March 1922.

7 This Union Congress was held on September 22–23, 1922. Minutes published in Toews, *Selected Documents*, 139, and Toews and Toews, *Mennonite and Soviet Documents*, 175–82.

8 Peter Froese and Cornelius F. Klassen were the representatives in Moscow of the Mennonites in Soviet Russia.

9 D. M. Hofer, from the United States, was a Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) worker in Ukraine.

10 The meeting was held on November 15–16. See the minutes in the Klassen collection and published in Toews and Toews, *Mennonite and Soviet Documents*, 182–85.

11 The Soviet government insisted that it would not allow the return of emigrants rejected by Canada. This negated the plan to have Canadian doctors conduct the necessary medical examinations in Latvia. It was instead proposed that the doctors go to Chortitza to conduct the examinations, but this required entry permits to be issued by the authorities in Moscow and Kharkov. Klassen's report about this trip from November 17–24 is found in the collection.

12 He stayed from December 8 to 21.

13 Peter H. Unruh was a prominent leader from Kansas who went to Ukraine as a commissioner for MCC.

14 Wilhelm Neufeld from California had delivered material aid to Mennonites in revolutionary Russia in 1918 and was now accompanying a group of his relatives on their emigration.

Our Trip from Russia to Canada

John G. Bergen

Translation by Katherine Bartel

Introduction and annotations by Ernie G. Dyck

PRIVATE COLLECTION

The village of Schutschino, in Tambov province.

INTRODUCTION

John G. Bergen (1898–1985) was born in Adelsheim, Yasykovo, a prosperous offspring settlement of the Chortitza colony. After spending time in Pologi, near the settlement of Schoenberg, his family moved to the newly established settlement of Schutschino (also known as Volkonskii khutor) in the province of Tambov, located southeast of Moscow.[1] He would emigrate to Canada in 1926, settling in Drake, Saskatchewan. John and his brother Cornelius, along with their descendants, became prominent members of the community, both in agriculture and in business. Some of their descendants are still active in the North Star Mennonite Church at Drake.

Schutschino is not a well-known settlement. In 1913, Chortitza colony purchased land from Prince Sergei Mikhailovitch Volkonskii in Tambov province for over a million rubles, for the settlement of landless colonists.[2] In the spring of 1914, fourteen Mennonite families arrived in the province. However, landless families who needed more time to put their affairs in order before making the move found themselves caught up in the First World War, as the men were drafted into medical

service and were unable to receive permission to move.

The settlers who did arrive were experienced farmers. The soil was rich, and the short but intense growing season lent itself to grain production. They did well. They built a horse-powered mill and could market flour. They were located near the rail station of Pavlovka, which gave them access to markets. Tokarevka had bank agencies and commission agents. The rail, banking, and postal networks were comprehensive.[3]

1917, Prince Volkonskii permanently vacated the area fearing for his life. A mob of soldiers in September brutally murdered Prince Vyazemsky in the province. In Kozlov (Michurinsk), twenty-four estates went up in flames over the course of three days.[5] Meanwhile, in St. Petersburg, the Bolsheviks overthrew the Provisional Government, starting the next stage of the revolution.

As the civil war began, the Bolsheviks became desperate for food supplies and for men. They procured grain from the peasants

PRIVATE COLLECTION

Schoolchildren with teacher Peter Dyck in the village of Schutschino.

by force and in every village they attempted to draft ten or fifteen strong, healthy men. On one occasion a group of Schutschino men were marched to a nearby Russian village and threatened with execution. On another, hidden sacks of wheat were discovered in the Mennonite mill.[6] The bitterness of the rural people in the grain-producing areas of Tambov, Penza, Voronezh, and Saratov became so intense that armed rebellion ensued. Known as the Tambov Rebellion of 1920–1921, the peasants created their own state, with an army and their own laws.[7] The rebel army at its height is estimated to have comprised about twenty thousand regular soldiers and twenty thousand militiamen. It successfully controlled the central grain-producing region until the summer

REVOLUTION AND CIVIL WAR

Mennonites had been living in Schutschino for three years when the February Revolution occurred, resulting in the abdication of the tsar and the establishment of a provisional government. During this period, the Mennonites of Schutschino could not have failed to notice dramatic expressions of a deep change in their neighbours' attitude toward land ownership. Though it seems to have taken a few months for the implications of the tsar's abdication to sink in, there were incidents of trees being cut down and cattle grazing estate lands without permission.[4] In many districts of Tambov province, buildings of landowners were dismantled for their lumber or burned down. In the autumn of

of 1921, at which time Red Army troops could be deployed from the more or less pacified western and southern battle fronts.[8]

The Mennonites of Schutschino would have found the ever-changing demands made upon them disturbing and stressful. Like their neighbours, they concealed grain from the authorities. They needed to protect themselves from the many hungry and homeless army deserters. They had to walk the fine line between covertly sympathizing with the rebels and taking care not to antagonize whoever was in authority at the moment.

SOVIET POWER

The requisitioning of food ended in 1921 with the introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP). Under NEP, food producers were encouraged to be enterprising, as were small businesses and tradespeople. The Mennonites of Schutschino could carry on farming.[9] At the same time, large businesses were nationalized. This was felt by farmers in the dearth of manufactured items such as machinery and repair parts. The new bosses of industry faced a steep learning curve and frequently were not motivated. Nevertheless, it was possible to be hopeful about the economy. Yet for the Mennonites, other factors weighed heavily – namely, the land, their nationality, and their faith. Though they could farm the land, it was not theirs to buy and sell or to enjoy a sense of ownership. As a group, they were a tiny German-speaking speck in a huge Russian landscape, and Germany very recently had been an aggressive enemy. Finally, they were Christian, contrary to what was expected of good Bolsheviks. The Mennonites of Schutschino, like their co-religionists elsewhere in the Soviet Union, faced a painful decision as they contemplated whether there was a future for them in Tambov.[10] Ultimately, a few families decided to stay in Tambov, some moved to other Mennonite colonies, and forty-three individuals decided to emigrate to Canada. John G. Bergen's recollection of their journey, which he self-published in 1980, follows.

OUR JOURNEY

We lived in Russia in the province of Tambov, where we had moved in the spring of 1914 together with fourteen other families.[11] In the fall of that year war broke out. After the revolution in 1917 we lost our land plus many other things. The government urged us to organize a workers' company and as a result of that each family received ninety acres of land, enough to make a good living. The land was given for an indefinite period of time because it was all to be divided into collective farms. Our faith was being criticized more and more. In order to get around these circumstances, eight families and a bachelor decided to try to immigrate to Canada. I was elected to arrange for all the paperwork. The first thing we had to do was to get permission to enter Canada. We were supposed to be able to get this from the RUSKAPA [Russko-Kanadsko-Amerikanskoe Passazhirskoe Agentstvo (the Russian-Canadian-American Passenger Agency)] in Moscow. Unfortunately, they did not have any of the proper forms from the Mennonite Board in Rosthern on hand.[12] We could, however, purchase them for three dollars per person over age fifteen. Then we were able to take our names off the registration list. Here we ran into our first problem. We had three young men who were of draft age. They were Abe Bergen, Cornie Janzen, and Abe Schellenberg. All those born in 1903 and 1904 were eligible for the draft. The possibility of getting them out of the country looked completely hopeless. It required the permission of the Ministry of War. I took the train to Tambov and was received in a friendly manner, and then I made my request. Without hesitation from the ministry official, I got a very quick answer: "NO." Then I asked him what use these men would really be to them because they were all conscientious objectors; they would not serve in the army in either case.

"What," he said, "they don't serve?"

"No," I said. "They are all exempt from active military service!"

"Then," he said, "the situation is entirely different." He asked to know if they would return if they were needed. I assured him that they would return if requested. In fact, I think I would have sworn an oath had he asked me to. To the best of my knowledge this was the only situation in all of Russia where such persons received permission to emigrate. Abe Schellenberg has often mentioned that I saved his life by these actions. The Ministry of War obviously has not needed them because they have not yet received any notice to return.

Following this we immediately were able to apply for our passes, for which we had to pay thirty dollars per person in advance. Then after a lengthy time of waiting and a good bit of discussion we received notice that we would be placed in a better classification than we had applied for and that the cost for these passes would be ten times higher, that is three hundred dollars for everybody over fifteen years of age. We had no choice but to send them this sum of money. I think there were twenty-six of us. But now the struggle was really just beginning. I cannot remember how many times I went to Tambov to try to get this all straightened out. To make matters worse, our railway connections were just terrible. We had to change trains twice, once in Gryazi, and the other time in Kozlov. What was only a distance of 75 miles as the crow flies required a whole day of travel of about 180 miles.

Our passes had to be processed through the Tambov foreign office. They, however, could not do this on their own. They had to get approval from the Moscow emigration office, and this is what took so much time. Finally I went to Moscow. Here I first went to the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization [*sic*] (CMBoC), where I met C. F. Klassen for the first time.[13] Here is where I was expecting to receive help. Unfortunately, he was unable to help me, which left me with very little desire to go on. He told me they had tried several times to get into the Moscow emigration office but they never had managed to get in. He did, however, encourage me to try and then to report how I made out. I went to the office in Kitay-gorod, in a very large building. When I arrived, I noticed armed soldiers standing guard, asking questions of all who wanted to enter. I also noticed that very few got into the building. I heard that they were asking for a password, which I, of course, also did not

know. And it was clear to me that I, too, would never be able to get into the building. I decided to try to walk around to see if I could find another entrance. I walked around the building, and before I knew it, I was standing in front of an open door. And so I walked straight in as though it were my own home. Once inside I asked someone where I could find the emigration office. He gave me the directions, and I walked to the door. The sign on the door confirmed that I was in the right place. After a short prayer for God's guidance, I walked in. There was a lady at the desk, and I asked her if she was Ekaterina Ivanovna, the person I needed to see. She said she was and asked me what I wanted to see her about. I explained our situation to her. She seemed very surprised, but started searching through the papers, and right at the bottom of the pile she found them. She apologized

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and said they were having a meeting in the evening and that she would bring our request to the attention of the rest, and if there were no objections they should be able to process them right away and make sure there would be no further problems. Happily, I returned to the CMBoC and told C. F. Klassen the whole story.[14] He was very surprised at my rather unorthodox approach and wanted to know what I intended to do next.

I said, first I wanted to eat, then sleep, and that tomorrow morning I would return to the emigration office to see what they had decided. He said that is exactly what he was about to suggest that I do as well.

The next morning I returned. The route now was familiar to me. I was received in a friendly manner by Ekaterina. She told me how smoothly and without any opposition it had been approved. She had already prepared the passes and they were ready to be sent out in the next mailing. I asked her if she could not entrust me with them, but she said there was no way she could do that, but that I did not have to worry because they would be in Tambov shortly. They did not arrive with me on my train but did arrive on the next. The very next day I received all the passes except my wife's. This was delayed because she had to enter our daughter Katie, who was born after we had begun working on the papers. Actually, she would have been a Canadian, but because of all the delays she ended up being born in Russia.

I had to go back to Tambov to get the passport for my wife and daughter. We had decided that after he had entered her name the emigration officer would bring me the passport personally. We arranged to meet at the circus. This we did and he himself put the passport into my breast pocket. Then we went to a restaurant and had a very good supper of roast duck. After this I went with him several blocks and down a dark street. I gave him an additional twenty dollars and then we parted company.[15] I went to get my suitcase and left for the station to return home.

Two days later we had our auction sale. In the middle of the sale a policeman came and wanted to talk to me. I was the auctioneer, so we stopped the sale for a short time and I went to speak to him. He took a handwritten telephone message out of his pocket and tried to read it to me. Because of the poor handwriting he could not read it very well and so I read it. It said that he was supposed to arrest me and take me to the GPU,[16] and that I was to bring my passport along. I recognized immediately what kind of a difficult situation I was in. But because he could not read it, I was able to change the wording from passport to a term which had to do with religion. This was very clear to him. I told him that he did not have to come with me, but that I would require a copy of the message. He wrote it as I dictated it to him. None of the people around were aware of what our discussion was about. The next day I again set out for Tambov and went directly to the GPU. The first thing he asked me for was my passport. I acted innocent and said that I had not been requested to bring it. He immediately went to get a copy of the message he had sent the police. I also had my copy, which I gave him. He said there must have been some misunderstanding but that we could work things out this way too.

Then he asked me very directly if I knew Nikolai Ubanobir. I said that if he meant the chairman of the foreign embassy [*sic*], then yes, I knew him. He confirmed that was the man he meant. Then he asked me how much money I had given him, and I said

C. F. Klassen standing in front of the All-Russian Mennonite Agricultural Union offices in Moscow.

none. Then he said he would like to read something to me. He read how they had followed me and had been spying on me. How we had met at the circus, and how he had put the passport into my pocket, where we had eaten supper and even what we had eaten, and how I had given him [the officer] some money, but that they did not know how much I had given him. I immediately saw that it would not help to lie. So I told him the truth. I also told him that the money I had given him was not meant as a bribe but simply as a small gift for his trouble and that I had not felt that it was illegal for me to give this to him. We had a long discussion and parted as friends. I did have to sign a paper that I would not leave the country without permission, because this matter would have to come to court, where the final decision would be made. I realized I had my notebook with a record of my dealings. He tore them out of my book and put them into his file. They had already arrested the chairman of the foreign embassy. I went home in a very depressed state. One station before ours, I got off the train and went to the stationmaster and ordered a boxcar to take us to Moscow two days later. After this I went home. No one knew anything about all my troubles except my wife Mary and my parents. I told them everything and that I had ordered a boxcar in Mordovo for the day after next. I told them we could not take the chance of leaving from our hometown because the police knew us all.

Some of our people were rather unhappy that we had to drive thirty miles[17] with horses, but I could not tell them the reason for this. On September 13 we left our homes. On this trip we had our first accident. A wagon loaded with suitcases upset into a deep ditch filled with water. The driver, Hermann Isaak, could not swim, and we were thankful to God that all were saved.[18]

We still left that very same day for Moscow, six hundred kilometres away. We arrived there the next day and stayed at a big hotel. The next morning I, with a companion, went to the RUSKAPA to notify them of our arrival and to speak with the doctor. He offered that if we would pay for the taxi, he would come with us to the hotel and examine us. We gladly accepted this offer and took him to our hotel immediately. On the way he asked me how many sick people we had. I told him that none of us were sick. He commented that we were the first group without any sick people. After he had examined us, he asked me where we had come from. I said we were from Tambov. He said had he known this, he would not even have had to come, because Tambov had no trachoma. We actually wanted to stay one day longer in Moscow, but the RUSKAPA insisted that we take the train immediately since one was ready to leave.

The RUSKAPA owed us some money. Though they had paid our tickets from Moscow to Gretna, we had come to Moscow on our own. They told us that we could get our refund in Riga or in England. When I inquired about this, they asked if they could put it all under my name. To this I agreed. They simply sent along a statement of refund because they had no cash. We left and came to the border station at Sebezh. Here we were lightly inspected and so we passed through the "Iron Curtain"[19] and entered Latvia. The train stopped, the engineers changed, and

we went on. There is no way of describing our joy.

Then some of the older men came to me and said, "John, now tell us what the trouble was about." I told them, and they said they had felt there was something wrong, but they did not know what it was. They also said I had done the right thing to keep it from them. Yes, God brought us safely out of Russia. Otherwise I, for one, would likely never have seen Canada, and I praise him for it. Later I was told that the RUSKAPA received word from Tambov that they were to stop me. They sent a telegram, but luckily for me it was too late. We were already over the border.

MAID: MHA, PP-4-044-367.0

After a few days another group came and was searched for me. They kept one of the passengers in Sebezh a whole week. When we arrived in Riga we met cousins from Orenburg, some of whom we never had met. It was here in Riga that I tried to get the money back that they owed us. They checked their accounts and found ours to be correct. They did not have any money here either but assured us we would be getting it in England.

After a three-day layover we, together with the Orenburger group, left in the ship *Baltara* for England. In London we boarded a train and went to Southampton, where we were housed in Atlantic Park. These were special quarters for immigrants. I think there were approximately four hundred of us there. We were immediately examined by a doctor and all declared healthy. Our passports were stamped. After this I again inquired about the money. Our accounts agreed and I was told they would call me when they had the funds ready. That same evening they called out my name and asked me to come to the office and bring my passport along. They took my passport and told me that I could

A group of Mennonites travelling to Canada by ship.

not go any further because of the skin problem on my hands, but that this would take only a few days to cure, and then I could follow the rest. These few days stretched to 130 days, 122 of which I spent flat in bed. I could not even sit up to shave.[20]

The others left the very next day on the train for Liverpool and from there they took the boat [the *Montrose*] to Canada, landing in Quebec. From there they went west into an unknown future. The Isaak family stayed in Manitoba, I think in Blumenort. The others all went to Saskatchewan, where they knew nobody, but came to Drake and were given a very friendly reception. The Depression years were difficult, and many left to seek their fortune elsewhere. Only two of the original families making up our group stayed in Drake: Cornie Bergen's and ours.

After 122 days they brought me hospital clothes and told me to put them on and walk around. After a few days of exercising they brought me my own clothes and took me back to Atlantic Park. The next day I got my passport and then went to the seaport. I apparently was healthy and did not need any doctor to check me. I again went to inquire about the money and I was told that there was none left – I had used it all up to pay for my doctor and hospital bills. However, the condition of my hands had not changed. Anyway, I left England and arrived in Canada at the beginning of March 1927.

There were several other families that had just arrived in Canada and so we went together to Winnipeg. From there we were all sent to our designated places. I, of course, wanted to go to Winkler because my wife was living in Reinland with her parents. I was told that I could not go to Winkler because they were not accepting any more immigrants there. So I was given a ticket to Gretna. I had no idea how far apart these two places were. Another gentleman came by, and I asked him if they gave separation papers there. He looked at me bewildered, and I told him that my wife was in Reinland but they were not accepting any more immigrants there, so I had little choice left but to get a divorce from my wife. They all had a good laugh and told me that I should excuse the ticket agent because he was not aware of my circumstances. So he took back my ticket to Gretna and gave me one to Winkler. I met this gentleman years later. He looked at me and asked if I was not the man who because of his stupidity wanted to get a divorce. We both had a good laugh about it again.

Certainly we all have had many difficult days. We all are very happy they are behind us. We have also had many good days and for these as well we are thankful.

Our parents, of course, are all gone into eternity. How much we would like at times to spend a few hours with them. We could recount and discuss our past and tell them how good God has been to us these last years here in Canada. Of our group of forty-three[21] that left Russia, to the best of my knowledge twelve have already passed on.

Christian greetings to all who read this document.

Katherine Bartel (1926–2013) emigrated to Canada as an infant with her parents, John G. and Maria (Buhler) Bergen. She lived all her life in Drake, Saskatchewan. Ernie G. Dyck is the son of immigrants from the Molotschna colony who settled in southwestern Manitoba. He is retired from a career as a United Church minister and lives in Peterborough, Ontario.

1 GRanDMA (the Genealogical Registry and Database of Mennonite Ancestry), #378206, #350542.

2 James Urry, "The Cost of Community: The Funding and Economic Management of the Russian Mennonite Commonwealth Before 1914," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 10 (1992): 26.

3 Sofya A. Salomatina and Vladislav Y. Ivakin, "Harvest, Railway Transportation and Banking Services to the Agriculture in the Central Black Earth Region of the Russian Empire in the Late 19th Century," *Russian Journal of Economics* 7, no. 2 (2021): 130–31. The map at p. 127 is especially helpful in depicting the context in which these settlers found themselves. For other fairly detailed maps of the time see Erik C. Landis, *Bandits and Partisans: The Antonov Movement in the Russian Civil War* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2008).

4 Prince Volkonskii, who was still living nearby, recalled a number of such incidents. See L. A. Owen, "The Russian Agrarian Revolution of 1917: II," *The Slavonic and East European Review* 12, no. 35 (1934): 374. My thanks to James Urry for drawing my attention to this essay.

5 Owen, 380.

6 Cornelius C . Janzen, "An Address at the 50th Anniversary Celebration of the Arrival in Canada" (Drake, SK, 1976), trans. Ernie G. Dyck, in *Reminiscences of Maria Isaak and Cornelius C. Janzen and Family*, ed. Tina Dyck and Ernie Dyck, rev. ed. (self-pub., 1993; revised, 2000; reformatted, 2022), 24.

7 Pyotr Fydorovich Aleshkin, "Krest'ianskoe dvizhenie v Tambovskoi gubernii v 1920—1921 godakh: istoki, osnovnye etapy, formy sotsial' no-politicheskogo protsessa" (The peasant movement in the Tambov province in 1920–1921: origins, main stages, forms of socio-political protest) (Candidate diss., Moscow University for the Humanities, 2004).

8 Wikipedia, s.v. "Tambov Rebellion."

9 Dyck and Dyck, *Reminiscences*, 2.

10 Janzen, "Address at the 50th Anniversary," 24.

11 "In the spring of the year 1914 we moved to Tambov province. The Old Colony [Khortitsa] had bought land in this province, a huge plain, but because of the war it was without inhabitants. Only fourteen families settled here and of these some later returned home. Here we spent our childhood and youth. The first years we had no teachers. So, when I should have been in the third year, I had missed two years of schooling. Thus, my whole schooling consisted only of five years, but the last three years we had very good teachers." Janzen, "Address at the 50th Anniversary," 23.

12 The Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization, headquartered in Rosthern, Saskatchewan.

13 He means the Allrussischer Mennonitischer Landwirtschaftlicher Verein (All-Russian Mennonite Agricultural Union), which had an office in Moscow.

14 Once again, he means the Allrussischer Mennonitischer Landwirtschaftlicher Verein.

15 It is unclear if Bergen means rubles instead of dollars.

16 The OGPU was the secret police of the Soviet Union from 1923 to 1934. It was preceded in Soviet Russia by the GPU (1922–23).

17 Bergen probably meant 30 kilometres, not miles. According to Janzen ("Address at the 50th Anniversary," 25), the countryside was rough, with many waterways and steep, deep ravines. Freighting all the luggage and passengers would place demands on the horses that make 30 kilometres seem more likely. Google Maps shows the distance by today's highway as 32.4 km.

18 According to Maria Janzen, daughter of Hermann, he was wearing a heavy sheepskin coat, the lining of which held the family's paper money. The waterlogged money had to be dried out. In the winter of 1993 Maria's daughters found rolls of this money safe and sound in Maria's home. Their food supply of biscuits (*reesche Tweebak*) also got soaked and was ruined.

19 This was the term used later, during the Cold War, for the USSR's policy of preventing its citizens from leaving the country. Actually, Bergen's group was among the last to benefit from Lenin's very lenient policy toward emigration.

20 It appears that Bergen had typhus. With typhus a rash shows about four days after onset. The incubation period is seven to fourteen days. Typhus is caused by bacteria spread by lice, mites, or fleas, such as Bergen might have encountered in Moscow and Tambov hotels or in a train coach. He had been under great stress for many weeks and so perhaps was vulnerable.

21 Hermann F. Isaak (b. 1880) and Katharina Bückert (1881), and 6 dependants, settled in Campden, ON. Kornelius F. Janzen (1864), 5 dependants, Winnipegosis, MB. Abram K. Janzen (1893) and Helena Dyck (1896), 2 dependants, Winnipegosis. George G. Bergen (1870) and Katharina (1872), 2 dependants, Winnipegosis. Abram J. Schellenberg (1903), Kelowna, BC. Johann D. Penner (1885) and Aganetha Janzen (1891), 7 dependants, Virgil, ON. John G. Bergen (1898) and Maria Buhler (1897), 1 dependant, Drake, SK. Isaak Gerhard Bergen (1901) and Helene Bückert (1903), 1 dependant, Winnipegosis. Kornelius Gerhard Bergen (1899) and Helena Janzen (1900), 3 dependants, Drake. All of their CMBoC registration cards give their last place of residence as Schutschino and place of departure as Mordovo. Some of the Mennonites of Schutschino decided against emigration; some left the settlement before 1926.

From Schoensee to Canada

Ernest Becker and Werner Becker

In 1925, the Jacob and Maria (Kroeker) Becker family of Schoensee, a village in the Molotschna colony, wanted to leave Soviet Ukraine. Although they still retained their yard and buildings, the Soviet government had expropriated their farmland. However, the cost of travel documents and transportation to Canada deterred the family.

The family received a letter from Maria's uncle Peter Quiring from Henderson, Nebraska, who had married a sister of her father, Jacob Kroeker. Her uncle told all the descendants of Jacob Kroeker to leave the Soviet Union immediately and that he had paid for their transportation. Most of the siblings of Maria prepared to leave. Without delay, the Jacob Becker family and their Kroeker relatives prepared for the journey to Canada.

After deciding to emigrate, Jacob Becker sold the yard and moved his family into the house of his uncle Peter Becker, also in Schoensee. Jacob was forty-two years of age, and Maria was thirty-seven. He had six children ranging in age from five to seventeen. On November 24, 1925, the Becker family left Schoensee by horse and wagon for the Bolshoi Tokmak station, ten kilometres away. It was raining and the roads were muddy.

Most of the village of Schoensee accompanied them to the station. Other families from the area were also leaving. Everyone knew this was permanent. They would never see their neighbours and relatives again. Although the Soviet Union had stabilized somewhat after the chaos of the revolution and the civil war, life was still unsettled.

The two railway cars ordered by the departing families did not arrive. After some discussions with the stationmaster it was agreed that the railway cars would arrive the next day. Everyone went home to repeat the process the following day. Once again, most of the population of Schoensee accompanied the emigrants to the Tokmak railway station. They boarded the train around four in the afternoon. There was much hugging and kissing, and tears were shed. Although those who stayed behind suffered horribly during the Stalinist terror a few years later, in that moment no one anticipated such a future.

For the Jacob Becker family, who had never travelled far from home, the prospect of moving to a distant country where they would be penniless and unable to speak the language must have seemed daunting. Henry Becker, who was seventeen at the time, regarded the migration with the optimism of youth, viewing it as an adventure, although still he recognized the solemnity of the occasion.

The railway through Tokmak was a branch line, and the railcars had to be transferred to the main line. There was a twenty-five hour stop while the group waited for the train to Moscow. With no available lodgings at the transfer point, the entire group spent a restless night on the floor in the station with people coming and going throughout the night.

The Becker family arrived in Moscow on November 28. After their arrival, the family discovered that the money sent by their relative Peter Quiring was gone. It had allegedly been used by Rev. D. M. Hofer and his friends to support a newspaper. Everyone would have to continue their travel on money borrowed from the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR).

The CPR had an office in Moscow to receive the emigrants and to arrange for travel on to England through Riga, Latvia. Arrangements included a medical exam. All of the Becker family passed the medical exam except for Henry, who was diagnosed with trachoma, a disease of the eye.

Trachoma is caused by Chlamydia trachomatis and is spread by direct contact with secretions from affected individuals, or through contact with contaminated objects such as towels. Repeated infections can eventually result in scarring of the cornea and blindness. Today it is easily treated with antibiotics, and in the late 1930s it could be treated with sulfonamides. In the 1920s, therapy was much less effective; treatment consisted of topical applications of copper sulfate.

Jacob and Henry promptly visited several physicians for a consultation. They asked that Henry be treated in Riga. This was not allowed. Jacob searched for alternative destinations. He was advised that there was an option to go to Mexico where

MAID: MENNONITE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA, 153-12-2013.003.154

there were no medical restrictions. However, Jacob elected to continue to Canada.

As the rest of the family travelled to Latvia, Henry had to stay behind in Moscow. He stayed with the Abram Wall family, who were also from Schoensee and diagnosed with trachoma. Henry and the Wall family were not entirely alone, as other Mennonites were also travelling through Moscow on their way to Canada.

LIFE IN MOSCOW

Life was difficult in Moscow. The accommodations were not luxurious. Henry and the Wall family rented a room, where they were tormented by bedbugs. Henry made numerous visits to doctors in Moscow to treat the trachoma so that he could emigrate. In between visits to doctors, Henry visited the Menno Union and the Russian-Canadian-American Passenger Agency (RUSKAPA) to obtain visas, as the rest of the Becker family had taken the family's exit papers with them, and Henry had been left behind without the necessary emigration paperwork. It was a time of anxiety and stress about the progress of his eye treatments, exit papers, and money. Henry ran out of money, but his uncle Johann Kroeker in Schoenau sent him a hundred rubles. There was also concern that the Soviet government would stop emigration completely.

Henry's eyes were slow to improve. The doctors gave him many vague and conflicting opinions. He had to pay for every visit, and he wondered sometimes if they were simply fleecing him. Henry and the Walls pestered the various doctors, including the ones who had to certify they were medically fit to emigrate. It is easy to understand their anxiety. In retrospect, Henry wondered why the doctors did not get impatient with him.

Henry was still in Moscow on Christmas Eve, and as there were no Mennonite churches, he attended a German-speaking Lutheran church. Henry and Abram Wall, the only boy in the Wall family, were also on the lookout for entertainment. On December 26 they walked to the Moscow Zoo, and for the first time Henry saw many wild and exotic animals, including a lion. During his time in Moscow, he managed to see a movie about a man who visited the moon, go to a circus, and see Lenin's tomb. But life was not easy. In their lodging they used a wood stove to cook, and finding wood was a problem. Henry would go to a nearby carpenter shop and scavenge shavings and small pieces of waste wood off the floor. The labourers swore at him, but never physically tried to stop him.

This adolescent from a small Mennonite village met many different types of people in Moscow. On one occasion he had a conversation with a Russian Orthodox priest, who had never heard of Mennonites. When Henry told the priest that Mennonites were pacifists and were not allowed to kill, the priest remarked that it was too early in human history for such an attitude. Perhaps in the future something like that could be realized. Henry commented in his diary that history has since shown that

Mennonites leaving Lichtenau in 1924. Often the entire village accompanied departing families to the train station.

the priest may have been right.

On December 28, Henry received his emigration certificate from Benjamin Janz and a letter with the hundred rubles from his uncle. A few weeks later, on January 7, 1926, Henry and the Wall family passed their medical examinations. A letter from his father, sent from Canada, also arrived at the RUSKAPA office, begging one of the officials there to help Henry if he was still in Moscow. The next day he was able to pay his fare to Canada to RUSKAPA, 330 rubles, and things were looking good.

The true condition of his eyes was unclear. The treatment was painful, as in addition to receiving eye drops, which were presumably copper sulfate, his eyelids were treated by abrasion with alum stone. Alum stone is a potassium-rich mineral which was widely used in medicine because it is a good astringent and antiseptic. This could not have been very comfortable. In any case, it was probably clear to the doctors, including those who eventually certified him for emigration, that his trachoma was not cured. In fact, it was emphasized even after he was approved to emigrate that he should continue his treatments until he actually left. One doctor told him, "According to our Russian concept, the trachoma has been cured, but not according to the American concept." He was given eye drops to use shortly before he was examined by the immigration doctors to temporarily suppress the inflammation caused by the trachoma.

LEAVING MOSCOW

Things now moved rapidly, but not without incident. In the afternoon, they received their passports and other papers from RUSKAPA. In the evening, they were to be at the Vindavsky station to obtain their train tickets. They went shopping in the meantime to provision for the journey. Henry bought some garlic sausage while Mr. Wall went to buy some bread. While waiting for his change, Wall put his wallet in the outer pocket of his overcoat. He had been pick-pocketed, and his sixty rubles were gone. The family was upset, but between all of them they still had enough money to leave once Mr. Wall recalled that he had a hundred rubles hidden somewhere else. They paid their landlord with Henry's twenty-three US dollars. But their problems were not over. They reached the train station by a horse-drawn vehicle at a cost of three rubles, but when it came time to check their baggage, they discovered they did not have enough rubles to pay for checking the luggage, and the baggage agent would take only rubles. It was late, and all the banks were closed. Fortunately, in front of the station they found someone who was happy to exchange dollars for rubles, and the problem was solved.

At 11:30 p.m. on Saturday, January 9, Henry boarded the train with the Wall family. During the trip, somehow Henry broke a small pane of glass covering a notice with his knee. When they carried their luggage into a large room at the border to be inspected, a conductor followed them and demanded to know who had broken the glass. Henry admitted to having done it, and fortunately had enough money to make one last payment of a few rubles for the broken glass.

Henry passed through the gate and crossed the border into Latvia. Away from the Soviet Union, he could breathe freely. He compared the way he felt to the Israelites leaving Egypt. In Riga, they were deloused and their clothes were disinfected. What a relief that must have been. He passed his medical examination in Riga and was cleared to travel to England.

IN ENGLAND

The Abram Wall family was detained in Riga because they did not pass the medical exam. Henry continued to London alone. On January 13, he left Riga on a ship which would take him across the Baltic, through the Kiel Canal, and then across the North Sea to England. Henry thought he had left lice behind him, but on the ship he discovered it was not to be. The ship was infested with lice, and he soon found his shirt was full of them. At one point on the Baltic Sea they were surrounded by ice, and had to be rescued by an ice breaker. He disembarked in London on January 19, at five in the afternoon.

The next day, he boarded a train to Liverpool, expecting to be on a ship to Canada by January 23. His hopes of departing for Canada were dashed when Dr. Hummel told him, after examining his eyes, that he would have to wait in England. Unfortunately, his one piece of luggage had gone on to Canada. On January 30, he was placed on a train to Southampton. On the train, he felt embarrassed by how shabby his clothing was in comparison to the clothes the British were wearing.

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Before leaving Moscow by train, Henry Becker purchased garlic sausage at the local market for the trip.

Although Henry was already learning English, having purchased a language booklet in Riga, his confusion over the spelling of his destination, Eastleigh, and how a similar-sounding word would be spelled in German caused him to travel past it. Luckily someone helped him get on a train in the opposite direction. A driver who had been waiting whisked him off to the Atlantic Park Hostel, between Southampton and Eastleigh, where he would spend the next two years.

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A Mennonite choir at the Atlantic Park Hostel. Henry Becker is third from the left.

THE ATLANTIC PARK HOSTEL

The Atlantic Park Hostel was not luxurious. During the First World War, the US Navy Air Force had a base at Eastleigh. Afterwards, three transport companies bought the old aerodrome and formed the Atlantic Park Hostel Company. In 1921, two hundred workers converted hangars into dormitories, dining rooms, kitchens, and bathrooms. The space now provided temporary shelter for the large numbers of immigrants travelling through England to North America. The hostel had a permanent staff of 150. The kitchens were designed to cook two thousand pounds of meat at one time and were able to cook three hundred gallons of soup. The meals provided generally served two thousand people or more.

This was where young Henry would spend the next two years. For a time, Henry stayed in a dormitory with many others. Eventually he moved to a "smaller" room, but still shared it with five other people. Yet he was luckier than some. He mentioned in his memoirs that one Mennonite acquaintance spent over five years at the hostel because of trachoma, all the while separated from his wife, who had gone on to Canada. Even worse was the fate of 980 Russians who were deported to the hostel after having been denied entry to the United States in 1924. Seven years were to pass before they finally left Southampton for North America.

Thousands of Mennonites passed through the hostel during Henry's stay. Among these was his future wife, Helen Friesen. At that time they did not know each other, but later it became clear that their paths had crossed in England. The Friesen family was travelling with an acquaintance of Henry's, and this had drawn Henry's attention to the group. Henry was at the time with another man that Helen knew, and she recalled seeing Henry's companion. At the time, they did not notice each other.

In some ways Henry was a prisoner at the hostel, although he was allowed to roam through the countryside and the neighbouring cities. The CPR had confiscated his passport, and would not return it until he was approved for departure. That departure depended entirely on receiving a medical clearance from the doctors.

TRACHOMA TREATMENT

Trachoma treatment in the age before antibiotics can only be described as brutal. In addition to various eye drops, salves, and rinsing of the eyes, there was mechanical abrasion of the inside of the eyelids with a "blue stone" made of copper sulfate crystals. These therapies were not very effective, but Henry endured them for over two years. Discouraged with the lack of progress from his treatment, Henry tried various remedies recommended to him by other immigrants at the hostel. These included taking turpentine orally and applying it to his eyes, and rinsing his eyes with his own urine.

San Francisco newspapers of the day describe the topical use of adrenaline by Chinese and Japanese immigrants to mask the signs of trachoma and fool immigration officers. In his memoirs, Henry recounts using this trick in Moscow and Latvia. Unfortunately, it did not get him all the way to Canada.

The doctors at the Atlantic Park Hostel and the examining doctors from the CPR had absolute power over if and when emigrants could leave for Canada. Henry and some of his friends wondered whether they were really providing an accurate assessment of the progress of their disease. The doctors seemed to give conflicting and inconsistent messages to Henry as to the state of his eyes. Henry may have been right in wondering whether the two years of treatment he endured at the hostel was a sham. Perhaps not an intentional sham, but one based on incomplete knowledge of the disease by the medical profession. Only later, in 1930, were small inclusion bodies in the cytoplasm of infected cells in patients with trachoma identified as the cause of the disease. It was not until 1954 that the causative agent of trachoma, the bacterium Chlamydia trachomatis, was first grown in culture and identified.

It seems that the real problem with trachoma is the occurrence of repeated infection over long periods of time. The World Health Organization states that an individual's immune system can clear a single episode of infection, but in areas where trachoma is common, re-acquisition of the organism occurs frequently. Finally, after many years of infection, the scarring of the eyelids causes the eyelashes to turn inwards and they scratch the cornea. This can eventually lead to blindness. Henry believed he was infected as a child through sharing a towel with a servant girl who may have had the disease. However, trachoma was not rare among the Mennonites in imperial Russia. In any case, if he had been able to avoid re-infection, his trachoma would likely have cleared up on its own. One wonders if by putting people with trachoma together in the close living quarters of the Atlantic Park Hostel, with six or more infected individuals sharing a room, the CPR was simply perpetuating trachoma in the patients. Henry knew of Mennonites who eventually gave up meeting Canada's immigration requirements and emigrated to Paraguay instead. Without any further treatment, they seemed to be cured and had no further eye problems.

Henry was caught in a web of medical ignorance and bureaucratic regulation. He did not know if he would ever escape this web, but hoped and prayed that he would one day be able to leave for Canada. It all depended on whether the doctors would pronounce him fit to go.

MAKING MONEY IN ENGLAND

Henry had to learn to survive during his time at the Atlantic Park Hostel. Needing pocket money, he went into business. Those staying at the hostel received a small amount of money from a fund in Canada. The Mennonite boys at the hostel were not fond of the fried eggs prepared by the cook. They asked to be given the eggs raw so that they could cook the eggs themselves on a small stove. The cook supplied them with a large number of raw eggs, not all of which were eaten. The other young men would sell Henry their surplus eggs, as they also needed money, and Henry would resell them to a baker in Southampton. Before long he had a profitable egg business. On one day he accepted 382 eggs, so at times his business was quite sizable. He carried the eggs in a large canvas bag, and would travel with them by tram, bicycle, or on foot. One might question the ethics of obtaining eggs from the cook under somewhat false pretenses and then selling them. At times Henry seems to have had a slightly guilty conscience about this, but he kept dealing in eggs during most of his time in England.

The eggs at the hostel were not particularly fresh, and Henry examined them all with a light to ensure that he was not bringing any rotten eggs to the bakery. His egg business was perhaps an omen of things to come, as many years later while living in Marquette, Manitoba, he would drive to Winnipeg every two weeks with a car full of egg crates, and sell the eggs to a loyal following of customers that he developed. These eggs, too, he examined with a light to detect imperfections such as blood spots.

His business interests during his time at the hostel did not stop with the eggs. There was a continuous stream of refugees coming through from eastern Europe, including Mennonites, Jews, and Russians. Henry could speak both German and Russian and had also become fairly fluent in English. When these newcomers arrived, some of them would need new clothes. Henry would take them to a clothing store to shop. For every shilling they spent there, the store owner would give him one pence.

Henry also dealt in apples. He would buy them in the city and sell them at the hostel. Carrying the apples could be a problem. Henry had two experiences during his time in England that illustrated this. On one occasion, Henry and a friend bought eight pounds of apples and were taking them back to the hostel on their bicycles. The apples were in a paper bag, and after a while on the road, the bag developed a hole and an apple fell out on the street. The rest of the apples quickly followed, and soon the street was covered in apples. People who were passing by helped to retrieve them, but before they retrieved them all, a passing streetcar had squashed three of their precious apples. On another occasion, Henry was carrying ten pounds of apples in a paper bag when it started to rain and the bag began to disintegrate. Desperate, he tried to take off his shirt and put the apples in it. Fortunately, at that point a little girl came running to him, likely sent by her mother, and brought him a stronger bag.

LIVING AT THE ATLANTIC PARK HOSTEL

Thousands of immigrants passed through the hostel, and all sorts of medical issues arose. Babies were born, and people, especially children, became sick and were admitted to hospital. Henry knew the area and spoke English, so he was often called upon to go with people to the hospital to visit their relatives. Hospital beds seem to have been cheap and plentiful in England at that time, and children with communicable diseases like measles and chicken pox were often hospitalized in isolation for several weeks. Sometimes families were split up, with some members going on to Canada and others staying behind because of a sick, hospitalized child. Tragically, in those days before antibiotics, the outcome of these hospitalizations was not always positive. Henry recalled one day when three children from the Mennonite community were buried in England.

MAID: MENNONITE ARCHIVES OF ONTARIO, DIGITAL 185-2

During the First World War, the US Navy Air Force had a base at Eastleigh. Afterwards, three transport companies bought the old aerodrome and formed the Atlantic Park Hostel Company.

Henry had a strong religious faith even in his youth. He read a book entitled *Hin und zurück* (There and back), and it strengthened his conviction in the Bible. Quite often there were Mennonite ministers among the emigrants from Russia, and they would deliver sermons to the group staying at the hostel. He seems to have enjoyed these sermons, and a number of pages in his diary are devoted to discussing them.

He was very impressed with a prominent Mennonite of the time, Benjamin Unruh. Unruh had been part of a commission that organized the exodus of the Mennonites to Canada during the 1920s. Unruh had come from a poor family, but some neighbouring wealthy Mennonites had recognized his intelligence, and had provided him with a good education. He was now living in Karlsruhe, Germany. Unruh gave the young men at the Atlantic Park Hostel lectures on a variety of topics. These topics included archaeology, and one of his lectures included the alleged discovery of two stone tablets in the Sinai which were thought to have originated with Moses. Apparently, the writing on them utilized Egyptian hieroglyphics but the language was Hebrew. At the time Henry was very impressed, but later he had doubts about the veracity of this claim.

Unruh discussed theological questions with the men. Henry described him as being quite broad-minded, especially for some of the Mennonite Brethren. He believed that the Bible was the source of all truth, and he did not have much time for petty religious differences. Unruh had been active in a conciliatory way between Slavic labourers and the Mennonite farmers during the revolutionary period, and this may have saved some Mennonite lives. Unruh's attitude was that "one must always be able to put oneself in the other man's situation and not think only of oneself." He also emphasized that God was there for all people, and that we must not have faith in our own experiences, but rather have faith in God.

Unruh travelled throughout Europe to straighten out issues with visas and passports, and visited the hostel a number of times, where he would spend time with the young men. He would play dominoes with them, and even take them out to dinner. He would discuss their problems, and at times advocate for them as needed with the authorities. Henry was taken with Unruh; he called him a very special person and thought that he had never seen a better man. Apparently Unruh was generous to a fault. Henry was told that back in imperial Russia, if Unruh butchered a pig, he gave so much away to the poor that it would leave his own family short of food.

The Mennonites of that era had certain ideas about the gender roles of men and women. It seemed that young men like Henry were incapable of washing their own clothes. They felt this was a job only for girls, and Henry mentioned that he had a "wash girl" who would do his washing. It is unclear just how he persuaded her to do this for him. In his diaries there is never any mention of payment for these services. It was problematic that on several occasions his "wash girl" was able to leave for Canada before he could, so he had several different wash girls during his time at the Atlantic Park Hostel. The wash girls did seem to try hard to be helpful. One girl, before she left for Canada, obtained a new wash girl for him.

Henry did considerable growing up during his time at the hostel. On one occasion, he fell in love. Unfortunately, his feel-

ings were not reciprocated, and he was heartbroken for a while. On another occasion, a friend was medically approved to go to Canada and decided to have a little celebration. The friend, Jonathan Friesen, bought several bottles of wine and treated his comrades at the hostel to a few drinks. Henry does not seem to have had much experience with alcohol. While celebrating Jonathan's good fortune, he drank some wine, and a little later, when they all sat down to supper, he got a funny feeling in his head. He believed he was drunk and panicked a little because he did not know how much worse it might get. He was still able to find his mouth with his fork, and felt that he managed to get through the evening without causing suspicion. He stated that this was the closest he ever got to being drunk.

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A group of Mennonites detained at the Atlantic Park Hostel.

In England, the Mennonites maintained their old customs. On the morning of January 1, 1928, Henry did grain strewing. This was a custom that the Mennonites seem to have adopted during their time in imperial Russia. If you could find a person in bed, you would lift the covers and throw grain on his body while saying, "I am seeding and dedicating and wishing you a happy new year."

MEDICAL CLEARANCE

On March 3, 1928, word came that a Canadian doctor wanted to examine a group of the Mennonites at the Atlantic Park Hostel. A list was brought to their lodgings, and Henry noted that his name was last on the list. As he waited to be examined, he vacillated between hope and despair. There is an old German saying that the last one is bitten by the dogs, but Henry kept telling himself that this would not be the case today. He prayed and committed himself to the Lord.

Finally it was his turn. The doctor was from Saint John, New Brunswick. She examined his eyes carefully and asked him to look down and then look up. Then she was finished and he was sent on his way. One of his companions, a Mr. Penner who had been waiting for five years at the hostel to join his wife in Canada, did not pass. Penner was very upset, and Dr. McGee, the local doctor, came out and asked Henry to calm Penner down. Then he said the fateful words to Henry: "You are all right".

There was still the small matter of his passport. While they were at the hostel, the Russian passports of many Mennonites, including that of Henry, had expired. Unfortunately, there had been a diplomatic row in London. The Soviet embassy was found to be a major spy centre, and all the Russian diplomats had been expelled from Britain. This meant that the expired Russian passports had to be sent to the Russian embassy in Paris. Henry's renewed passport had not yet arrived from Paris.

On March 10 he was still at the hostel. It was already evening, and although Mr. Unruh had expected their passports by then, they had not arrived. They were having evening devotions with Unruh when the head of the hostel, Colonel Barber, appeared, interrupted them, and said he had learned that twenty passports were ready.

The next morning they were all up at six, and after breakfast Henry went by car to Eastleigh, and from there by train to Southampton. Goodbyes were said to all those staying behind, and they were off to the port. After receiving their cabin cards, they boarded and went to the dining room. The ship was to leave at two in the afternoon. At this point Henry learned to his horror that the passports had still not yet arrived. At last the ship from Paris arrived, but their passports were not on board.

They were told to disembark, and an automobile took them back to the hostel, where life went on as usual. Henry visited Mr. Collis, the pastry shop owner to whom he had been selling eggs for several years, and said goodbye. The baker gave him a cake for a present.

Finally, on March 16, Henry was summoned to the office and given his passport and visas. On Saturday he boarded the *Melita* and was on his way to Canada. The ship took on some passengers in Cherbourg, and then again in Iceland. Henry was lucky in that, unlike many of his friends, he did not get seasick. They did encounter a storm during their crossing, and at one point the ship lurched so hard Henry thought they had struck something. He expected alarms to go off at any minute, but nothing happened, and all appeared to be well.

On March 26, the passengers disembarked in Saint John, New Brunswick. Henry feared his eyes would be re-examined or there would be something wrong with his paperwork and he would be sent back. He passed through a number of steps with immigration, and eventually an official asked him if, given all the extensions in his passport, he had another paper. He did not. The official said, "This fellow must be CPR," and walked off with Henry's passport. Henry was terrified and thought, "They got me at last." This was not, however, the case. The official came back, gave him his passport, and soon Henry had passed through a door marked "Out." He was in Canada.

Ernest and Werner Becker are the sons of Henry. Ernest had a long career in physics and holds a PhD from the University of British Columbia. Werner received an MD degree from the University of Manitoba and has served as a professor at the University of Calgary and as Chief Examiner in Neurology for the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada. They share an interest in history, and their parents experienced first-hand a fascinating and tumultuous historical period.

A Memoir of Migration

David Toews

Translation by Ingrid and Lothar Moehlmann

Although I unfortunately did not keep a diary, I still believe that some of my experiences, especially those of the past few years, are worthy of note for society in general and my family in particular.[1] Hence, I have taken it upon myself to record my memories. It will not be possible to organize everything chronologically, but what I will record shall be a faithful representation of the truth, proof of which can be found in our archives, in old magazines such as the *Rundschau*, *Vorwärts*, *Herold*, *Bote*, and in the minutes of various church and conference assemblies. I would like to remain objective in my account, and will not excuse my errors and weaknesses. But I pray to God that he give me the grace to fully credit others for their accomplishments, and that he prevent me from judging too harshly those who made my work difficult, through ignorance or wilfulness. I pray, too, that my account will remain accurate and unbiased.

It must have been in the year 1918, or perhaps at the beginning of 1919, that we heard the first news of atrocities in Russia. The war had brought much suffering, the revolution even more. Lenin and Trotsky were in power at the time. Terrible cruelty was attributed to them. We heard news of horrible murders also in the Mennonite colonies. Whole families were reported to have been slaughtered, the *Gutsbesitzer* (landowners) murdered or driven out, many children orphaned. Then came the news of famine.

The news caused grave concern here, and the question in our circles became more and more urgent: what could we do to help? Gerhard Ens from Rosthern was probably one of the first who received letters from Russia. Ens had emigrated from Russia to Canada in the 1890s and had become an immigration agent for the government. When the North-West Territories were divided into provinces in 1905, he became a member of Parliament for the riding of Rosthern. He therefore had experience with matters of immigration, as well as friends in government and political circles. Since 1913, I had been *Aeltester* (bishop) of the Rosenorter Mennonite Church in Saskatchewan. It must have been in the summer of 1920 when Ens came to me with some letters from Russia and we pondered the question of what could be done to provide effective aid in Russia. We agreed that I would call a meeting at the Eigenheim church. It should be indicated that

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As a ten-year-old boy, David Toews participated in Klaas Epp's Great Trek to Turkestan. The suffering on the trip inspired his commitment to helping others in need. In Canada, he was a teacher, a minister, and leader within the Mennonite community. As the chair of the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization, Toews was instrumental in organizing the immigration of 21,000 Mennonites to Canada.

Ens was no longer a Mennonite at this time, but a member of the "Church of the New Jerusalem" (the Swedenborgian Church), probably since 1899. Up to that point, I had had very little to do with him. At the aforementioned meeting, the situation in Russia was considered from all perspectives. The poorly attended assembly agreed unanimously that we should do everything possible to help. At the meeting, Ens made the remark that our people in Russia would be absorbed by the Slavs if they remained there. I

David Toews family in 1932. From left, front row: Anna, David, Margarete, Catherine (Friesen) Toews holding Theodore, and Elma. Back row: Louise, Marie (Toews) Riesen, Herman Riesen, Elsie, Benno, Dora, and Margaret. MAID: MHA, PP-PHOTO COLL. 470-18.0

could not see how we could help get our people out of Russia, considering how poor we were. I also hoped that the situation in Russia would improve. The assembly was unanimous that we had to do everything possible to help out financially over there.

That was my first task: I had to make the urgency of the situation clear [to the Canadian Mennonites], so that they would open their hearts and wallets to their brethren in need. I travelled from house to house in my congregation, and then further afield to other circles. And I succeeded in collecting a very significant sum of money. The various Mennonite churches worked together. In the autumn of 1920, our deacon, Dr. Jacob J. Epp, and I gave our relief work treasurer, C. K. Unruh, about $3,500. This money was then transferred to Levi Mumaw of Scottdale [Pennsylvania], the treasurer of the general relief society of the churches in North America [Mennonite Central Committee]. Our Canadian churches cooperated closely with the relief society in the United States and sent all their money to Scottdale for transfer to Russia. Significant aid was thus provided in Russia.

In the beginning aid could be provided via Constantinople, but there were political complications. There was no progress. I don't think, however, that the route was changed due to anything that we said or did. But because the goods were stuck in Constantinople, and eventually some representatives (probably Orie Miller and Clayton Kratz) got into Russia, I wrote a letter to Scottdale suggesting we deliver aid through Riga instead. I think that others had already drawn the same conclusion. The aid was consequently routed through Riga.

In 1920, we got the news that three delegates from Russia would come over. Their names were [B. H.] Unruh, [A. A.] Friesen, and [C. H.] Warkentin. I no longer remember whether the name Esau was among them. In any event, he (the former mayor of Ekaterinoslav) joined the delegation, but he didn't make it to Canada.

The delegates travelled to the US churches first and brought reports of Russia and the situation there. There was a great deal of sympathy for the cause. It must have been the end of July or early August when the delegates came to the border at Portal [North Dakota] and were denied entry into Canada.

I do not know how the news travelled, but in Herbert they heard the word that the delegates were denied entry into Canada. The issue must have been settled by telegraph to Ottawa, and our brethren had their first meetings in Herbert and the surrounding area, because Herbert was the Mennonite settlement closest to the border town of Portal. Brother H. A. Neufeld always claims, publicly and privately, that the real beginning of the immigration work took place in Herbert. If one considers the efforts to get the delegates across the border as the beginnings of the immigration, then his claim is valid. The brethren in Herbert remained very committed to the cause.

Brother Unruh travelled from Herbert to Manitoba, where he went to several meetings. From there, he proceeded to Perkasie, Pennsylvania, where the General Conference of North America held meetings at the end of August 1920. Brothers Friesen and Warkentin came to Rosthern after I had already left for the conference. They held meetings in a number of places here, and then continued on to Drake, and from there they must have returned to the United States. They stayed several days, maybe even a week, in the Rosthern area. When I came back from the conference, I was informed of what had occurred, not all of which was encouraging.

Gerhard Ens had hosted the delegates and convinced them

that they needed to be introduced into English-speaking circles. Friesen was an educated man and quickly learned enough English to make himself understood. Ens hosted a banquet in his home, to which he invited the mayor of Rosthern, bank managers, lawyers, and other important English-speaking people. No Mennonites were invited, although they were the only ones expected to provide aid. In Saskatoon, Friesen was introduced to professors and visited the university. In Regina, he was introduced to several politicians. These circles had nothing to do with any relief work. Our people were expected to help and wanted to help, but they were bypassed.

When I returned from the conference, I heard a great deal about this situation. In Mennonite circles in Canada, and, as I later discovered, in the US, Friesen was considered to be proud and unapproachable. I was told that Warkentin had made a number of very tactless comments. The latter was also soon to be shunted to the side by his colleagues. I later had to defend Friesen again and again, which I did willingly, because I saw the good in him as I got to know him.

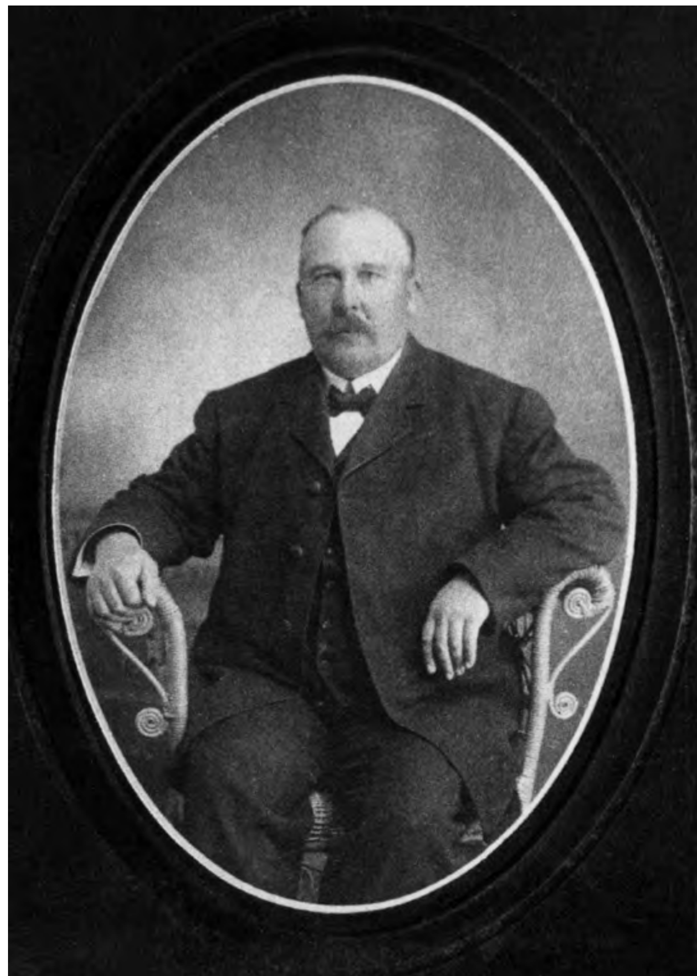
Because I had received information about how Friesen had been withdrawn from Mennonite society, and how our people had been belittled, I exchanged a few sharp words with Ens. I told him, probably too harshly, that I was not prepared to kneel before the English and kiss their boots! The delegates were sent to seek help from our Mennonite churches. We should help and wanted to help.

Why was the delegate not moving in our circles? Ens wouldn't speak to me for half a year. He was offended. I should have expressed myself less vehemently. My prejudice against the English originated in the war, when many of our people had been so badly treated by most, but not all, of the English. They had been slighted by the English community, including its leaders. When the soldiers came back, the mob ransacked our church, cursing, vandalizing, throwing the Bible between the pews. They even wanted to lead a cow into the church, saying the cow must also have converted, and then they hung a black flag from the church steeple. I was not home at the time. On the way from BC, I think it was in Moose Jaw, I heard about all this. It made me especially angry that leaders of the community could let such a thing happen, and even participate. This unrest was likely because our young men didn't have to go to war, and many of them behaved badly back home. I had been given the task of getting our young men out of custody, so their wrath was also partly directed at me. I don't want to excuse my harsh words, but rather to explain how and why I resented the English so deeply. But let me get back to the real point of these recollections.

I first met Brother B. H. Unruh in Perkasie, Pennsylvania. He said that he had read my appeals for aid in the newspapers, and wanted to accompany me to the conference. I didn't know anything about his plans, and he didn't know when and how I would travel there.

I had not heard anything unpleasant about Brother Unruh, but I had heard how extraordinarily talented he was. His lectures left a deep impression everywhere, and I heard from everyone how he could mesmerize people. At the conference in Perkasie, he talked about the red horse in Revelation 6:4. I did not speak with him again in Perkasie, partly because I was busy with committee work. He was also travelling on to another conference of American, English-speaking Mennonites, accompanied by a young Epp from Henderson, Nebraska, who served as his interpreter.

I therefore did not get to know Unruh better. What I had seen of him made a good, but not decisive, impression on me. Soon after the conference, he returned to Germany, where he has remained since, and has supported the Mennonite colonies in Russia where necessary. In the first years, he was regarded as the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Gerhard Ens, born in Neuendorf, Chortitza colony, in 1864, immigrated to Canada in 1891, where he joined the Church of the New Jerusalem and became a politician. He used his political influence to help organize the immigration of Mennonites from the Soviet Union to Canada.

representative of the Russian Mennonites and was to some extent remunerated by them. Then the Dutch committee undertook to remunerate him for one or two years, and since the beginning of the year 1927 he has represented and been paid by us. I will recount his activities in Germany a little later on. Friesen and Warkentin kept travelling through the United States and Mexico to study the situation and the possibilities for settlement. These travels were financed by a committee in Kansas and J. W. Wiens from Hillsboro was asked to accompany the men. These trips

were very expensive and did not produce any practical results. At the end of 1920 and the beginning of 1921, Friesen was apparently in Bluffton and also in Philadelphia, where he was especially busy putting a good word in for sixty-two young men who had served in the White Army against the Bolsheviks. These young men had stayed in Constantinople for a while and had eventually made it to the port of New York, where they were denied entry. M. H. Kratz, a famous Mennonite lawyer, had tried to intervene on their behalf, as he told me later. He also told me how presumptuous Friesen often was towards him, etc. Peter Jansen, from Beatrice, Nebraska, a man who had many friends in political circles, worked very effectively to facilitate the immigration of these young men. Other people and committees also worked to this end. In Washington, people grew tired of the issue. When a non-Mennonite came to the minister [official] concerned regarding another issue, he responded angrily, "Are you here over the Mennonites again?" For a time, it seemed as though all our work was for naught and that the young men would be sent back into misery. Later, however, they were allowed entry.

OBSTACLES TO IMMIGRATION

The delegate A. A. Friesen returned to Herbert, Saskatchewan, in the spring of 1921. Why, I do not know. In any event, he had become convinced, during the course of his travels, that if our people could be brought out of Russia, they should come to Canada – provided we could get permission. He had gotten to know H. A. Neufeld earlier, and his nephew Herman H. Neufeld, presently [1934] the editor of the *Mennonitische Rundschau*, and Friesen's former student and friend, was staying in Herbert at the time. From Herbert he probably corresponded with his friend Gerhard Ens, here in Rosthern, who came to me one day to ask that Friesen be invited to Rosthern. I was not in favour, because I saw no point in it. The ministers in our congregation were of my opinion.

In the spring of 1921, the question became more pressing. Could we do something for our persecuted brethren in Russia, in order to help them find a new homeland? The news from abroad was so awful; our people could not remain in their terrible misery. However, there was an order-in-council, in effect since 1919, which forbade Mennonite immigration to Canada.

As long as this order-in-council remained in effect, Mennonite immigration to Canada was out of the question. Under these circumstances, we had to find a way to lift the ban. I can no longer remember who called the meeting, but I think it was A. A. Friesen. I travelled to Herbert, but I no longer remember with whom. The meeting was held in the Herbert church either in May or June 1921. I spoke in favour of attempting to get the immigration ban lifted, but I thought that it was hopeless to try right away, because there was a federal election coming and the parties were in the midst of a heated campaign. The election was going to be held in the fall. Furthermore, our conference was supposed to be held in Herbert in July, and the Mennonite Brethren conference was to be held in Winkler, Manitoba, at the same time. To avoid wasting any time, we brought the question to the conference. The suggestion met with general approval. The meeting concluded harmoniously. Nonetheless, it was already noticeable that there were fears in our Mennonite circles over the question of the immigration of our brethren from Russia. These fears were voiced when we spoke of sending a delegation to Ottawa.

At the end of our conference I was re-elected chairman, as I had been since 1914. I was firmly for the idea of sending a delegation. When the matter came up for discussion, all pertinent questions were dealt with. I didn't hurry the process along, because I saw this as a matter of great importance, and I didn't want it to be said later that the decision was made in haste. It took half a day to discuss the question. A certain Brother Thiessen expressed his amazement that a half day had been devoted to the issue. Eventually, it came to a vote, and out of sixty people, only two voted against sending a delegation. The others were all in favour.

The vote in Winkler followed. As it was reported to me, there were fourteen votes in favour and twelve opposed. The delegates from Waldheim had reserved the right to have their own congregational meeting and telegraph me the result in Herbert. Before our vote, we received the following telegram from Waldheim: "Joint meeting July 5th Rosthern district decided not to support decision of Manitoba conference in any of the following questions: advance of money guarantee morally and financially for emigrants from Constantinople nor delegation to Ottawa. David Dyck, Chairman."

At our conference we voted for sending a delegate. It was proposed that I go, but I refused, because of my workload in the church. Brother H. Ewert was in the East at the time, where he was visiting the so-called Old Mennonites. I suggested that he be sent to Ottawa as our delegate. This proposal was accepted. It meant a big saving and Brother Ewert was generally considered to be a suitable person for the job. It was also taken for granted that Brother Friesen accompany the delegation, because the matter concerned our brethren in Russia, and who was better informed than he? But where to get the money? I guaranteed Brother C. K. Unruh that he would get at least $100 for the relief fund from our congregation, if he would give the sum to Friesen. He agreed.

The Mennonite Brethren churches near Herbert were also in favour. They decided to send H. A. Neufeld as their delegate. I promised my full support. From Ontario, the delegation was represented by S. F. Coffman of Vineland.

The result was as expected. They went to see Sir George Foster, the acting prime minister, who questioned them in detail. Then the delegates met with Mr. William Lyon Mackenzie King, leader of the Liberal Party. He promised that if the Liberals were to come to power, he would see to it that the immigration ban on the Mennonites was lifted. He was aware of the Mennonites and knew that they were among the finest citizens of the land.

Brother Friesen went from Ottawa back to Bluffton. The other delegates returned home and reported what had happened. It was hence clear that nothing could be done until the political situation had been clarified by an election. At this point, I must explain my personal situation. When I had been elected Aeltester

of the Rosenorter Church in 1918, I had continued to teach at our educational institution in Rosthern for a few years. I was not only busy with my teaching duties, but also responsible for fundraising for the school, as well as serving as its secretary and treasurer. At the same time, I also had to look after my church. I came to realize that I could no longer carry on in this way, without having both the school and the church suffer for it. Furthermore, I have to admit that I am not very good with finances. I was able to drum up promises as well as anyone else, and then optimistically believed that the payments would follow. However, this was often not the case. I was inexperienced in bookkeeping and not meticulous enough. Many didn't pay the money they had pledged, and some hard-up students did not pay. With the money that eventually did come in, I had to satisfy the other teachers. I got what was left over. The school went into debt and I was very worried about my own income. I realized that this could no longer continue. I quit my job at the school and wanted to dedicate all of my time to the church, which I hoped would support me. I was deluding myself. Then I thought that if I purchased land cheaply and subsequently sold it at a profit, I could still devote nearly all of my time to my church work. I wasn't careful enough in my choice of land. I was easy prey for the real estate agents. I sank deeper into debt. The situation became nearly hopeless. I had debts everywhere and had no hope of ever paying them back. I was still granted credit. People believed in me and took me for an honest man, but it was a heavy burden for me to bear. In this hopeless situation, I had to carry on my church work, and look after the school, financially and otherwise. I was also the head supervisor for local mission work. I had a lot of cares, worries, and heartache. At that time, Isaak P. Friesen wrote a promissory note for me. Because I couldn't pay it back, and my creditor threatened to take me to court, Isaak Friesen paid the debt, which I then owed to him in turn. Friesen was a well-off man, who had a better business sense than I. He had wintered in California for many consecutive years, and I believed that he would and could shoulder my debt. I must admit that I did not pay enough attention to repaying this debt, as I had so many other duties. When serious differences came between us regarding the immigration, our relationship became strained and he reminded me repeatedly of my debts. He then wrote me letters. In one of them, he accused me of not wanting to repay him. I wrote him back that it would be the happiest day of my life when I could repay him.

But back to the point of these memories. The federal election had taken place in the fall of 1921. The Liberals had won. William Lyon Mackenzie King had become prime minister. Now the time had come to do something about lifting the immigration ban on Mennonites.

In the light of the political circumstances of the day, the success of the delegation was all but guaranteed. Mr. King, the new prime minister, had been brought up in Waterloo County, Ontario, surrounded by Mennonites, and he had already promised the first delegation that when the Liberals took over, they would lift the immigration ban. He had already said, and would often say again, that Canada had no better citizens than the Mennonites. Mr. Stewart of Edmonton was the immigration minister. He had come to know the Mennonites in the East and had an appreciation for them. Mr. Motherwell, the MP for Melville [*sic*, Regina], in Saskatchewan, knew the Mennonites in the West and confirmed that they were good citizens, capable of looking after themselves in adverse circumstances and without outside assistance. They had complete success in Ottawa. They were promised that the immigration ban would be lifted and we were encouraged to take the necessary steps to start the immigration process. Mr. Stewart gave the delegates' letters to Mr. Beatty, the president of the Canadian Pacific Railway company, and to Colonel J. S. Dennis, the chief commissioner of colonization and development for the CPR.

The name Colonel J. S. Dennis appears here for the first time in our history. He had become acquainted with Mennonites as a young man. He belonged to the crew of the *International*, the ship that brought the first Mennonites to Manitoba on the Red River. He knew of the difficulties they had had with locusts, flooding, and frost. He also knew of the $100,000 loan that the government had guaranteed the Mennonites, which had been paid back within ten years.

Later, Colonel Dennis became deputy minister of public works in the North-West Territories, based in its capital, Regina. He held this position until 1902. He later became the chief commissioner of the CPR and lived in Montreal. He had a military appearance, with a keen gaze and an imposing presence. When I first met him in 1922 he was about sixty-five years old. He knew Gerhard Ens from his time in Regina, when Ens was a member of the legislature.

Colonel Dennis was asked on what terms credit could be obtained to help our brethren from Russia to come to Canada. The matter was new to him, but it was reported that he spoke to the appropriate officials and later told the delegates that things could be arranged, but that the terms would have to be set later. The report of the delegates sounded much more favourable than the contract later was. The officials of the Canadian Northern Railway had also spoken to the delegates beforehand, but were not in a position to specify the terms. When the reports were brought to us, we were happy that so much had been accomplished.

At that time I had in my possession many letters from H. H. Ewert, who insisted that I should become a member of the committee responsible for the immigration question. I refused, writing again and again that I could not be a part of the committee. I was thinking of my straitened financial circumstances and of my work in the church. On top of that, I had no experience with the sort of questions that would emerge in this kind of situation. I promised to support the committee in every way, but I did not want to become a member of it.

Then came a letter from Brother Ewert, announcing a meeting of the committee in Gretna. The meeting was to be held in May.

At this meeting there was a lengthy discussion about how to house the immigrants when they came. Here, too, there were a number of irritating comments made. Brother Ewert had a

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Members of the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization and representatives from the United States. From left: D. H. Bender, G. Warkentin, J. W. Wiens, P. H. Wiebe, Gerhard Ens, David Toews, unidentified, C.K. Unruh, unidentified, A. A. Friesen, and P. P. Epp.

plan whereby a number of locals would guarantee the debt of an immigrant family and would provide them with shelter. H. A. Neufeld and Gerhard Ens believed that this approach would be too difficult, and that many could be put up in Herbert and Rosenort. There was no agreement on this point.

Two plans were then put forward regarding the financing of the undertaking. Brother Ewert had the following plan: The Old Colony Mennonites were intending to go to Mexico, and it would be a good idea to buy their villages for the expected wave of immigrants. He believed that the locals would be so generous that they would provide enough money to buy a village. A mortgage would then be taken on that village in order to buy the next village. Then the second village would finance the third, in the same way. And so it would continue until all the villages were purchased. The *Waisenamt* would act as a bank to broker the deal, looking after the business end of things.[2] The first obstacle was that it would have been impossible to raise the requisite $150,000 from the locals to buy the first village. Secondly, many of the lands were already mortgaged, so we couldn't have borrowed the full amount. And thirdly, it was impossible to find a credit union to lend us that much money. The other plan was devised by Gerhard Ens, who had asked the lawyer A. C. March of Rosthern to work out the details. This plan entailed setting up a joint stock company with a working capital of $10 million. With this money, land and equipment for all the immigrants would be bought. They in turn would owe the joint stock company for it. It was believed that the Mennonites could raise the $10 million, and I, too, in my excessive optimism, agreed with this view. We felt we were entering into a very advantageous banking arrangement, and I cannot say that we were totally free of notions of self-interest. We never imagined that there was no one among us with the business acumen and the ability to deal with such a large sum of money. We also had no idea that our people would not unanimously support this plan. Large sums of money can be raised by our people for purely charitable causes, but when things smell of a business deal, the Mennonite is sufficiently suspicious to reject it.

Both of these plans were discussed at the Gretna meeting, and everyone but Ewert supported the second plan.

When it came to a vote regarding who would be chairman of the Canadian [Mennonite] Board of Colonization, I was elected, at the suggestion of H. H. Ewert, despite the fact that I had not yet agreed to be a member of the committee, and Rosthern was designated as the seat of its business activities.

A. A. Friesen was named secretary and treasurer, with a monthly salary of $100. Gerhard Ens and A. A. Friesen came to Heidelberg [where Toews was teaching elementary school] to relate the news to me and held out the prospect of a salary.

Although I had kept myself out of the picture, I can't say that this was an unpleasant solution. I was known to some as a successful teacher. Nobody appeared to perceive my imperfections in the way that I did. Furthermore, the prospect of more responsibility was very tempting, especially since I could work from home.

On the day of the first meeting in Rosthern, I formally accepted the position of chair of the committee, and because I was to have received an income of $1,400 in Heidelberg in the coming year, I was offered the same salary. I said that I would be satisfied with an annual salary of $1,200. My salary was thus fixed at $1,200 per annum. At that meeting, it was also decided that we make formal contact with the CPR in order to bring over our brethren from Russia. As chairman, I sent my first official telegram to Colonel J. S. Dennis in Montreal, to ask him to send us an offer, which we would then examine and possibly sign. I have already mentioned that the contract, when it arrived, was not as favourable as the delegation had led us to believe. I should perhaps add that not everyone in the administration wanted to grant us credit. It was likely due to the good reports that Colonel Dennis made about the Mennonites with respect to their reputation as good and honest farmers that President Beatty was won over. Sir Augustus Nanton of Winnipeg, who as principal partner and president of the firm Osler, Hammond & Nanton, and of North of Scotland Mortgage Company, had had many business dealings with Mennonites, gave them his endorsement and, in his capacity as director of the CPR, supported the deal. On a later visit to Winnipeg, he told me that his company had not lost one cent in its dealings with Mennonites, with the exception of one [man] in Waldeck, Saskatchewan, who was no longer a Mennonite, as far as he knew.

Mr. Ogden, the financial vice president of the CPR, was against granting the loan and called the prospective agreement "one of Colonel Dennis's crazy ideas." I was told this later on.

It is therefore understandable that Colonel Dennis didn't prevail with all of his ideas and plans. Ticket prices were significantly higher than we originally thought – $140 per person instead of $100, which G. Ens had first indicated – and the payment dates were much earlier. In light of our poverty and our great responsibility towards the company and towards our congregations, I was almost afraid.

But first, there was a conference in Winkler, Manitoba, and a debate. This conference took place in early July 1922. Present were Brothers Jacob Kroeker from Germany, J. W. Kliewer, from Newton, Kansas, and Gustav Enns from Kansas. I was again chairman of the conference. When the immigration question came up, Brother Ewert explained his aforementioned plan. I then explained ours, that is to say, the one devised by Mr. March to form a joint stock company. I managed to explain the plan in a calm and collected manner, while Brother Ewert became quite agitated. He exclaimed, "I have nothing against Brother Toews, but the other members of the committee [the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization] don't want to consult the constituency, and I cannot work with them." Subsequently, P. P. Epp, of Altona, Manitoba, was elected as a member of the Board. The conference voted sixty-four to two in favour of our plan.

A DECISIVE CRISIS

At the meeting, I asked whether I could sign the awaited contract when it arrived. Everything was quiet. Then I asked again. Everyone was silent. Then I asked a third time. No answer. A Brother Hildebrand from Winkler timidly asked what Brother Ewert had to say about the matter. Then I got scared, because I believed that Brother Ewert would answer in the negative. But he remained silent. Then I did something that later made me the target of bitter accusations. Perhaps and probably it was a mistake. I said, "For the time being, the Rosenorter Church will take the responsibility, until other congregations join us." Brother Johann Gerbrandt from Drake, Saskatchewan, then said that I could count on them. A minister from the Zoar Mennonite Church in Langham said that I could also count on them. This man caved in quite quickly when he went home and faced the opposition – swaying like a weak reed in the wind.

At the conference meeting, there were two ministers present from our church. Both were very prudent financial managers, and numbered among the most successful businessmen in our church. Both of them were very pessimistic and suspicious by nature. With my remark [about the Rosenorter Church taking responsibility], I had given these men and others means to sow and nurture seeds of mistrust in our congregation towards me and the immigration. When I came home from the conference, I was met with great anger; the opposition was in full swing, and it was growing. In Rosthern, a petition was circulated that sought to forbid me from signing the contract. Some of my best friends had become sharp critics, and our formerly good relations never completely returned to normal.

The contract came and was not what we had expected. The members of the Board were called together. We were all disappointed and the committee often sat up late into the night to read and consult and couldn't come to a conclusion. With this contract, the company undertook to send two ships, the *Montreal* and the *Scandinavian*, to Odessa. We were supposed to get the passengers to the port. They were to be well fed on the ships and later on the trains, with simple but good food. For each trip that the ships made, we were required to pay $185,360 for the *Montreal* and $184,520 for the *Scandinavian*. It was estimated that the *Montreal* could accommodate 1,324 passengers, and the *Scandinavian* 1,318 passengers.

The costs for passports, visas, passage, and the like were to be our business. The costs for children were less. The terms of the agreement were unfavourable, to the point that we all knew that we would not be able to meet them. The first payment of 25 percent was due within ten days of receipt of the bill, a further payment of 25 percent was due within a quarter of a year, and the last payment within a half year. I was the first to see the contract, and said to myself that we could not fulfill the terms of the agreement. I also had no idea how we would start to meet other terms of the contract. The Board was convened. We often

sat until late at night, reading, conferring, and wishing the contract could be totally different. Those assembled included H. A. Neufeld, C. J. Andres, P. H. Wiebe, P. P. Epp, A. B. Wiebe, of Herbert (not a member of the Board), Gerhard Ens (also not a member, but particularly interested), A. A. Friesen, and I. The little office attached to the customs office was made available to us by Mr. Hodson. The meetings were opened with prayer. At one of the first meetings, Friesen asked me if he could smoke. I, with too much goodwill, agreed, and afterwards, Friesen and Ens ensured that the office and later also a bigger office on the first floor of the Bank of Montreal were clouded with smoke. This became bothersome, particularly in view of the fact that I saw our work as an act of salvation. In large meetings and in writing in the papers, I referred to the salvation of our Russian brothers and sisters as our Christian duty. Although my efforts were not without results, they were in stark contrast to the stench of the air in our meeting rooms. I talked about this contrast repeatedly, but was met only with derision. Why didn't I take a firm stand against it? Why didn't I? Public opposition grew quickly and vehemently, and soon developed into enmity towards us personally and towards our cause. At the beginning, I was only attacked because of my colleagues, Friesen and Ens. When I defended them, I was personally attacked. That pushed me more and more into their company. But back to the contract. Our discussion continued and it was almost impossible to come to a conclusion. I was deeply convinced that we would have to accept the bitter pill if we wanted to help our people, but to take on $370,000 of debt without knowing if the required number of passengers would show up in Odessa made it hard to come to a decision. On top of this, there were other difficulties, including our poverty and the open hostility among our people. I was convinced, however, that we would not be able to get better terms. On the other hand, everything in me balked at the thought of signing a contract which I knew we couldn't fulfill. At one of our meetings, Gerhard Ens demonstrated how the Doukhobor leader Verigin would talk to Colonel Dennis about this sort of matter, to get a better deal. It was consequently decided that Gerhard Ens would come with me, because it was felt that he could get an agreement on better terms. As it turned out, he was no better than I in this regard.

At that time, Pastor Jacob Kroeker of Wernigerode, Germany, visited Canada. He attended our conference in Winkler and his sermons made a deep impression on us. He also came to Saskatchewan. We heard that he would be giving a sermon in Hepburn one evening. Gerhard Ens, A. A. Friesen, and I went with a few others. The big church was packed. Kroeker gave a powerful sermon. His sermon made a deep impression. He also spoke of the plight of the Mennonites in Russia and of our mission.

After the service, Brother H. A. Neufeld came up to me and said that we should sign the contract, even if we couldn't get better terms. C. K. Unruh said that he thought the ice had broken. Unruh was perhaps the only man in Hepburn who was for us. He was a second cousin of Benjamin H. Unruh.

The next Sunday was *Missionsfest* in our congregation in Eigenheim. Another big meeting. Kroeker preached there too. I believe he also referred to the situation in Russia, but I no longer remember. I talked to the assembly and said, among other things, that in accordance with our beliefs, we would have to do something to help our people in Russia escape. We had the opportunity, right now, to help approximately three thousand of them, and we shouldn't back off out of fear. I asked for their prayers and told them not to be afraid, and not to be afraid that I would sign something which would bring anyone harm. I realized, again and again, how seriously people viewed this undertaking, and how unsure they were about it. The fear of some turned into hostility. Many well-meaning friends were also afraid. Even those who were friendly towards me made discreet inquiries as to whether this would put them at risk. This fear and hostility can be partially explained by the planned formation of our joint stock company. The charter, which was certified by Ottawa some time later, was good for $10 million. Some friends, especially Gerhard Ens and the lawyer March, made careless remarks. They spoke of the very high salaries which would be paid out, of expensive office furniture, etc.

The contract with the debt of $370,000 and the million-dollar project were confused and mixed up, and ill-meaning pessimists did their best to increase the opposition and mistrust towards us. The anxiety can also be explained by the fact that our planned joint stock company would have to be incorporated, and our church was incorporated as well. People believed that if I, as the Aeltester of the church and president of the company, signed the contract, each member of the church would be personally liable. It didn't help when I explained that in any corporation, liability can only be assumed through a duly passed resolution, and then only the assets of the corporation are liable, not the assets of the individual shareholder. I repeatedly stressed this fact. Furthermore, I said, "Do you think that the CPR has any interest in ruining old farmers and businessmen in order to bring other poor people into the country?" My arguments didn't help very much. One successful businessman in particular claimed that the opposite was true, and people believed him more than they believed me. Again and again, people claimed that if the immigrants were brought over, they would not be able to pay, and they themselves would be stuck with the debt. Furthermore, they did not believe that things were so bad in Russia. People would have been more willing to send more aid to Russia. But from Russia, there came more and more urgent requests to get the Mennonites out, or they would perish. As confirmation, we heard terrible stories of murder and expropriation and expulsion. If I had considered things from a business point of view, then I would have decided not to undertake this initiative, given my incapacity to deal with such matters. Even in the United States, where people were soon to hear of the project, they believed it to be unworkable. People took pity on me, they warned me, and in some places, they were bitterly hostile towards me. Some particularly cautious people were also afraid for themselves; even in the United States, we had almost no friends with respect

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The first train leaving Chortitza, with over seven hundred Mennonites, on June 22, 1923.

to the planned project. On July 24, 1922, Gerhard Ens and I left for Montreal to deal with the contract. When we arrived in Saskatoon and went to Mr. Gerow's office, he told us that he had received a telegram from Colonel Dennis indicating that we shouldn't bother coming if we hadn't signed the contract. The contract was put in front of me for my signature in Saskatoon on July 24, 1922. The purpose of our trip to Montreal had been to acquire better terms. That is why Gerhard Ens was sent to accompany me. I hesitated to sign for that reason. Ens seemed to have no objections, but he was also not responsible. He advised me to sign. Taking into consideration the advice of Brother H. A. Neufeld in Hepburn and of Gerhard Ens, and in the knowledge that I would sign even without having negotiated better terms, I signed my name to the fateful document and we travelled on to Montreal.

When we arrived in Montreal, we checked into the Ryan Hotel across the street from Windsor Station. The hotel was unsatisfactory. Later that morning we went to Colonel Dennis's office. Mr. Dennis greeted us warmly. I was introduced to him as Bishop Toews, and despite my protestations, the title stuck. It always seemed too presumptuous that a lowly person like me should hold such an exalted title. After our introductions, the Colonel took his briefcase out and read us many complaints, which had been sent to him from Rosthern and Hepburn. Colonel Dennis looked at us and asked sternly, "How is that?" Gerhard Ens clarified that these letters came from insignificant people. I said nothing.

In the afternoon we went back to him, and I told him that the affair was a matter of trust, and asked him if he agreed. He answered that he completely agreed. Then he read us his responses to these letters. He went on to describe what he knew about Russia, and also what he knew about the Mennonites who had immigrated to Canada in the 1870s – how they had received government loans and subsequently honestly repaid them. He assured us that the CPR had never agreed to such a contract with any other group apart from the Salvation Army. Then he outlined the plans for bringing people over. Later, another telegram from Hepburn arrived, on behalf of a large assembly of protesters who had met there on July 26. I asked Colonel Dennis if this protest would hinder the fulfillment of the contract, to which he replied, "No, not in the least!"

I drove from Montreal to Bluffton, Ohio, where Quakers, Tunkers, and other branches of the Mennonites were meeting to discuss questions of nonresistance and peace. I hoped to have the opportunity to discuss our project with them. I was promised time, but they almost forgot to include me in the agenda. I reminded them and got the opportunity to say a few words. Whether they helped or not, I do not know.

Before the evening meeting, I spoke to P. H. Unruh in private,

and the following conversation ensued: Unruh: "What are you brethren in Canada doing?" Me: "About what?" Unruh: "Don't you know that the Russian Mennonites have renounced non-resistance?" Me: "I don't know that. I only know that they are in need and I see it as our duty to help them. The Samaritan saw the plight of the man who fell among the murderers. He didn't ask about his past life, he just helped him." Unruh: "And don't you know that A. Friesen is not a believer?" "I don't know that either. He attends worship services and I have heard him make no remarks that would indicate he is an unbeliever or a modernist."

When I came home, D. H. Bender from Hesston, Kansas, and J. W. Wiens from Hillsboro were there to meet me. They had come to look at the contract and the charter. We had a meeting that evening and the following day. The contract and the charter were thoroughly studied and discussed. Late the next evening, Heinrich and Peter Lepp from Dalmeny and P. J. Friesen from Hepburn demanded to have the contract read before a public meeting. We told them that we would be happy to read and explain it to whoever was interested or to have it read and explained by someone trustworthy, but that we were not allowed to let the contract out of our hands.

On August 12, there was another big meeting of protesters in Hepburn. They sent another telegram and a long letter of protest to Montreal. In the letter, they said that the meeting had been called to read the contract, and that we had not allowed attendees to acquire a copy.

As I mentioned earlier, we had not wished to make copies of the contract or to let it out of our hands, but we offered again and again to read the contract ourselves or have it read by someone else. This was obviously not the desire of those who wanted to make trouble.

I think it was on February 10 that I left for Kansas and Oklahoma. It was cold outside. Gerhard Ens accompanied me to the train station in a covered sled. I was supposed to drum up support in Kansas for the project and the $10 million contract. I felt inadequate and unequal to the task, but the attempt had to be made. No one else could do the job. H. H. Ewert, who would have known how to go about this better than I, and was very influential in Kansas, had declined any cooperation, as he deemed the project to be impracticable and un-Mennonite.

I arrived in Elbing, Kansas, on a Sunday. As I had not announced my visit, no one was at the station to meet me. It was a sunny, dry day. I took my suitcase and walked towards Newton, hoping that someone would pick me up on the way. And soon, someone drove by and was kind enough to do so. My first stop was at Bernhard Regier's. My arrival was totally unexpected, but I received a warm welcome. He was under the impression that Brother Ewert had started this project and passed it on to me when it became too much responsibility. This was a mistake. Brother Ewert had resigned for different reasons, to which I have already referred. He is not the type to give up when the going gets hard. The next day, Brother Regier drove me to Newton and then on to Hesston, where I wanted to meet D. H. Bender, president of Hesston College and chair of the immigration committee [the Mennonite Executive Committee for Colonization (MECC)]. In Newton at the First National Bank, I bumped into P. W. Enns, who had a large dairy near Bethel College. He greeted me with the words, "What are you doing up there in Canada? You are chasing a dream. What you are trying to do is impossible." In Hesston, we had to wait at the college for quite a while. The teachers were having a meeting. Reverend Yoder from Iowa was also there. A. A. Friesen had especially recommended him to me. It was a great pleasure for me to be able to meet him. Gustav Enns was at the conference in Winkler in 1922 and had expressed a real interest in the project. I looked forward to meeting him and expected he would be understanding and encouraging. Yoder was supposed to be at Enns's for dinner.

When the meeting was over, the men came to the president's office. Bender greeted me warmly. Yoder was introduced to me and was also very friendly. Enns seemed more distant, which I could not understand, because he had been so friendly and enthusiastic in Winkler. Bender promised to call a meeting of the committee right away. I indicated that I also wanted to speak with Brother Yoder. That took me to Enns's house. I no longer remember whether he invited me or not, but he might have. At the beginning, the conversation was about questions I was more unfamiliar with. Then I talked to Yoder about the need in Russia and about our project to bring the poor people over. Yoder kindly invited me to Iowa and promised to introduce me there. Enns had remained silent at the beginning, but suddenly he exploded. Missionaries should be sent to Russia. Many of the Russian Mennonites were responsible for their own suffering. And Molotschna was the home of modernism. He would not want to raise his children in Halbstadt, where he had been. In Alt Samara there were no complaints about poor treatment. Everything was normal there. This was confirmed by his wife. I was completely unprepared for this. I no longer remember what I replied. The experiences of these first days discouraged me. I had expected support, especially from Gustav Enns, and found opposition. What else was coming? I was depressed. Then I thought of H. P. Krehbiel, whom I considered a man of great ideas. I went to meet him and we talked about the project. He said that the entire General Conference did not have $10 million between them. Then he got lost in details about founding a possible settlement. He gave me no encouragement.

I put my hopes in the [MECC] committee meeting, which was supposed to take place in the Midland National Bank. The day came. D. H. Bender, J. W. Wiens, William J. Ewert, and H. E. Suderman were there. Soon after the meeting began a few land agents arrived as well. Naturally, I had to make a presentation about the project. Then they talked about possible settlement areas in the US. Mr. Reeves and Mr. Faltz spoke of settlement possibilities in Texas and Washington, despite the fact that they knew that the United States was closed to immigrants at that point. Faltz said repeatedly that Colonel Dean in Topeka had promised him that he could arrange all this. We had four or five similar meetings. There was no progress. The land agents were always present.

I was despondent when I thought about my work. I probably would have done better had I left the committee. There was no plan and no progress to be made.

One evening I was invited to speak in the Alexanderwohl church in Goessel, and then there was another committee meeting. We decided to drive to Spokane, Washington, where land was available. Maybe I should have gone back to Canada, but Mr. Faltz and possibly the other wealthy landowners paid for the travel expenses and I had a free ride for most of the way. The prospective land sellers were a Mr. Groves, president of the Old National Bank, and a Mr. Farr, owner of several sawmills.

We visited Gustav Toews, a very successful mill owner from Spokane. We had to visit him in his home. His wife is an American. They had a Filipino servant waiting on the table. He told us a lot about the land. He was not as optimistic about it as Mr. Groves and Mr. Faltz were.

It was on the last day of our stay that Bender, Suderman, and Wiens visited Mr. Groves in his office again. An option on land was signed. It had all become too much for me. Mr. Farr invited us to have lunch in what was reputed to be the best hotel west of Chicago. If that was the case, I do not know. All I know is that it was very good. I do not remember what we had to eat, but I remember something about the conversation. Bender was leading the discussion. Bender said to Farr: "Of course, if this goes through, that Canadian contract is going to be cancelled." Toews: "Oh no, that Canadian contract is not going to be cancelled. Bender: "Well, what security can you give?" Wiens: "They may be able to give security for ten dollars." I didn't answer. This short conversation told me everything I needed to know.

The only thing that I achieved was to have a general assembly meeting called in the auditorium of Tabor College, Hillsboro. (In the meantime, I visited churches.) Brother C. E. Krehbiel had returned from Russia and that gave me hope that it would be a good meeting. The day of the meeting arrived. I drove from Whitewater with Johann Epp, Heinrich Thiessen, and Johann Andres, of Elbing. It had rained and it looked as though it would rain some more. Despite the weather, the large hall was packed. I think P. C. Hiebert spoke first. He had been to Russia as well. He said, among other things, that if our forefathers had had a reason to leave Russia, that was even more the case now. I thought that this statement would be helpful. Krehbiel spoke calmly and soberly about the type of project this was and about the distribution of donated clothing. I had hoped he would speak with more passion. I was disappointed. Bender then spoke about a plan I no longer recall.

This plan was described by a teacher Toews from the college as "the biblical way." I think I spoke before Bender, but I am not sure. I only know that when I stood up to speak, the weather worsened outside, but I don't think that was the only reason that half the audience walked out. I outlined the situation in Russia as it had been described to me in letters, and spoke about our plan to help them emigrate. There followed a meeting, about which I remember only a few remarks. P. W. Enns from Newton stood up and spoke of the dream we were chasing and remarked, "I don't even know how you sleep at night, after signing such a contract." I answered, "I have slept well ever since I signed the contract. But if I had missed the opportunity to sign it, I would not have been able to sleep well." The meeting was over, and all my hopes were dashed. Deflated, I headed home from Elbing that very evening.

A MIRACLE OCCURS

When I got home from Kansas, there were Board meetings. I made a report. We were all convinced it would be a waste of effort to try to sell enough shares to enable the charter to function. Some were even for cancelling the contract. Ted Nickel said impulsively, "Well boys, we are beat. Let's cancel the contract." Several others agreed. I said, "No, I think we must honour the contract. If the movement doesn't happen, at least we won't have to blame ourselves."

Later I read a letter from Aeltester Isaak Dyck of Chortitza, indicating that they knew how things were going here, and that our reputation in Russia was sinking. There was also a letter from D. H. Bender to A. A. Friesen informing him about the founding of the "Colonization Board" [the Mennonite Colonization Board]. Our [Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization] board members A. A. Friesen, P. P. Epp, C. J. Andres, and H. H. Ewert were to sit on this new board. There were separate committees for billeting, transportation, propaganda, etc.

Friesen wrote to Bender: "I want to use you for those coming by way of Quebec and I want to use Orie Miller for those coming by way of New York."

It seemed as though Bender thought that he could get rid of our organization with a letter. I had to wonder at his presumptuousness and also at his incompetence. No credit had been arranged and the immigrants were not legally allowed to immigrate to the United States.

B. B. Janz was also informed about this "new organization." In a letter ostensibly written to A. A. Friesen, he expressed his joy that an organization had finally been founded which had the trust of the people. I did not hear anything more about it. It obviously foundered, which was to be expected. This board was supposed to replace our organization. Why, even its founders hardly knew. The way into Canada was open, the one into the United States was closed.

In the meanwhile, in Russia there were still some obstacles. It is not clear why the Russian Mennonites believed that the obstacles were over here. The obstacles were over there, and as soon as they were overcome the work could begin. When I went to Montreal for the second time, Colonel Dennis told me that there were reports of a cholera outbreak in the Odessa area. Also, the situation in the Dardanelles was so unsettled that they could not send any ships there.

As a result, a plan was hatched to travel via Riga. The biggest obstacle was that it would cost a great deal more money to bring the emigrants to port via this route and that most of the people had no money.

When this matter was settled, the Russian government declared that it would not let any emigrants back into Russia

if they crossed the border and were rejected due to illness. The committee in Germany found a solution to this problem by persuading the German government to take in the rejected emigrants and keep them in Lechfeld until they were well enough to travel. Outbreaks of trachoma and tuberculosis were of particular concern. Germany seemed to fear neither. There were many difficulties involved with the acquisition of exit permits. Here we almost gave up hope of success, despite the fact that we had done everything possible and necessary. Our opponents started mocking us. One minister even did this openly from the pulpit. hoped the situation would improve. Then the telegram came to me. I announced it immediately. It provoked a mixed reaction, but the news did not create any visible excitement.

In the face of all the obnoxiousness I have encountered since 1923, I have had to recall what Brother P. A. Penner told me at the time: "The immigrants will some day turn against you even more aggressively than the locals do now." Back then, I could not imagine such a thing. Today, in 1934, I believe it might happen. Many good and faithful people, whom I can always trust completely, have since immigrated. But there are also others. I hope

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Mennonite immigrants from the Soviet Union arriving in Rosthern, Saskatchewan.

Then, in June 1923, we heard indirectly from Jacob Niebuhr in New York that the first group was almost ready to go. P. H. Unruh, from Goessel, Kansas, who had been granted wide-ranging authority by the Russian Mennonites, got the same message from B. B. Janz. We did not hear anything. We knew nothing. At the beginning of July 1923, we were at our conference in Langham when I received a telegram forwarded to me from Colonel Dennis, indicating that 750 people had left from Chortitza. In Langham we had already discussed the immigration question. H. H. Ewert, C. E. Krehbiel, J. J. Balzer and P. A. Penner were all there. There was so much to discuss, after all that had happened, so very much. Brother Krehbiel had in the various churches described the situation in Russia and our relief efforts in such an emotionless tone that some of us did not know what to make of the letters we had received, which described the situation as so desperate. Brother Krehbiel was against the immigration and probably wanted to dampen enthusiasm for the project through calm and factual presentation. He probably

that they will stay a minority. We followed the progress of the train with great interest, and as closely as possible. We got news from Moscow and then from the Latvian border. A full 25 percent of the passengers were rejected, mostly due to trachoma. They were not allowed back into Russia, and also could not continue on to Canada. We were very depressed. I wrote a very sharp letter to Ottawa. We had been told that passengers would be subjected to an easy inspection, and now it seemed as though it was as strict as it possibly could be. Mr. Blair, usually a very kind man, a good friend, and a true Christian, told me when he visited me: "You would have more luck ramming your head through this stone wall than trying to get those trachoma patients into Canada." Apparently, they were more afraid of trachoma than of smallpox. There was no negotiation, only healing would do. Even trachoma scarring would not be allowed. There was an overabundance of caution and fear. The German doctors were immoveable in their opinion. This created a lot of work, worry, and additional cost for us. Among the passengers, there was disappointment and the

pain of parting yet again. In Germany, they were very warmly received by the officials. Gerhard Ens and P. P. Epp were delegated to greet the first group. They drove to Montreal, then on to Quebec, where they met the first boatload, who had come over on the *Empress of France*. At this point, many of our opponents started getting nervous.

They tried to influence people to refuse to take in the immigrants, saying, "If you take them in, you will be held responsible for the contract." There were only a few who sank low enough to do such an awful thing, but there were some and they found an audience. Most people were fortunately open to our reassurance, and a great many were persuaded to practice hospitality.

We invited a number of leading figures and explained the situation to them. It was clear to us that we would have to accommodate the large group, and we were happy to do that to show that we would not shirk any work or responsibility. It was thought that the immigrants capable of working would help with the harvest for a regular wage, and pay as much as possible on the travel debt (*Reiseschuld*). We would supply them with clothing, and food and lodging would be covered by their hosts. In many cases, this is what happened, but in some cases, things did not go so well. The fault lay sometimes on one side and sometimes the other.

The above plan was communicated to all and after that the brethren sought lodging in their respective communities. Some communities were avoided, partly because we were afraid of their negative influence, partly because there was no willingness to take anyone. I then turned to various places in the United States for used clothing. Gerhard Ens did the same in Church of New Jerusalem (Swedenborgian) circles. Then we tried to plan how the reception would happen.

It was on July 19 that we received a telegram from Gerhard Ens from Ignace, the central station between Fort William and Kenora, that the immigrants were en route. I do not know why he did not telegraph us earlier. According to our calculations, they would be arriving at about noon on July 21. We telephoned all the hosts and continued to wait, during which time we tried to work through all the details.

Then another telegram arrived from the CPR, asking us if we could pick the immigrants up in Saskatoon. We saw the great difficulty that would pose. The roads were not good, and willing participants would have to travel fifty to sixty miles to get there. It would also cause a stir among the English people. Then we got word that the train would come to Rosthern. Likely the CPR and CNR couldn't agree on the terms whereby a CPR train would use CNR tracks in Rosthern.

July 21 came and we were already waiting for the train at noon. We had only vague information about where exactly they were. I don't remember when we got the news that the train had arrived in Saskatoon. The cars gathered from far and wide in Rosthern. We had never seen so many people or cars in Rosthern as on July 21, 1923. We all waited anxiously to see when and how this great event in Mennonite history would play out. Flags were flying on many businesses. At about five o'clock in the afternoon the long train with ten passenger cars and three baggage cars arrived at the station. There is a big square north of the station and east of the tracks. The train went there and 608 immigrants stepped out and congregated on the square together with their hosts and many locals. A choir of immigrants sang the beautiful song "Gott gruesse dich! Kein andrer Gruss gleicht dem an Innigkeit" (May God greet you! No other greeting is so warm), etc. Then I announced the chorale "Lobe den Herren, den maechtigen Koenig der Ehren" (Praise the Lord, the mighty king of honour). Looking at this crowd, I found the verse "In wieviel Not hat nicht der gnädige Gott über dir Flügel gebreitet" (In what time of need has our merciful God not spread his sheltering wings over you) of particular significance. We were all deeply moved at the sight of those who had suffered starvation and persecution. Once wealthy, they had arrived without means. The task now was to make a fresh start under completely new circumstances.

The impression of the crowd was that they were poor and destitute. The mere sight of them brought many to tears. A returned soldier, an Englishman, confessed he could not hold back his tears. They sat on their bundles and suitcases and awaited their fate. The locals went through the rows and picked out suitable families, which were then registered, together with their host families. There were six orphans from one family who thought they might be split apart. I said that they must not be separated. Whoever wanted them would have to take all six of them, at least temporarily. They were all taken in by Jacob A. L. Friesen in Tiefengrund. These orphans were talented children who could sing beautifully and had a good upbringing. The Friesens loved those children and treated them well. I do not know what happened to all of them. Several are married. Two passed their teaching exams and work as teachers. Not long ago, they sent me their regards. Now, in 1934, they are all grown up and self-sufficient, even though it has often been hard for them in these difficult times.

The Nikolai Dyck family was the last to be chosen. The family was too big for everyone. They had eight or nine children. Then Peter Thiessen of the Zoar church in Langham arrived and took them with him. Brother Thiessen was not small-minded or cheap; he was a man of principle. A few days later, A. A. Dyck, brother of Nikolai Dyck, from Didsbury, Alberta, picked up his brother and family.

Ingrid Moehlmann is a great-granddaughter of Bishop David Toews. She is a leader and key organizer of the Memories of Migration: Russlaender 100 tour. Lothar Moehlmann, Ingrid's husband, is a professional tour manager and specializes in leading tours involving musical and sports groups in western Europe. Ingrid and Lothar live in Winnipeg.

1 In 1973, the fifty-year anniversary of the beginning of the Russlaender migration, the Winnipeg-based *Mennonite Mirror* published significant excerpts of David Toews's memoir of his Russian immigration work, written in 1934. It was serialized over over seven issues (Feb., Mar., Apr., May, Oct., Nov., Dec.). This is a translation of that German text.

2 The *Waisenamt* was a church institution developed in Russia to administer the estates of orphans, widows, and widowers. It also accepted deposits, serving the function of a small savings bank or credit union.

Getting the Right Papers

The Russlaender Migrants

Hans Werner

To migrate from one country to another legally often depends on filling out applications and getting the right paperwork. Countries pass laws and have policies that restrict who may visit or settle permanently, and in some cases who may leave and for what purpose. There was a remarkably short period of time in the 1920s when the door opened for Mennonites to leave what had become the Soviet Union and immigrate to Canada. The opening would not last. For Mennonites attempting to leave the Soviet Union legally, the door was shut by 1930. During the seven or so years that the doors were somewhat open, migrating to Canada would still require moving political roadblocks and navigating bureaucracies to get the right paperwork completed in the Soviet Union and in Canada.

The first wave of Mennonite immigration to Canada from imperial Russia occurred in the 1870s, when more conservatively oriented Mennonites immigrated to Canada after the tsar's reforms threatened their military exemption. These early migrants to the Prairies were pacifist and isolationist. They preferred concentrating on converting the prairie of Manitoba's Red River Valley to agriculture rather than participating in the Canadian nation and society. In the years before the First World War they also moved to Saskatchewan, establishing block settlements in the Swift Current and Saskatoon areas. During the war their propensity to remain German-speaking and separate, in addition to their resistance to compulsory school attendance and public schools, conflicted with the swell of nativism that gripped the country's Anglo-Saxon population. In the 1920s approximately a third of them would migrate to the Bustillos Valley in northern Mexico, where they negotiated privileges with the Mexican government that they believed would allow them to preserve their religious particularism and educational preference.[1]

At the same time as these Mennonites were leaving Canada, those who had stayed behind in imperial Russia experienced the waves of trauma brought on by revolution, civil war, and famine. They were desperate to leave the Soviet Union, and Canada emerged as the preferred destination. Mennonites were, however, no longer permitted to enter the country. The problems with conservative Mennonites during the war and British nativism contributed to amendments to the Immigration Act in 1919 that allowed the government to refuse entry to persons "deemed undesirable owing to their peculiar customs, habits, modes of life and methods of holding property, and because of their probable inability to become readily assimilated or to assume the duties and responsibilities of Canadian citizenship within a reasonable time."[2] The government issued orders that applied this provision specifically to Mennonites, Hutterites, and Doukhobors.[3]

As the devastation suffered by their coreligionists in the Soviet Union during the Russian Revolution and its aftermath became apparent, Mennonites remaining in Canada exerted pressure on the federal government to rescind the 1919 orders. A delegation of Mennonites approached the government in July 1921, and while in Ottawa they also met with Mackenzie King, the leader of the opposition, who committed himself to rescinding the order if the Liberals should win the upcoming election. King's Liberals were victorious at the polls later that year, and in March 1922 the Mennonite delegation met with the new acting minister of immigration and colonization, Charles Stewart, to press their case. In their petitions to the government, Mennonites took pains to point out their desirable traits and stressed the differences between the prospective new Mennonite immigrants and their more conservative counterparts who were then threatening to emigrate in large numbers. They also tried to address the problem of the "peculiar . . . methods of holding property" mentioned in the 1919 orders by distancing themselves from the "communistic people called the Hutterites." They tried to allay fears that Mennonites would not assimilate easily by assuring the government that learning English would be a priority for these immigrants and that they would have "close contact with the culture, the fate, and the history of the country."[4] The new government followed through on King's promise by repealing the restriction on Mennonite and Hutterite immigration on June 2, 1922, clearing the way for the immigration of Mennonites from the Soviet Union. In a letter to the government, the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization (CMBoC) committed

Mennonites to a guarantee that none of the immigrants "at any time would become a burden or inconvenience to the Canadian Government or any Provincial or Municipal Government."[5] The successful negotiations with the government and an agreement with the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) for the transport of the immigrants opened the door for Mennonites seeking to leave the Soviet Union.

In the Soviet Union, the Mennonite colonies that had come to thrive in the nineteenth century had been devastated by war, revolution, and anarchy. The new Bolshevik regime was not amenable to their religious sensibilities and their previous economic success made them suspected counterrevolutionaries. For a brief period, the combination of a measure of Ukrainian autonomy and the desire to allow the emigration of a group that did not fit the Soviet vision for society helped to open the exit door. The opening of the doors in both countries made possible the emigration of some twenty thousand Mennonite refugees from the Soviet Union between 1923 and 1930.[6]

THE PASSPORT PROBLEM

Even though the ban on Mennonite immigration to Canada was lifted and leaving the Soviet Union was possible, there would be many hurdles that would have to be overcome when it came to securing the necessary paperwork. The signing of the peace that ended the First World War also signalled an era of stringent admission requirements for potential immigrants to Western countries. Among the myriad of admission requirements, the passport became a necessity. The League of Nations, formed after the end of the war, held several conferences devoted to standardizing the passport system that we have come to know.[7] Canada began to require a valid passport to immigrate in 1919, and during the 1920s a valid passport gradually became essential: you simply could not cross an international border without one.

For Mennonites seeking to leave the former Russian Empire, passports were a problem. The modern definition of a refugee, someone who is outside their country of nationality and unable or unwilling to avail themself of their homeland's protection and hence stateless, was in its infancy.[8] While the League of Nations and its Commission on Refugees developed the "Nansen Passport" for the refugees of the Russian Revolution and subsequent civil war,[9] Mennonites desperate to leave their homes in the former Russian Empire did not qualify as refugees as they had not crossed an international border. In addition, the status of their required documentation was in question.

By 1922, the new Bolshevik regime had gained control of all areas where Mennonites lived. The regime had essentially eliminated the former systems of documentation, and to complicate matters, the new communist state was not recognized by other countries. However, when the emigration was set to begin, Soviet Ukraine, one of the founding republics of the Soviet Union, had some autonomy in granting permission to leave the country. An emigrant ready to leave in 1922 who was over the age of sixteen was required to have exit permit from Ukrainian authorities in Kharkov (Kharkiv) and a certificate from the Union of Citizens of Dutch Lineage (Verband der Buerger hollaendischer Herkunft [VBHH]) in order to emigrate.[10] This document usually also provided a guarantee they would repay their travel debts. Throughout the summer of 1922, exit permits were readily obtained from the Ukrainian authorities on the basis of lists of names presented to officials, and by August 14, lists totaling 17,121 persons had been submitted.[11]

However, by the time the first group left the Soviet Union the requirements had changed, as they often would over the next seven years. In 1923, when the point of departure moved from Ukrainian Odessa (Odesa) to the "Red Gate" at the Latvian border, Mennonites faced the additional requirement of receiving permission from the Moscow-based secret police (the GPU). Under these new circumstances, the VBHH had to prepare a special certificate for every family and submit these names to the Moscow GPU for an exit visa.[12] Also, by the end of 1923, group emigration by lists was prohibited. Although the emigration in 1924 of two groups previously sanctioned was authorized, from this point exit permits could only be obtained on an individual basis.[13] Emigrants still required a certificate declaring they were bona fide Mennonites, which the VBHH continued to provide.[14] After 1924, when the possibility of travelling without using CPR credit emerged, immigrants still needed the certificate from the VBHH and an exit permit. They also generally had individual passports.[15]

Canadian immigration regulations enacted in 1921 required the submission of a valid passport for all countries of origin other than Britain and the United States.[16] Canada had vigorously rejected the Nansen passport because it did not provide for returning immigrants to their countries of origin.[17] In the negotiations to allow entry for Russlaender immigrants in 1922, F. C. Blair, the secretary of the Department of Immigration and Colonization, assured David Toews by letter that if there were a "slight passport difficulty owing to the unsettled conditions in Russia and Ukraine," the department did not wish "to place any technical difficulty in the way of the movement."[18] Russlaender Mennonites were exempted from having passports, but the myriad of immigration officials that processed them were not always aware of the exemption. When a group of immigrants were being refused visas by Canadian authorities in November 1923, a flurry of telegrams once again confirmed that passports were not required of them. It appears the Canada Colonization Association's T. O. F. Herzer was instrumental in gaining an exception to these regulations from the Canadian government. Herzer pressed the deputy minister of immigration, William Egan, who agreed that visas would be granted, provided the CMBoC 's European representatives, B. H. Unruh and B. B. Janz, recommended the prospective immigrants.[19]

THE MEDICAL EXAMINATION

Although the passport issue was challenging and kept changing in the Soviet Union, it paled in comparison to the problem of meeting Canadian medical requirements. The Canadian government proved to be inflexible in enforcing its strict medical and

MAID: MHA 665-117.0

Mennonites waiting for medical clearance in a temporary camp in Lechfeld, Germany, in 1923.

psychological requirements, causing untold stress and grief for the CMBoC and Russlaender families. The revised Immigration Act had expanded the list of prohibited immigrants to include those with tuberculosis, psychopathic inferiority, and persons who "upon examination by a medical officer are certified as being mentally or physically defective to such a degree as to affect their ability to earn a living."[20]

The first problem for the leaders of the emigration was to work out who would carry out medical inspections, and where. On November 26, 1922, a despondent B. B. Janz reported to B. H. Unruh in Germany and A. A. Friesen in Rosthern, Saskatchewan, that the Canadian government would not accept medical examinations conducted by Soviet doctors and the Soviet government would not allow Canadian doctors and immigration officials into the country. "We're caught in a jam," he remarked.[21] The Soviet authorities had refused to grant medical personnel visas in retaliation for the Canadian government's refusal to allow entry of a Soviet trade mission. The Soviet government also stipulated that those leaving the country could not return. With no solution for those who might fail a Canadian medical examination in Latvia and hence could neither go to Canada nor return to the Soviet Union, the prospects for emigration in 1922 ended. Eventually an arrangement was worked out whereby Germany would temporarily accept those unable to obtain medical clearance at Lechfeld, a former military drill ground in Bavaria. The most prevalent medical cause for rejection was the eye disease trachoma, and the plan was to treat cases at Lechfeld and to send them on their way to Canada once they had been healed. A second camp at Atlantic Park in England was operated by the CPR and other passenger ship companies.

The medical examinations were much more rigorous than anticipated by leaders in Ukraine or the CMBoC in Canada. In F. C. Blair's 1922 letter to the CMBoC outlining the requirements for entry, the medical examination requirement had seemed sufficiently innocuous. The official promised cooperation, allowed for entry without a passport, and suggested that "immigration regulations will be made as simple as possible for settlers of the agricultural class who are mentally and physically fit."[22] The CMBoC seemingly focused on the promise of a simple process

СОЮЗ
Голландских Выходцев
на Украине
Николайпольский Район
Марта 17 дня 1923
№ 69/29

УДОСТОВЕРЕНИЕ.

Настоящее удостоверение выдано пред'явителю сего в том, что он меннонит, член союза Голл. выходцев и на основании разрешения Наркоминдела У.С.С.Р. от 24 апреля 1922 г. эмигрирует в Канаду.

Гражд.

Местожит.

Находятся при нем:

Председатель Николайпольского района
Союза Голл. выходцев
Секретарь

MHA, Ernest J. Klassen fonds, Acc. 2023-012

An exit permit issued by the Ukrainian Republic in 1923 that provided the crucial permission to leave the Soviet Union.

and underestimated how extensive the medical examinations would be. In a 1924 letter to the Canadian minister of immigration, B. B. Janz asked the government to conduct its "severe" medical inspections before they left and to provide prospective emigrants with results that would be "final and decisive" so that they could sell their possessions and not fear rejection while in transit. He begged the minister for "leniency in the [medical] examinations."[23] While inspections ultimately took place in the Soviet Union, the Canadian government would not grant the persistent requests of Janz and David Toews for leniency. In individual cases the immigration department relented on the regulations only when age was a factor, but as the acting deputy minister pointed out in a letter making such an exception, "when negotiations took place for the admission of the Mennonites it was not anticipated that the Permit would include any number of persons who in the ordinary way might be included on the grounds of age, physique, or occupation."[24]

THE DOOR CLOSES

By the fall of 1925 there were increasingly negative portrayals of the VBHH in the Soviet press. While the government did not directly refuse further exit permits, there were longer and longer delays in obtaining the critical document.[25] In late fall 1925 and early 1926, the VBHH was reorganized by the Ukrainian authorities and ultimately forbidden to act in legal and emigration matters. In March 1926, B. B. Janz resigned his position as chair, and in June he left the country. After the 1926 emigrants

MAID: MHA, 714-1-32-1

Пролетарі всіх країн, єднайтеся!

Proletaires de tous les pays, unissez-vous!

СОЮЗ СОЦІЯЛІСТИЧНИХ РАДЯНСЬКИХ РЕСПУБЛІК
Союз Социалистических Советских Республик

Union des Républiques Socialistes des Soviets

Українська Соціялістична Радянська Республіка
Украинская Социалистическая Советская Республика

République Socialiste des Soviets d'Ukraine

Закордонний Пашпорт
Заграничный Паспорт

Passeport pour l'étranger

Пред'явник цього громадян..... Української
Пред'явитель сего граждан Украинской
Соціялістичної Радянської Республіки..........
Социалистической Советской Республики
Деркsен Екатерина Юлиусовна
....
відправляється до Канада, гор. Росштерн
отправляется в
в посвідчення чого і для вільного переїзду
в удостоверение чего и для свободного проезда
видано цей пашпорт з прикладенням печатки
дан сей паспорт с приложением печати
Народнього Комісаріяту Внутрішніх Справ.
Народного Комиссариата по Внутренним делам.
Цей пашпорт є дійсний на 1 (один) год
Настоящий паспорт действителен на
до 7 Марта 1926 р.
по 192 г.
Видано 7 Марта 1925 р. в м. Бахмут
Выдан 192 г. в гор.

Відомости про пред'явника
Сведения о пред'явителе.
Час і місце народження 1907 г. к. Марьевка Донецк.
Время и место рождения
Родинний стан Девица
Семейное положение

Прикмети
Приметы.

Зріст 158 сантим. | Волосся темно-русые
Рост | Волосы
Очі темно-карие | Особливі прикмети.....
Глаза | Особые приметы
Ніс прямой | Нет
Нос

З уповноваження Народнього
Комісаріяту внутрішніх справ

Завідуючий Закордонним Відділенням
Губерніяльного Відділу Управління

Цей пашпорт є дійсний для переїзду
Настоящий паспорт действителен для проезда
державного кордону до 1 Апреля 1925 р.
государственной границы до 192 р.
через Контрольно-Кордонний Пункт
через Контрольно-пограничный пункт.

L..... porteu..... du présent, citoyen .....
de la République Socialiste des Soviets d'Ukraine
Derksen Katerine
....
Se rend Kanada, la ville Rosthern
en foi de quoi et pour le libre passage le présent passeport est délivré avec apposition du sceau du Commissariat du Peuple aux Affaires Intérieures.
Le présent passeport est valable pour 1 (une) an jusqu'au 7 Mars 1926
et délivré 7 Mars 1925
à la ville Bakhmout

Signalement du porteur

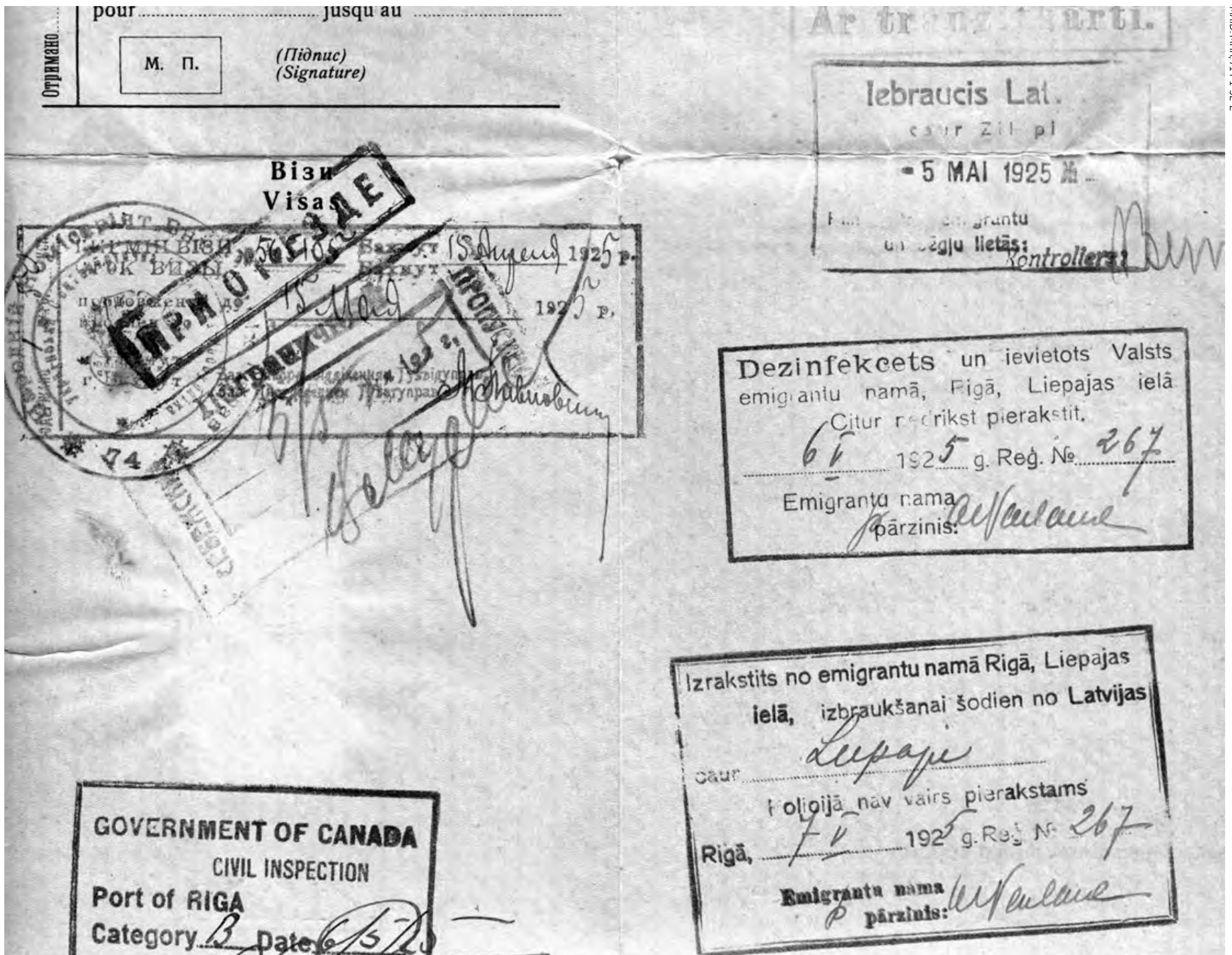
Lieu et date de naissance 1907 village Marienka
Etat de famille demoiselle

Signes

Taille 158 centimètres
Yeux noir brun
Nez droit
Cheveux noir rousse
Signes particuliers Non

Підпис власника
Подпись владельца

№ ПАС. 15319



MAID: MHA, 714-1-32-2

Above: Passport stamps received by Katharina Derksen (Penner) along her immigration journey. Left: First page of Katharina's passport, issued in 1925.

had left, the bureaucratic processes became insurmountable, with most applications refused outright.[26]

In Canada the door also began to close. The tide of public opinion was increasingly resentful of immigration, particularly of arrivals from countries other than Britain or the United States. In the fall of 1927, the government began to withdraw the privilege Mennonites had been given of entering the country without a valid passport. An October 1927 letter from the Department of Immigration and Colonization to David Toews, who had written requesting entry for Russlaender emigrants who had gone to Mexico, noted that the department was now enforcing the passport requirement but in some cases was still granting exceptions for Mennonites. A. L. Jolliffe, the commissioner for immigration, begged Toews to keep "requests for the waiving of the passport regulation . . . to the absolute minimum."[27] Even the waiver in individual cases would not last. In an August 28, 1928, response to a letter from David Toews about specific immigrants, the deputy minister formally gave notice that future Mennonite immigrants would need a passport. He noted that he had consulted with the minister and had been "directed to inform you that the Department cannot disregard the same" for the CMBoC.[28]

The relatively orderly exit of Russlaender from the Soviet Union that began in 1923 slowed to a trickle by the end of 1926, and with the increasing difficulties in obtaining exit permits and passports the migration appeared to be over. The collectivization of Soviet agriculture was particularly discouraging for Mennonites in Siberia. For a variety of reasons few Mennonites had come to Canada from Siberia in the early 1920s, and now they wanted out. In the fall of 1929, thousands of Mennonites, primarily from Siberia, sold as many of their assets as possible and congregated in Moscow with the hope of leaving the Soviet Union. The rush to Moscow was triggered by the Presidium of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee, which granted exit permits to twenty-five families in August 1929.[29] The news of the possibility of emigration stimulated a rush of destitute farmers, who congregated at the "gates of Moscow," triggering an international diplomatic incident. In Canada, Mennonites immediately sought to have the country again open its door to more Mennonites. In Germany, B. H. Unruh and the Brueder

in Not organization aroused sympathy for the plight of those in Moscow, but the German government would not allow them into the country permanently. The Soviet Union was caught not wanting to acknowledge that some of its citizens were desperate to leave, while not wanting to harm its relations with Germany by returning German-speaking Mennonites to their homes by force.

In Canada, the Mackenzie King government had become cautious due to negative publicity and deferred to the provinces in its decision about admitting more Mennonites. The Saskatchewan government and its premier, J. T. M. Anderson, were most adamant against reopening the door. Even with persistent requests from the federal minister of immigration, Saskatchewan would only agree to limited admissions for family reunification. After more than a week of appeals, the premier informed the federal minister that his government refused to sanction any immigration movement "other than relatives referred to." On November 26, 1929, Minister of Immigration Robert Forke informed the German government that Canada would not accept any Russlaender immigrants. By that time some five thousand emigrants had made it out of the Soviet Union and were temporarily in refugee camps in Germany, while some eight thousand were on their way back to Siberia. Despite the almost closed door, just over one thousand would eventually be admitted to Canada under various arrangements with the railways, cases of family reunification, and special guarantees. The rest would establish the Fernheim Colony in Paraguay and settlements in Brazil.[30]

In 1930, a year after Soviet authorities began sending Mennonites back to their homes and while those who had managed to get to Germany were on their way to new homes in Paraguay and Brazil, the CMBoC was still trying to gain admission of Mennonites to Canada. F. C. Blair's correspondence with David Toews offered no hope that any accommodation would be forthcoming. While he assured Toews that he sympathized "very greatly with the troubles of your people in Russia," he nevertheless suggested they go to South America.[31]

By 1929 the political and economic landscape had changed in Canada, prompting the closing of its door. In Saskatchewan, the avowedly anti-immigration J. T. M. Anderson and his Conservative party came to power in September. Mackenzie King's Liberals lost the July 1930 federal election, and in March 1931 the Conservative government of Prime Minister R. B. Bennett closed the door to immigration almost completely.[32] By then the country was in the throes of the Depression, and provincial and municipal governments saddled with responsibility for relief were urging deportations. Canada did not begin to re-open its door until 1947.

Decisions made by governments to allow people to migrate ultimately must be translated into policies about how an individual gets the necessary paperwork to buy a ticket, passes a medical examination, and obtains the stamp from an immigration officer that means they can go on to the next step. The successful emigration of Russlaender Mennonites required an almost impossible level of persistence by people like B. B. Janz and David Toews to navigate the political and bureaucratic structures that ultimately made it possible for twenty thousand Russlaender to come to Canada before the door closed.

Hans Werner is an associate of the Centre for Transnational Mennonite Studies and a senior scholar at the University of Winnipeg. He is the author of several books, including *The Constructed Mennonite* (2013).

1 The most complete study of this conflict between Mennonites and the state is: Adolf Ens, *Subjects or Citizens?: The Mennonite Experience in Canada* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1994).

2 An Act to Amend the Immigration Act, S.C. 1919, c. 25, s. 13.

3 Orders-in-Council P.C. 1919-923 (May 1, 1919) and P.C. 1919-1204 (June 9, 1919). The latter was published in *Canada Gazette*, June 14, 1919, 3824.

4 Peter H. Rempel, "Inter-Mennonite Cooperation and Promises to Government in the Repeal of the Ban on Mennonite Immigration to Canada, 1919–1922," *Mennonite Historian* 19, no. 1 (Mar. 1993): 7.

5 "Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization to The Minister of Immigration, July 6, 1922," Mennonite Heritage Archives, Winnipeg, Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization Collection (hereafter CMBC), vol. 1269, file 602.

6 Frank H. Epp, *Mennonite Exodus: The Rescue and Resettlement of the Russian Mennonites Since the Communist Revolution* (Altona, MB: D. W. Friesen, 1962), 282.

7 Daniel C. Turack, "Freedom of Movement and the International Regime of Passports," *Osgoode Hall Law Journal* 6, no. 2 (1968): 230–251.

8 "1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees," art. I, in "Convention and Protocol Relating to Refugees," UNHCR, 14, https://www.unhcr.org/3b66c2aa10.

9 Barbara Metzger, "The League of Nations, Refugees and Individual Rights," in *Refugees in Europe, 1919–1959: A Forty Years' Crisis?*, ed. Matthew Frank and Jessica Reinisch (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2007), https://www.bloomsburycollections.com/book/refugees-in-europe-1919-1959-a-forty-years-crisis/ch7-league-of-nations-refugees-and-individual-rights.

10 John B. Toews, *Lost Fatherland: The Story of the Mennonite Emigration from Soviet Russia, 1921–1927* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1967), 104. See also B. B. Janz to the District Administration of Khortitza, Nov. 7, 1922, and B. B. Janz to the Study Commission, Apr. 17, 1922, A. A. Friesen Collection, as translated and transcribed in *Union of Citizens of Dutch Lineage in Ukraine (1922–1927): Mennonite and Soviet Documents*, ed. John B. Toews and Paul Toews (Fresno, CA: Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, 2011), 410, 433.

11 Toews, *Lost Fatherland*, 97.

12 Toews, *Lost Fatherland*, 132.

13 Toews, *Lost Fatherland*, 148, 162–170.

14 After the VBHH was dissolved in 1926, a similar certificate could be issued by A. R. Owen, a CPR official, or even by Dr. Drury, a Canadian doctor conducting medical examinations. See Toews, *Lost Fatherland*, 193.

15 Toews, *Lost Fatherland*, 147–148.

16 Isabel Kaprielian-Churchill, "Rejecting 'Misfits': Canada and the Nansen Passport," *The International Migration Review* 28, no. 2 (1994): 283.

17 Kaprielian-Churchill, "Rejecting 'Misfits,'" 285.

18 F. C. Blair to David Toews, Sept. 22, 1922, CMBC, vol. 1269, file 601.

19 See the exchange of correspondence between David Toews and T. O. F. Herzer and copies of Herzer's correspondence with Col. Dennis of the CPR, CMBC, vol. 1170, file 47.

20 Act to Amend the Immigration Act, 1919, s. 3.

21 B. B. Janz to Mennonite Representatives of the Russian Mennonite Churches Abroad, Nov. 26, 1922, in Toews and Toews, *Union of Citizens*, 437.

22 F. C. Blair to David Toews, Sept. 22, 1922, CMBC, vol. 1269, file 601.

23 B. B. Janz to the Honourable Minister of Immigration, Ottawa, Canada, Mar. 26, 1924, A. A. Friesen Collection, Toews, *Union of Citizens*, 471.

24 F. C. Blair to David Toews, Nov. 5, 1924, CMBC, vol. 1269, file 603.

25 Toews, *Lost Fatherland*, 184–186.

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27 A. L. Jolliffe to David Toews, Oct. 5, 1927, vol. 1270, file 605.

28 Willam F. Egan to David Toews, Aug. 28, 1928, CMBC, vol. 1270, file 605.

29 Andrey I. Savin, "The 1929 Emigration of Mennonites from the USSR: An Examination of Documents from the Archive of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 30 (2012): 45–55.

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32 Order-in-Council P.C. 1931-695 (Mar. 21, 1931), https://pier21.ca/research/immigration-history/order-in-council-pc-1931-695-1931.

An Idealist in Soviet Times

Johannes G. Thielmann

Alfred H. Redekopp

Johannes Thielmann (1903–1957), loving and devoted son, and proud supporter and admirer of Vladimir Lenin, was my mother's brother. There are two contrasting newspaper clippings about him – one published in North America at the time of his death, written by his mother, the other from Soviet Russia, written a year earlier by Johannes himself, self-identified as Ivan Tilman. His mother wrote:

> With a heavy heart, I am sharing with all my dear friends and acquaintances, that on October 9 of this year, I received the sad news from Russia that my dear son, Johannes Gerhard Thielmann, died on March 10 of this year. Where or how? We do not know the answer. Oh, how long we waited to hear from him and his family. Almost tweny years have passed since we received his last letter. He was born on March 16, 1903. His dear wife Anna and sons Gerhard and Hermann live in Russia. [Signed:] In deepest sorrow, Mother, Mrs. G. J. Thielmann and children, R.R. 2, Line 1, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario. P.S. The photo was taken in 1928. On the backside he wrote to his mother: "This past week I did not go to bed, before I turned my thoughts to you, and voiced a prayer for you. Your first-born son."[1]

In 1956, Johannes wrote and submitted for publication the following, entitled "Near and Dear":

> From 1923 to 1925 I studied at the first military academy established by the All-Russian Central Executive Committee (VTsIK). The school was located in the Kremlin in Moscow. V. I. Lenin was named our honorary cadet.
>
> For our practicum, cadets were assigned to guard the government buildings. We all dreamed of guarding No. 17, the office of the Chairman of the Council of the People's Commissars. Many students who guarded this post witnessed Vladimir Ilyich working hard all day, and going home after midnight. (He only had to go across the corridor on the ground floor.) He would go so quietly, as not to disturb the domestic staff – into the kitchen for a cup of tea or a little modest supper. Several times I met Ilyich as we cadets went from our barracks to classes. I saw him once during a morning walk, in a wheelchair accompanied by N. K. Krupskaya, the doctor in charge.
>
> By March 9, 1923, the health of Ilyich had declined so much that he was moved to the small town of Gorki, close to Moscow, under strict medical orders. By July he had become a little better, and could get up and walk a little.
>
> I saw Vladimir Ilyich for the last time on October 19, 1923. Fellow cadet Peter and I were on duty at the inner gate, the Spasskaya Tower of the Kremlin, that night. The signal came from the outer gates facing Red Square that a car had just entered the tunnel. We were ready to check their passes again. The car stopped and driver Gil presented his pass. A thought came to me that perhaps Ilyich was riding in this car. I went to the other side of the car, and indeed it was our dear Ilyich, presenting his pass. Later that evening when we were back in our living quarters, we heard from our friends who had been posted on other watches that Ilyich, with his driver Gil assisting him hand in hand, had eventually gotten up to the second floor, entered his office, and looked around the conference hall. Then he had been taken back to Gorki. There he spent the last months of his life.
>
> V. I. Lenin was near and dear to all Soviet people. His memory will always live in the hearts of the workers.
>
> – I. Tilman.[2]

The family in North America and the family in the Soviet Union emphasized different parts of the life of Uncle Hans. To my grandmother, he was the loving, devoted, and ever-caring son that she "lost" when he was unable to join the family in Canada. To my mother, he was the older brother. "He wasn't a communist," she once said to me. To his brother, later a political

science professor at Georgia State University, he was the sibling, only a year older, with whom he had quarrelled as a child, and debated intellectually various aspects of communism and capitalism. To his sons, he was the father they had hardly known, because he was a political prisoner and enemy of the state for the first twenty years of their lives. His grandsons, born in the 1960s, after his death, learned he had been in a high-ranking position in the Red Army, was arrested in 1938 during a period of mass repression, sentenced and imprisoned in the Komi Republic, and released in 1953 after Stalin died, and was one of the first to be declared rehabilitated in 1956 after the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party, which condemned Stalin's political repression. Much of what I know about my uncle Johannes today is based on a review of the letters that he wrote from 1922 to 1938, and subsequent communication with his wife, sons, and grandsons after 1957.[3]

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THE EARLY YEARS: BEFORE 1924

Johannes – or Hans, as he was often called – was born in Rosenort, Molotschna, in 1903 where his father, Gerhard J. Thielmann, was a village teacher. His brother Gerhard (later called George) was born in 1904, also in Rosenort. A sister Kaethchen died at age two, and a brother Jacob (1909–1921) died at age twelve. His sister Elly, my mother, was born in 1912 in Neu-Halbstadt. In his earliest years the family moved frequently, as his father taught in Friedensdorf and then Gnadenfeld before moving to Lichtenau to join the family farm implement import firm, Hamm and Huebert. The family then moved to Halbstadt, where the firm relocated its head office around 1910. The firm went out of business during the First World War, because it depended on imports from Germany. As a result, the family moved to the village of Muensterberg in 1918, where his mother's family lived. Hans was fifteen and his brother Gerhard was fourteen, brother Jacob, nine, and sister Elly, six. His maternal grandfather was Johann N. Huebert (1848–1934), a mill owner in Muensterberg who had a number of children: daughters Liese (married to Gerhard Sukkau), Katharina (married to Gerhard Thielmann), Justina, and Anna (neither married), and sons Kornelius, Johann, Jacob, Heinrich, Nicolai, Abram, and Isaac.

The writings and memoirs of Gerhard (George) and Elly about this period say very little about their brother Hans. Elly remembered a few friends she played with in Halbstadt. From Muensterberg she remembered living across the street from her Huebert grandparents until the family immigrated to Canada in July 1924. George recalled witnessing the murder of his mother's cousin Klaas Wittenberg in Altonau on October 30, 1919, by a group of Makhnovites. Nothing is mentioned about the activities of Hans during this period, except that by the time the family decided to immigrate to Canada, he was studying in Moscow and could not leave with them. The understanding was that he would join the family once he had completed his studies and related service assignment. In my grandmother's memoirs she relates how Johannes was a gifted child. At age nine he attended the *Musterschule* (an enriched educational program), where his teacher B. B. Wiens placed him in Grade 3 because he had already learned to read and write at home. At age twelve he entered the Halbstadt secondary school (*Zentralschule*), and he also continued studies at the Halbstadt School of Commerce (*Kommerzschule*). He was offered free passage to study abroad in America, which he turned down upon the advice of his parents.

The question of how Hans ended up studying in Moscow was never asked or answered until recently. Perhaps his parents and brother George knew, but nothing was written down or passed on to the next generation. The descendants who remained in Russia have filled in some of those details. Their story goes something like this: In 1918, at the age of fifteen, Hans participated in the youth organization of the Communist Party and entered the Red Guard as a volunteer and was part of the intelligence squadron responsible for the takeover of the Isthmus of Perekop (the narrow strip of land connecting Crimea and the mainland), which had been strongly fortified by General Wrangel, head of the White Army. For his role in that takeover, he was one of the first to be awarded the Order of the Red Star and was invited to study at the Kremlin's military academy. If my grandmother or mother knew these facts, they were not considered important to write down or pass on.

Johannes "Hans" Thielmann (in uniform) linked arm in arm with his mother. Taken on July 13, 1924, at the Lichtenau train station on the day of his family's departure for Canada.

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The first All-Ukrainian German Youth Workers' Congress held in Kharkov, April 27, 1926. Hans Thielmann is in the back row, sixth from the left.

Hans most likely arrived in Moscow sometime in late November 1922. In a letter dated December 1, addressed to his ten-year-old sister (my mother), he wrote: "My trunk and all my things arrived safe and intact . . . I am enjoying Moscow . . . it is a very, very large city." His letters written in 1922 and 1923 from Moscow to his family in Muensterberg gush with love and affection for his little sister and gratefulness to his parents. "Warm regards and best wishes for your birthday with 1000 kisses!!!" he wrote to his sister. "Thank you for all your love and sacrifices," he wrote to his parents, and signed off, "Love and kisses, your Hans. Good night, also, to Elly and Gerhard."[4]

CHANGING IDENTITIES: 1924–1929

Johannes remained a loving, caring son and brother, albeit at a distance. After July 1924 his immediate family was in Canada, and he was alone in the Soviet Union. Soon after the departure of his parents, his life was turned upside down, with arrests, educational and vocational uncertainty, and political and economic changes, followed by a number of failed attempts to emigrate. Numerous identities appear in the letters he sent to his family in the years immediately after their departure: he was a prisoner, a convict, a reporter, a farmer, a "former Bolshevik," and a Mennonite.

Johannes (Hans) took leave from Moscow to bid his parents and siblings farewell as they departed for Canada. He remained in military uniform and reported at every train station along the way from Lichentau, Molotschna, where they left on July 13, to Sebezh, where he said his final goodbyes on July 20. He travelled with teacher J. J. Thiessen (1893–1977), who been asked by B. B. Janz to serve as the echelon leader, and who would accompany several emigrant groups that summer to the border. Hans wanted to return to Muensterberg to his Huebert grandparents, but the train needed to go through Moscow, which suited him, because he also wanted to meet the next emigrating group. Barely back in Moscow, after travelling Monday and Tuesday, July 21 and 22, he experienced trouble. One of his classmates from the military academy reported to the authorities that he had witnessed Hans buying a ticket for Riga at the train station on Wednesday afternoon. On Thursday, July 24, Hans was arrested and questioned by the GPU (secret police), who didn't believe his explanation that the Franz Isaaks (with whom he was staying temporarily) had asked him to buy train tickets for the Tjarht sisters who were travelling to Riga. From Thursday to Sunday he was detained and questioned by various departments and agencies. Finally becoming ill from all the stress, he was released on the condition that he report to court in Saratov when called.

When Hans reported this in a letter to his parents, dated August 8, written from Saratov, he included a few more details

about those few days in Moscow. F. C. Thiessen from Ufa, married to his father's cousin, was in the city at that time. The third echelon of emigrants, among whom he knew a few people, was there as well. J. H. Janzen from Tiege was also there, for church and religious affairs, and he and Hans went to the theatre on one of those days. Janzen was also staying at the Franz Isaaks' place. Hans writes that after he was released from questioning, "I sighed a big sigh of relief as I rode the electric street car, and with joy called out 'Thank God' when I arrived at the Isaaks, to which Mr. Janzen added, 'Nice communist!' I have to tell you I have been dismissed from the Party."[5]

Janzen's "Nice communist" remark was probably made in jest, but it contained an element of truth. The reference to dismissal meant that he had been a Communist Party member and was being disciplined for some infraction, at least until it could be cleared up in court. His infraction might have been returning late to the academy from his leave to bid his parents farewell – late because of his arrest and the interrogation. Nevertheless, it is clear that he was viewed as a communist and this letter provides evidence. I also remember my mother once saying that her brother Hans would attend the Bible studies in Moscow with other Mennonites, but there were people who were always suspicious of his sincerity. She would also say to me, "My brother was no communist." I had not seen these letters from Hans at that time, to be able to present another view.

Before arriving in Saratov on Wednesday, August 6, Hans spent several days in Muensterberg, settling some issues around land redistribution and property. His letter is somewhat opaque, but he knew his father, to whom he was writing, would understand. He wrote:

> On Sunday there was a meeting of the village and the Land Commission, where my land was taken from me. Now I've done my part. Braun and J. Neumann really wanted to lead my case through. I wrote a statement for the Molochansk Land Commission. . . . Was it right for me to do that? Later I went and said to Braun, you should rather tear up the statements. I'm so much of an idealist. Well, one of them warned me about such a step. . . . Now they also want to break into the trade unions. I spoke with all my uncles, H[einrich], K[ornelius], A[bram], and N[icolai]. Uncle Nicolai is so taken up in this, especially against Uncle Heinrich, and also against Grandfather, that he wishes that everyone's land be taken away from them, and thus cause the village to be against the work of the other siblings. . . . How it eventually turned out with the land, I do not know. . . . If my land is to be divided up, I don't want to waste any more time on this issue. . . . The Muensterbergers have divided the land of emigrants among themselves, except, for example, Lorenz's land stayed with Nikkel. How, I don't know, that is why I stopped there, and because of your land, although I know it is in the "possession of A. J. H. [Abram J. Huebert] and Grandfather." I can report nothing more. . . . The Sukkaus want to move back to M[uensterberg]. . . . J. Braun wants to move into our previous home in M., and will pay Abram Huebert ten rubles per month for it. Not that long ago there existed an alliance between H., A., and N., but now the one who worked in the field is against H. and N., and one from the opposite side (Grandfather, K., and G. Th., namely G. Th. [Gerhard Thielmann]) is in America. It seems like there are now three camps out of the five, while previously there were two camps out of the six.

One of the results of the Russian Revolution was land reform, and Hans seemed to have been well versed in the ideology and implementation of these reforms. His exact role is not clear from his letters, nor have I found other records which would confirm that he had any kind of official position in this regard. Colin Neufeldt's research on Mennonite involvement in the dekulakization of former landowners from 1928 to 1933 argues that during this period there were many Mennonites pitted against each other over economic reforms.

In Saratov, the life of Hans Thielmann took another turn when he was arrested, convicted, and sentenced to a year in prison on a criminal charge. Now he also had that identity. In his letter from prison in Saratov, he reported that he did not want a pardon; he was innocent and would serve the sentence until released. The incident which led to this conviction was the result of a dirty trick by the wife of the secretary of the People's Commissariat. He wrote:

> The adulterous, carnal instinct of my close acquaintance . . . whom I strongly resisted . . . led to my conviction. I was forced to disarm her from her pistol with which she wanted to take her life. I let my emotions guide me. Had I been guided by my mind, she may have shot a bullet through her head, or maybe not. . . . My honest disgust tempted this woman to lie in revenge, so that in the end everything turned out quite differently, and I was convicted of a gun theft.[6]

Instead of being commended for saving her life, he was convicted of stealing her only means of defence or protection, her pistol. From September 27 to December 20, 1924, he was a prisoner in Saratov. His release seems to have come as a result of an order that came down from Moscow, not long after Gerhard Woelk, a friend of the family, had a personal meeting with Mikhail Ivanovich Kalinin, head of state of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic. Hans was overjoyed that he was free just before Christmas, but he also had mixed feelings about what Woelk had done "against his wishes."

In another letter, written on September 11, while in Saratov, before the incident where he disarmed the woman, he reflected on the days in Moscow following his family's departure for Canada, his uncertain future, and several other exchanges which reveal how he viewed himself:

> Perhaps I acted too hastily and without thought, when I came to bid you farewell. I should have acted more cautiously and perhaps it would not have been necessary for me to go to Saratov. Maybe I could have gotten a posting in the college. . . . Now I

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Hans Thielmann talking with his grandfather Johann N. Huebert and his aunt Justina Huebert, in the garden at the office of Das Neue Dorf, June 5, 1926.

know that I will leave Saratov for sure after this month. I have written to Moscow, and the result is that they have released me from the academy. Where I'll be assigned, I do not know. The most unfortunate thing is that I need to appear in court; if not, I could leave Saratov this week. Today I gave a written affidavit at the tribunal that I would not leave town. . . . It is not a pleasant thought to think that in the future if I'm ever asked if I have had any charges in court, I will need to say "yes." . . . If I am completely free by the 1st of October, maybe I will still get to go to the college. But that is one big question. It may turn out that I will spend this winter in Muensterberg instead.

. . . I recently wrote a letter to B. Janz, Kharkov, who requested that I write because he wanted to stay connected with me. The top Mennonite official knows me and is counting on me, even though the masses don't know me nor want to know me. (I have to tell you, or perhaps you already know, at this moment I am judicially nonpartisan, though inwardly I still believe what I said earlier – ([blackened spot, by a censor?]). I received a response to this letter from J. Thiessen from Moscow, who at the beginning of September again accompanied an echelon of Mennonites. He sends greetings to you. . . . He begins his letter like this: "Dear Hans Gerhardowitsch! Surely you will be quite surprised that I am writing to you, but your letter to B. Janz has moved me to write to you. The tone of your letter sounds like you are saying: 'I am a child of your people and I know my duties, waiting for the moment when I can jump into action. Just watch me!'" . . .

. . . I also received a letter from Mrs. Isaak. She sends greetings to you, Mama, and wants to write you too. She writes that so many people ask about "her regular guest." . . . She feels along with your grief, Mama, that we must still be apart. She asks if she can comfort me and if I will come again. She must say goodbye to her son Jacob soon. . . . Will you become a Christian? she ends, recalling our conversation in the hotel in Moscow . . . and I so openly confessed, "I am a Christian."[7]

"I am a child of your people" and "I am a Christian" were statements of identity which might have been necessary to allay the doubt or skepticism of others. Hans was a twenty-one-year-old trying to find his way in an ever-changing world. His parents

and siblings were gone. His country was facing the challenge of rebuilding after war, revolution, and famine.

With his future plans uncertain, he left Saratov and returned to Moscow a "free man," as he wrote on January 25, 1925, the day he arrived. He reported that he attended the late evening celebratory service marking the fourth hundredth anniversary of the beginning of the Anabaptist/Mennonite church. He also mentioned the All-Mennonite General Conference held the previous week in Moscow. He expressed a lot of uncertainty about his immediate future. He wondered if his age cohort would be mobilized in 1925. He wondered if he should return and live in Muensterberg for the winter. He reiterated that he understood that he was supposed to join the rest of the family in Canada, but added that in his mind, if it didn't happen in 1925, it could always happen later. He felt no urgency.

He must have stayed in Moscow no more than two months, because on March 20 he wrote a letter from Muensterberg stating that he had already been there for four weeks. This letter was particularly focused on the upcoming birthday of his mother (March 23). He wrote conveying his love for his parents, brother, and sister:

> Mama, what should I wish you for your birthday? If only we could see each other again! Mama, are you still so sick and filled with worry? Don't make it so hard for yourself concerning your first-born. Your Hans won't be lost. I wish you could feel my kisses. . . . It is already late. I have to go to sleep. I want to have a night kiss from all of you. Stay healthy, Mama. Stay alive. I want to see you. Your Haenschen.[8]

A letter written for his mother's birthday a year later was again filled with affection. "How I'd love to throw myself at your feet, embrace you, and listen attentively to how your warm heart still beats for me!" he declared.[9]

After spending some time in Muensterberg with his grandparents in the spring of 1925, another identity began to develop: Hans the journalist/reporter/editor. By the summer of 1925 he was the village correspondent (*Dorf-Korrespondent*) for the agricultural cooperative (*landwirtschaftliche Genossenschaft*), which presumably was what led him to a role and position in Kharkov with the newspaper *Das Neue Dorf* in 1926. *Das Neue Dorf* was a German-language paper, formed by the merger of *Hammer und Pflug* (Odessa) and *Der Rote Stern* (Melitopol), that began to publish weekly in Kharkov on October 17, 1925. It identified itself as the official paper of the Communist Party (Bolsheviks) of Ukraine.

On February 20, 1926, Hans attended a meeting of the Verband der Buerger hollaendischer Herkunft (Union of Citizens of Dutch Lineage) as an editorial representive of *Das Neue Dorf*. On April 27 he attended the all-Ukrainian youth worker convention, presumably also representing the paper. His letters to his family, by then in Saskatchewan, were upbeat and he often included photographs, but they also expressed continued concern about his mother's health and his growing desire to be reunited with them. Sometimes he even hinted that they should consider coming back instead of him joining them. In June 1926, he wrote to Elly:

> I wanted to send you money many times already, but there was always not enough. Now I get 100 rubles a month. Earlier I earned more, 124 rubles. But before I was still doing a bigger job; now there is another man working in the editorial office, and so the work has become a little less for me, and hence also a little less money. These 100 rubles are not enough for the expensive life in Kharkov, where I have to buy everything ready-made. I have nowhere to eat and I always eat out, which is very expensive. If you would come back now, you could live with me. I would then get a room. Papa could work in the office and not have to do such hard work. Mama could get medical care here free of charge and would still get money from the health fund. Don't you want to come back?[10]

In another letter to his little sister, written on October 31, he described how he saw life in the Soviet Union:

> Soon it will be your birthday. How quickly time passes! You are so far away that I cannot even give you a birthday card. Therefore I want to write you a few lines.
>
> Children, girls and boys of your age, are pure gold, they are happy, because the future belongs to them. I am also still very young, and yet you are my little sister, even though you have grown taller than me. Many workers' and peasants' children of your age are Young Pioneers in our Soviet Russia. The Pioneer organization already consists of two million children in our country. The Pioneers in Russia are part of the building of a new life. In spring and summer the Pioneers live outdoors, in tents. Somewhere on the edge of a forest stand the tents of the girls. Nothing seems sweeter to them than their forest camp. They are not inferior to the boys, neither in gymnastics nor marching, neither in endurance nor in dexterity. The Pioneers are cheerful girls. It can't be said that the boys are particularly serious, but only girls can laugh at the smallest thing.[11]

He then described in great detail several humorous incidents that he was sure his sixteen-year-old sister would enjoy and chuckle over.

By the summer of 1927, Hans was back in Muensterberg with his grandparents and other relatives. The letters he wrote over the next two years are dominated by reporting on attempts to secure an exit visa from the Soviet Union or an entrance visa to Canada. His longing to reunite with his parents, brother, and sister were his motivation. The letters express emotions ranging from great anticipation and excitement to deep regret and disappointment. In August 1927 he reported that he had received a letter from the head of RUSKAPA (the Russian-Canadian-American Passenger Agency) in Dnepropetrovsk stating that he could be registered to emigrate without special permission from Canada simply by confirming that he was a Mennonite, landless, and going to

join his family. He was excited and was beginning the process. He wrote that he needed to work incognito. For example, he went to Tiege with Grandfather to see Lepp the church leader, without any uncles being aware of why he was going or what he was working on. There always seemed to be the danger that someone or something would prevent his success in securing the necessary papers. With Lepp he had no trouble confirming that he was a Mennonite.

In fall of 1927, he entered a program of study in Melitopol about Fordson and International tractors. Why? Because he wanted to have a skill that he could use immediately when he arrived in Canada. He could also use this training to confirm his identity as "a landless farmer." When he was not in Melitopol he lived in Muensterberg with his grandparents. Here he helped his aunt Justina and grandfather weed and water their garden. He wrote in one letter that Grandfather "has created a canal in the back from the artesian well to the garden, so that it holds enough water that he can water the garden for seven hours and it always remains full."[12] In a December letter he said more about the tractor course – it was something totally different and new for him. It was a six-week course leading to a diploma. Even if the diploma wasn't worth anything in Canada, he hoped that the practical experience would be helpful. He imagined the family perhaps having a farm, or working where a tractor driver was needed. And if his hope of immigrating did not come to fruition, then he could find use for these skills. He concluded the letter by thanking his parents for giving him the opportunity to study. Now it was his grandfather making this possible.

For Christmas 1927, Hans wrote, all of the cousins were together and they had a photograph taken. The only ones missing were his siblings Gerhard and Elly, cousin Heinrich Sukkau, and cousin Hans Huebert. (Of the latter two, one had emigrated to Canada in 1925, and the other had gone to study in Germany in 1926.)

At the end of January 1928, Hans wrote a letter addressed to his brother Gerhard, who by then had left Saskatchewan and was studying at Bluffton College in Ohio. He wrote:

> Dear Gerhard. I am glad that you are doing well, and that you have the opportunity to study, so one can soon congratulate you as an up-and-coming school headmaster. All the best! Even if money to get an education is rare these days, it is a great fortune that you can hold your head up high, and look forward to the future.
>
> You have finished the Christmas vacation time, and hopefully brought it to a close as you planned. You wrote that you wanted to visit various Mennonite settlements. It will have been more interesting than when we fellow commerce students, during the famine period, travelled to various colonies presenting literature evenings at the request of our teacher. That was once upon a time. Now you would be amazed how, in a few years, Soviet Russia has developed. Obviously it is not logical to compare the former capitalist period and Soviet Russia with an America that has not experienced this change, and furthermore, America is wealthy, and not like many other countries that had losses during the last Great War.
>
> "Now, how are you doing?" you will ask. As I wrote, I am taking a course in Melitopol on tractors, so I can be a "trakorist" (tractor operator). Currently I am in Muensterberg. One day this past week I was in Halbstadt and another day I was in Melitopol.
>
> Our Huebert relatives are in a bad situation. I will write about it a little later.
>
> I have not yet given up my hope of coming [to America], if our parents stay alive, so that we can see each other again. Mama is always ill. From the letter I can feel how difficult it is for her. So, as you already know, I have for quite some time been working to get an exit passport, but that effort has been in vain. At the same time, I also do not have an entrance visa to Canada in my hands, so even if I would get the passport, I still would not be able to go. Furthermore, exit passes are difficult to get without the entrance visas. Of course this is obvious. So our dear parents and others are working on the latter. And with regards to the exit permit, I did get a formal notice of rejection last year. I put in an appeal, and recently received a response from Kharkov that my submission was moving forward. In one month, I should have the results. Then we will know if I can come or not. Let's hope for a positive answer. I was already considering going to Siberia and getting to know our relatives over there, but that too would be dangerous.
>
> Now I need to tell you some sad news. As you know from my last letter, we had an exceptionally good Christmas time. All of our cousins were together. On January 3 the cousins from Crimea left. They also stopped and visited us in Melitopol. On January 3 Uncle Heinrich's house was searched, and he and bookkeeper Braun were arrested and brought to Melitopol. This, then, is how 1928 started for the Huebert family. That occurred on Tuesday. On Friday there was another house search, and our cousin Kornyusha was arrested. Now all three are in Melitopol for interrogation. On Tuesday, January 31, the trial will take place in Halbstadt. All three are facing two-year prison sentences on top of the confiscation of all property that is documented. Let's hope that the judges don't bring down the harshest ruling. However, you can be sure that they will not be able to talk their way into freedom, even though we have secured two of the best lawyers in Melitopol. How are all three guilty of breaking the law? Heinrich Huebert as the lead tenant, Kornyusha as the younger companion, and Braun as the bookkeeper. I cannot spend much time to indulge in the detail of the crimes. The trials will soon happen and then I can report on their conviction. So that is the story.
>
> Now imagine Grandfather left alone. The lease on the mill will most likely be cancelled by the authorities because the tenants have not complied with the terms. As you know, the mill had a lot of debt. Then the creditors came and demanded their money. In a word, the situation is critical. Mr. Woelke has also become tired. So in one way or another I have become the "man for all seasons," in that I go from Herod to Pilate, always working at something.

PRIVATE COLLECTION, ALFRED H. REDEKOPP

At the medical treatment facility at Kislovodsk, January 1932. Hans Thielmann is on the far left.

> So I will close off now. I have already written a lot, and you will likely not have much time to write while studying, nor time to read long letters. To be honest, I have not been able to write long letters in recent months either. It used to be different.
>
> Waiting for your reply. Have you met Lilli Magnusovna? What is she doing? Love and a kiss from your brother, Hans Thielmann.[13]

This letter marks another shift in themes. His next letters describe further arrests, trials, sentences, and fines. Hans, too, was arrested, and he wrote one letter from detention in Halbstadt, on April 1, 1928. He wrote that if everything worked out as he planned, he would be in Siberia in May, where he hoped that he could get help from his uncle David Thielmann. (Incidentally, the David Thielmann family did exit the Soviet Union via Moscow in 1929, and subsequently went to Paraguay).

On January 19, 1929, Hans wrote from Muensterberg that he was happy to report that in Melitopol he was promised he would be issued an exit permit that month. He hoped his letter would be his last from Muensterberg. He included with it a copy of a letter he had written to Uncle David Thielmann in Siberia, so his parents could see what he was planning. In the past three weeks he had travelled a lot – to Tokmak, to Melitopol, and to Halbstadt. He was keeping everything secretive about his departure. No relatives knew except Aunt Justina, so that nothing would spoil the plans. He had paid a deposit on a ticket but didn't have enough to pay for the entire ship fare. He had written to Uncle David about this issue. He was hoping that RUSKAPA would give him credit. He asked his father to send him a prepaid ticket that he could then pay back in Canada. The cost was $167. He didn't know how much Uncle David might be able to provide. He wanted his parents to confirm that they would guarantee for him in Canada. He was excited, and only regretted that he would have to leave his grandparents and Aunt Justina in a helpless state. He hoped there would be no problems or dangers en route, particularly as a "former Bolshevik," as he described himself.[14]

The family letter collection for 1924 to 1929 affirms Johannes Thielmann's various identities: loving, caring son and brother, Christian, prisoner, convict, journalist, farmer, Bolshevik, Mennonite, and former Bolshevik.

A VALUED CONSULTANT: 1931–1938

For almost two years – from June 2, 1929, to March 29, 1931 – Hans did not write any letters to his family in North America. When he finally wrote again, the letter was sent from a post office in western Siberia, about five hundred kilometres east of the city of Omsk. He reported that after his departure from Muensterberg at the end of December 1929, he had heard very little about his grandparents or uncles and aunts. He didn't know where they were and they didn't know where he was. He couldn't locate his uncles David and Kornelius Thielmann, who lived in Siberia. Hans also reported that he was just beginning

to recover from having been sick in bed for three days. He wrote that when he read his mother's last letter, he wept. "Are you healthy, Mama? Are you still alive, Mama?" He added:

> Close at my side sits my lovely wife, comforting me. So much time has passed and much has changed. I am married, which you do not yet know. My wife's name is Anna and she loves me very, very much. She is from a good family, not a German family, but from a Russian family. She has a heart of gold. She regrets very much that she does not know German.

Hans then continued the letter in Russian:

> My wife Anya is afraid that you will not love her because she is a Russian, but I told her to remove this folly from her mind. I know that you, Mama, Papa, my little Elly, and my brother Gerhard will all love my Njura. I also asked my wife to write you. But she wants to first wait for a response to my letter, says she is afraid to write first. She is silly. It's hard for me, dear loved ones, to be so far away from you. But maybe, God willing, we'll see each other again. I will apply for us to travel together to you. When we get permission, will we be allowed to join you? If it's too difficult to come from the USSR with my wife, my Anya loves you so much that she would even agree to wait, letting me go first. But all these are dreams, dreams for a sweet happy reunion.

Only at the end of that first letter did he provide a hint about his work: "I am working on a Soviet farm. I am a new person here, and with my illness, I don't know how it will be here and if I'll be able to work here."[15]

The next letter in the collection is dated January 25, 1932, and was sent from a sanatorium in the northern Caucasus region (Kislovodsk) and addressed to his brother Gerhard. Letters to his brother often contain more details, things which perhaps might have been harder for his parents to hear, even though he was aware that the family shared every letter with each other. Perhaps he hoped his brother would understand and maybe moderate or interpret these things for the family. Hans wrote:

> I will soon be well again. Primarily, I lost my health in prison, arrested a number of times, but it was my fault. Now everything is good again. My medical certificate for treatment at this centre expires on February 4, but yesterday I was examined by the medical commission (three physicians) at the sanatorium named after Stalin, and they have extended my recovery time at the expense of the government for another two weeks.[16]

In this same letter he also copied out an excerpt of a report that his superior officer wrote and printed in a local newspaper in western Siberia, dated January 4, 1932:

> "Former informant Tilman, now an inspector, showed exceptional initiative during his mission to eliminate backward agricultural practices during the formation of the Khakassy agricultural site (1,800 kilometres southeast of Novosibirsk) through immense assistance to the management of the office, and with a truly shocking pace of work. With the help of Comrade Tilman and his direct cooperation in the local press, the Khakassy office managed to make the greatest progress in eliminating backward practices in the regional, district, party, and professional organizations.
>
> "In no lesser measure, Comrade Tilman assisted the office by direct visits to a number of state farms (Soviet farms) and MTSes (machine-tractor stations) for accounting purposes and establishing business relationships between the top management and the site managers of the development sites. For the diligence and conscientiousness that he demonstrated to fulfill these tasks, and for the truly striking pace of Comrade Tilman's work, he has been rewarded with a trip at the expense of the Trust to one of the resorts on the southern coast of the Crimea or in the Caucasus, and will be promoted to the position of an inspector with a salary of 250 rubles starting November 1, 1931. Administrator Semenov."
>
> So you can see how good work is valued here. When I read your letter, I had to cry. Dear brother! How much I would love to help you. I've often wanted to send my dear parents some money, but that is not allowed. . . .
>
> Never ask me to tell you more about what I've been through. Whatever I can share, I will write without you asking. . . .
>
> Dear Gerhard, what do you think about the proposal to come back to Russia? Here, we have no unemployment. The third year of the Five [Year Plan] (1931) was a year of new successes and achievements for the working class in the development of socialism. Despite the insufficient development of specific individual industries, overall industrial production grew by 20–21 percent in 1931 in comparison with production in 1930. This increase in industrial production in 1931 happened while industrial production in all capitalist countries was in decline. At the same time, the unemployment rate in the USSR is dropping this year, while the number of unemployed in all bourgeois states suffered catastrophic growth. It has brought about a significant improvement in living conditions to workers and a further increase in wages by 18 percent, while the living conditions and wages of the workers in the capitalist countries has worsened greatly, which you have confirmed with the description of your situation.
>
> In all seriousness, you must consider the proposal to come back. You know that we do not have enough manpower in Soviet Russia. Annually, thousands of German, English, and American youth, qualified workers, come to Soviet Russia. If you wish, write a request to the West Siberian Regional Executive Committee in which you state exactly what work you are able to do and your education. It is entirely unlikely that I will come to Canada, and it also would not help, so maybe all of you could come back. Here I could be of assistance to our parents. How can I help you if you are over there? Oh my dear father and mother! Oh, how I would love to see you all come here!
>
> In all seriousness, please write a detailed response. And now, my dear little sister Elly, how tall you are already. You are all

Hans Thielmann at the shore in 1956.

taller than I am. How much I would love to give you a hug one more time, dear Elly. My wife Anna would be glad and happy if you were in our midst.

A greeting and a kiss from your beloved son and brother, Johannes.

In 1932, Hans Thielmann was finding his way in the country of his birth that had transitioned into communism. He was working in a responsible position as an inspector, he was being rewarded for his hard work, he was married, and he was well clothed (especially compared to family members that remained in the villages of Ukraine that were facing more and more deprivation). His wife wrote openly to his parents about her former life, wanting to hide nothing. She had two sons from a previous relationship. The fifteen-year-old boy never knew his father, who died when the boy was one year old. She had been an opera singer (from 1917 until 1925), but then family life prevented her from continuing. When her health improved she wanted to sing again. She also wanted to bear a child for her husband Hans. She assured them that both Gerhard and Elly could easily find employment in the Soviet Union if the family decided to return. I suspect that Hans and Anna had some idea of what the family was facing in Saskatchewan in 1932. Life was not easy for the immigrants during their first decade in Canada.

In subsequent letters, received from 1932 to 1938, it seems that Hans had to travel as part of his work. In 1932 he and Anna were living in Novosibirsk. From 1933 until March 1935, Hans was based in Ufa, and travelled from there. This was where their first son Gerhard was born on August 23, 1934. In August 1935 Hans began to work in Smolensk. Again he travelled a lot, as he worked as an auditor. He also taught some evening classes. On June 21, 1937, their second son, Hermann, was born in Smolensk. By this time, Hans seemed to be exercising caution with regards to his contact with his family in Canada. Sometimes he told them to send their letters addressed to his stepson, or he used some other method of mail forwarding, so that his location would be less traceable. This wasn't entirely new for him. In the early 1930s he once reported that half the people in Muensterberg thought he was dead, and the other half wished it to be true. One wonders what type of compromising choices he must have made. Nevertheless, in his letters to the family from 1931 to 1938, he remained the loving son and brother, and the capable, hard-working, and ever-achieving citizen loyal to the country of his birth.

A POLITICAL PRISONER: 1938–1953

In 1933, Hans wrote to his brother Gerhard in Russian a long letter filled with the communist rhetoric of the time. Andrej Peters, a fellow researcher who has translated Russian materials for me, summarized it: "Your uncle Johannes Thielmann could write very well in Russian. . . . From the lack of errors and writing style, the letter has high quality. He was an avid communist and

spoke of the communistic industry, and was fascinated with the Soviet Union. Your uncle wrote that according to George Bernard Shaw, anti-Soviet elements and capitalist elements had to be killed by shooting, or according to Stalin, anti-Soviet elements and kulaks had to be destroyed or liquidated, crushed or finished off. But he saw this only as one option for moving forward in the Soviet Union."[17] I can imagine that my uncle was a more moderate communist. In his earlier days, he had been very taken by Vladimir Lenin. Perhaps he could have supported Trotsky, Stalin's key opponent. Yet Stalin was the leader, and from 1936 to 1938 instituted the Great Purge to secure his political power. It was a period of mass arrests, with little judicial process.

The last letter that Hans wrote to his parents arrived in March 1938. His brother Gerhard received one more letter that had been written on May 2, 1938. It is believed that Hans was arrested in the summer of 1938. His wife Anna was hospitalized with a mental breakdown, and their two young sons, ages one and four, were placed in an orphanage. Once she had recovered and was released, she managed to find her sons and took them to live with her parents in the city of Stary Oskol in the Belgorod region, probably in 1939 or 1940. Anna knew nothing about where Hans had been sentenced. From July 1942 to February 1943, Stary Oskol was under German occupation. Sometime after Soviet troops liberated Stary Oskol, Anna learned that Hans had been sentenced to a camp in the distant north in the Komi Republic. In 1943, Anna and the boys left Stary Oskol and rented an apartment not too far from where Hans was in a labour camp. There she could see him and bring him clothes and additional food, making life easier for him and helping him survive.[18]

In the early 1990s, when it became possible to search the KGB archives, his grandsons tried to find his arrest records. The records of his first arrest were not found, but they did get to see his second arrest docket, which was dated shortly before his scheduled release from his initial five-year sentence. The accusations in this docket were most absurd. Hans was said to have formed an anti-state group with other prisoners in order to break through the front line and meet the German troops with arms. The front line was thousands of miles away, and the prisoners, weakened in the camps, simply would not have reached it, even without arms. It is more likely that the Soviet authorities didn't want to endanger their position against the Germans by releasing some German prisoners, so they made an excuse to re-arrest Hans. Despite denying the charges, he was sentenced to another term.

FINAL YEARS: 1953–1957

Hans was released almost immediately after Stalin's death on March 5, 1953, but he could not leave the North because he was not rehabilitated, and was still considered guilty by the Soviet authorities. He was therefore restricted in many rights, including the right to move freely around the country. The family remained in the Komi Republic, where Hans must have found some employment. In 1956, at the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party, the political repressions of the Stalinist era were condemned, which began the mass rehabilitation of innocently convicted people. Documents show that Johannes Thielmann was among the first to be acquitted, in a process that lasted through the Soviet period into the twenty-first century. His rehabilitation document is dated October 16, 1956.

Still cautious about foreign contact, Hans made no attempt to contact his family in Canada directly. For several years he tried to find his mother's half-sister, Aunt Justina Huebert, who had been such a close confidante to him in Muensterberg, or his mother's sister, Aunt Liese Sukkau, whom he had visited in the Caucasus in 1932. If anyone might have contact with his mother in Canada, it would be these two aunts. If only he could find them.

On March 10, 1957, Hans Thielmann died in a hospital in Pechora, Komi Republic. According to a letter Anna wrote to his mother, it came as a complete surprise to her. He never complained, but apparently the climate had caused heart damage, which caused his death. Unfortunately, it was the day after he died that Anna received a letter from Aunt Liese Sukkau, which included the news that Hans's mother was still alive, but that his father had died in 1949.

His "sickly" mother, whose health had caused him so much concern in the early 1930s, died at age ninety-four in St. Catharines, Ontario, in 1974. I spent many hours with her during my high school days, and never really understood her pain over Hans, but then some things only a mother can know and feel. I have learned to cherish the memory of Uncle Hans, the hard-working Soviet citizen and ever-loving and caring oldest son and brother to my grandmother and mother.

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1 *Mennonitische Rundschau*, Oct. 30, 1957, 1.
2 I. Til'man, "Blizkii i Prodnoi," *Za obraztsovuiu sluzhbu*, Apr. 21, 1956.
3 Alfred H. Redekopp, ed., "The Life of Johannes G. Thielmann (1903–1957): Translations of His Letters (1922–1938) and the Letters from His Wife and Sons (1958–1972)" (unpublished manuscript, 2018), 66 pages. This manuscript includes translations of most of Johannes's letters, translated from the German and Russian originals, along with annotations and photographs. The letters have been digitized with the intention of making them more accessible for further research when all translations are complete.
4 Letter to Elly Thielmann, Dec. 1, 1922; letter to parents, Mar. 29, 1923.
5 Letter to family in Canada, Aug. 8, 1924.
6 Letter to brother Gerhard Thielmann, Dec. 5, 1924.
7 Letter to parents, brother, and sister, Sept. 11, 1924.
8 Letter to mother, Mar. 25, 1925.
9 Letter to mother, undated.
10 Letter to Elly, June 6, 1926.
11 Letter to Elly, Oct. 31, 1926.
12 Letter to parents, ca. mid-July 1927.
13 Letter to brother Gerhard, Jan. 28, 1928.
14 Letter to parents, Jan. 19, 1929.
15 Letter to parents, Mar. 29, 1931.
16 Letter to brother Gerhard, Jan. 25, 1932.
17 This is a 14-page letter written in Russian dated Jan. 22–25, 1933, plus some pages dated June 23–24, 1933. It has not been translated but I am grateful to Heinrich (Andrej) Peters of Hamburg, Germany, for his summary.
18 Vladimir Tilman, Orel, Russia, email message to author, Dec. 12, 2021.