

Historian



Essex-Kent Mennonite Historical Association

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Hours are 9:00 a.m. until 12 noon, Monday to Friday, holidays excluded

Spring 2024 Edited by Jill Nicholson Vol. 36 No. 1 Celebrating the 100th anniversary of Mennonites in Essex-Kent

Emigration (Part 4 of Remembrances)

by Frank P. Tiessen

The train to the Baltic Sea:

The Lichtenau railway station was about one mile from Blumstein. On Sunday afternoon, June 2, 1924, 47 railway cars arrived there. We were told we were to embark early June 23 to the Baltic Sea and then by ship to Canada. We had already been thoroughly examined by Canadian doctors. Many registration forms had been completed. Now we were ready. We had to fit into 45 cars. They were all coal cars, which we were able to partially clean. There were 35 people in our car. Ours was the 45th car so we were almost at the end of the train. Peter Gossen, 6 months old, and Jack, 1 and a half years old, were the youngest and Mrs. Langemann (Elvira's grandmother) was the oldest, about 65-70 years old.

We had had an auction sale and made about 40 rubles (in gold). We also got a sack of white flour from one man. With this, mother baked and made "geroestete Zwieback" for the journey.

About 10,000 people arrived at the small station to say goodbye to those leaving. About 1400 people were leaving. The train slowly left the station at sunset, instead of early morning as scheduled. The 10,000 people sang "God be with you til we meet again". Many tears of farewell were shed that day. Of mother's family, she was the only one leaving. In this manner, 20,000 Mennonites came to Canada in 1923-1926.

The train stopped twice a day, once at a station where we got hot water. We had all taken food along -

"geroestete Zwieback" and other things that wouldn't spoil. We couldn't cook anything or buy anything either. We were shipped as bonded freight. The second stop was in a field with bushes or just an empty field. We never knew how long the train would be stopped. We just all dropped our pants and closed our eyes. The train usually stopped for about 10 or 15 minutes. Many a passenger ran, pants in hand, after the train which was slowly moving away. It was especially difficult for older people.

We travelled in Russia for 8 days before reaching the Latvian border. There we were examined one last time in the U.S.S.R. In the north, it became light at 2 o'clock so we became familiar with the soldiers' routine. They took whatever struck their fancy for their trouble. We crossed the border through the Red Gate with a large star, hammer and sickle at the top. It was a lovely morning when we arrived in Latvia.

Friendly people greeted us. We sang "Now thank we all our God". We were all very thankful that God had rescued us. We received a delicious bean soup with meat and fresh baked bread. Then all the men were taken a large bath house, the women to another for showers. We had to give up our clothes for disinfection so no lice would stay with us. This was about the first or second of July. Our clothes had a strong odour of sulphur, but we soon got used to it. Then each of us was given a CPR button and we were once again loaded into freight cars, this time clean ones. Then we were off to the Baltic Sea. It took one day. Now we were under the complete control of the CPR.

Emigration

*Written by Ernie Dick from the book
"Courage, Courage the Lord will Help"*

The vast majority of Mennonites in the Ukraine, however, were simple refugees by this point with only the North American relief keeping alive and few prospects for a future within the Soviet Union. A petition was this presented to the Central Executive Committee of the Ukraine Communist Party on the 17th of December 1921 requesting permission for the refugee and landless Mennonites to emigrate. A long and complex series of negotiations ensued and were fraught with many frustrations and disappointments. (These events are recounted in great detail in Frank H. Epp, *Mennonite Exodus*, D. W. Friesen & Sons, Altona, Manitoba, 1962 and John R. Toews, *Lost Fatherland*, Herald Press, Scottsdale, Pennsylvania, 1967).

These negotiations would have been difficult enough, but the ambivalence and uncertainty amongst the Russian Mennonites further compounded these difficulties. News of life in North America was not always encouraging and Russian promises of a better future were sometimes heartening. Lenin's New Economic Policy modified some of the harshest Bolshevik measures and allowed for some reward for private initiative and effort. And indeed, Russia demonstrated remarkable recovery under this hybrid, neither socialist nor capitalist, economy until 1927 when Stalin gained complete control of the Communist Party in Russia. Nonetheless, the prevailing consensus emerged that there was little future for the Mennonites in Russia. Mennonite leaders had the contradictory task of Mennonite participation in the economic development and reconstruction that Russia so desperately needed; while at the same time attempting to arrange for their departure from the country.

Commensurate with gaining permission for a group emigration was the challenge of finding a country that would take these refugees. Opportunities in New Zealand, Africa, Germany, Paraguay, Mexico, Latin America and North America were all explored. The relief provided by the North American Mennonites brought the Russian and North American Mennonites into contact with each other and this contact stimulated the possibilities of a North American immigration. Canada and the United States emerged as the most likely countries but both had restrictive immigration

regulations that limited such a mass influx of impoverished immigrants.

Canadian regulations had been passed during the war to specifically prohibit the immigration of the Mennonites. Due to lobbying efforts in Ottawa with the newly elected Prime Minister, William Lyon Mackenzie King, these regulations were amended. This generation of Mennonites, including many in our family, subsequently voted Liberal for a good many years in gratitude. Many, indeed, felt a personal affection for Mackenzie King because it was his campaign promise that was believed to have changed the immigration regulations. Specific and concrete evidence of this promise has never been located but in June 1922 the specific restrictions against Mennonites were lifted on the understanding that the Canadian Mennonites would provide the immediate shelter and support required; that the immigrants would be placed on the land because Canada needed farmers; and that none of the immigrants would become a public charge.

Moving these immigrants to Canada was another formidable challenge and here the Canadian Mennonite leaders turned to the Canadian Pacific Railway. The CPR had a positive experience with the Mennonites in Manitoba and they were anxious to promote a greater population for the Canadian west. The CPR was willing to advance transportation credits on the understanding that the Mennonite Church of Canada would guarantee their repayment. Obtaining this guarantee proved to be a formidable task because, of course, there existed no single "Mennonite Church of Canada".

David Toews became a most controversial figure in his unrelenting commitment to bringing these Russian Mennonites to Canada. The contract that he negotiated with the CPR was opposed by a significant number of Canadian Mennonites and none of the Mennonite church conferences were prepared to formally endorse it. David Toews, on behalf of a newly-created Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization, organized for the purpose, personally signed the contract on July 21st, 1922 because of his deep commitment to helping the Russian Mennonites. He fully realized that its

conditions could never be met because of the growing opposition amongst Canadian Mennonites. Nonetheless, he absolutely refused to succumb to this pressure, and Toews was subsequently revered by many Russian Mennonites, including our family.

Conditions in Russia further complicated the emigration with unsettled political conditions in the Dardenelles, the gateway to the Black Sea, preventing any of the commercial CPR ships from approaching the closest Russian ports. Consequently rail transportation within Russia overland to the Baltic port of Riga in Latvia had to be organized. This required further permissions from the Russian bureaucracy which was never consistent or generous in dealing with the Mennonites. Thus, when the first group of 726 Mennonites left the Chortitza Mennonite colony on June 22, 1923 there was great uncertainty about whether they would really be allowed out of Russia, let alone to make it to another continent.

Indeed, substantial numbers were detained in Latvia due to medical examinations by Canadian doctors who found that many of the Russian Mennonites were suffering from trachoma, a contagious eye disease. None were returned to Russia on this account, but these delays and separations of family members compounded the anxiety and trauma of this emigration.

Our family faced all the uncertainties and ambiguity about this emigration that all Russian Mennonites faced. Indeed, two of the Dück brothers decided to stay in Russia at this point. Peter was engaged to a Mennonite girl whose family had managed to retain their property and this had more reason for optimism about staying. Jacob was an independent and headstrong 21 years of age and completely confident of his ability to fend for himself in the “new” Russia. Parting was thus exceedingly traumatic and sorrowful because families and friends separated, fully expecting that they might never see each other again; without any great confidence that either decision was the right one. Despite all the hardship and suffering that Russia had caused them in the last ten years, it remained their homeland and future uncertainties were equally daunting.



Scene at the Lichtenau train station as Mennonites were emigrating

Over 20,000 Mennonites emigrated from Russia between 1923 and 1928 when all further exits were denied. It was said to be the largest mass emigration in communist Russia's history and was a diplomatic and logistical triumph. The total costs for the transportation credits advanced by the CPR came to almost \$2,000,000 and its repayment became a long and unfortunate chapter in Canadian Mennonite history.

A third of the Russian Mennonites had sufficient resources to pay for their transportation but our family primarily relied on the travel credits which were calculated at \$164 per adult. Repayment of this debt, called the “reiseschuld” became a sacred trust for many Mennonites, including our family, because of the great gratitude they felt for being able to escape from Russia. Indeed, this generation of our family was so grateful for escape, and so traumatized by their Russian experience, that they absolutely refused to consider returning for a visit to Russia when possibilities arose in the 1970s (with the significant exception of Jacob). John J. Dick always said that he had escaped once with only his life, and was not about to give Russia a second chance.



*Red Gate at Russian/Latvia Border
Mennonite Historical Society of Canada)*

Leaving itself was a long and frustrating experience because it was rarely certain when, and if, all the permits and permissions would be in order and the next group would be able to depart. Most of the Dück family left during the summer of 1924 from the Lichtenau train station, travelling aboard the CPR steamer, the Minnedosa, to Quebec City, and from there to Kitchener where they were taken in by the Mennonites of the area.

Belongings, for our family, could not have been more difficult to organize or dispose of because they had long ago been reduced to purely personal effects that had no monetary value. Anything of value would either have been stolen, or traded for more essential provisions, during the famine. John J. Dück carried with him a diary of his father's and some paper money, once worth thousands of rubles under the Kerensky regime but rendered worthless by inflation and the revolution. Herman valued a silver case given to him as parting gift by a girl friend and George once proudly showed us his Russian report cards from elementary school, explaining the value of the grades that he had earned.

The train trip across Russia to Latvia was often interrupted by stops for procedural and bureaucratic reasons which always threatened to stop the emigration altogether. The coal and cattle cars used for this transportation had to be cleaned by the Mennonites before they began their trip. There were no

sanitation, cooking or sleeping facilities on these cars and thus the Mennonites had to organize these facilities for themselves. Two stops were scheduled each day; one to obtain hot water and the other for the travellers to relieve themselves in open fields.

Crossing the border and actually leaving Russian must have been a most moving experience as a number of novels and films have dramatized. Quiet singing of hymns was recalled as our family crossed the border although some were so brave as to spit at the Russian soil, just as they were leaving. Herman vividly remembered collecting the pans of urine used for the children, together with another young man, and showering two Russian soldiers with their contents as the train crossed the border. He recalled that others in their train car were very angry at this gesture, fearing that it could provide an excuse for their exit to be blocked and reprisals carried out. However, it appears that nothing came of this gesture and Herman recalled it in his 80s with some pride.

This brings us to the end of an era for Johann P. Dück family history. Their Russian experience in their small village of Schoenbrun was to be forever closed without any thought of returning. Their survival of the Revolution, anarchy and famine was a common experience although each had their separate challenges. **Courage, courage** truly was required and the Lord did help.

Subsequently, the lives of the sons and daughters of Johann P. Dück developed in a great variety of directions. They lived their lives in Russia, India, Ontario, Manitoba, British Columbia and California. They pursued a variety of professions and personal interests. They belonged to different denominations and even spelled the family name differently. They always kept in contact and appreciated each other but had very different experiences and challenges.

Dear Grandchildren:

With this letter we arrive at the year of 1924. A very important and significant year for many of the Russian-born Mennonites – our last year in Russia. Immigration talk became more intensive and what had seemed to be a long way off, suddenly came close to reality. Our Immigration Committee worked feverishly. Long lists had to be set up. Immigrants-to-be had to be notified of their Doctor appointments. They had to be organized into small groups, the size that would fit into a railway car. Our family too, had to appear before a Medical Commission. All, with the exception of Uncle Abe and Aunt Mary, were found to be fit for Canada. Abe and Mary had to have their eyes treated for a disease called trachoma, which could take a few months. The first shipment was scheduled for June, and this was in May, so we had to wait until those eyes were healed.

In a way we were glad to stay a while longer and so have a little more time to prepare for the long trip. It also gave us time to take our crop off and in all, to get used to the thought of leaving our homeland and facing an uncertain future. But brother Peter, who was in danger of being mobilized for the army, was to go along with the first group, it was decided by the family. When the designated time for departure of the first group came, a long train pulled into the Station of Lichtenau. They were all cattle cars, not a single passenger car. One concession was granted the immigrants. The train would wait at the station until all the cars were washed and cleaned and suitable accommodations built into the empty room of the car. All this, of course, at the expense of the travellers themselves. On the day of departure, the Station was crowded with people. Hundreds, maybe thousands of people were milling around, helping to load, saying good-byes, crying in each others' arms. For many, it was for the last time. The feelings of the immigrants were two-fold – grief on the one side for leaving their beloved home and village (especially the older folks) and gladness on the other hand for leaving a godless country that had rejected them. When the train finally started to move, all of the big crowd began singing "God be with you, till we meet again!"

Love, Grandpa

Dear Grandchildren:

In the last letter I told you of the first group, numbering 1,000 people, leaving Russia for Canada. Emigration was now in full swing. Another group, although much smaller, was preparing to go. There was one auction sale after another. People were selling their household belongings, a cow or two, probably even a team of horses, in some cases their houses. Land could not be sold, as all land now belonged to the people. Who these people were, was not always clear. In the most cases, money realized from these sales was barely enough to pay for transportation to the Russian border. Once the border was crossed, all responsibilities for the emigrants was taken over by the CPR. (Canadian Pacific Railway). This was an arrangement made by Aeltester D. Toews with the Authorities of the CPR in Canada. He guaranteed that payment would be made in Canada once the emigrants were settled and employed. Looking back, we must say, the whole thing was a miracle of God. Our family too was preparing to go as soon as the eyes of brother Abe and sister Mary were healed. The eye treatments were very painful and the two just dreaded their next visit to the doctor. In the meantime we took our crop off, what little there was. After the first group had safely arrived in Canada, a very lively letter exchange began. Brother Peter wrote about his arrival and the life in the new country. Others too wrote long letters and the life in our village was brimming with news from Canada. People were quite excited about the news from over there. These letters made the rounds in the village and we lived already more in Canada than still in Russia. In October finally came the release from Dr. Bittner that those eyes were healed and upon presenting themselves to the Canadian Commission, Abe and Mary were declared fit and ready for Canada. Next we were put on the list of those ready to go and were scheduled to leave on Oct. 15 from Station Lichtenau. This put the house into feverish activity. What to take along, what to leave behind. The choice was often not easy to make. More next time. Greetings to you all.

Opa Driedger

Nich dit...Nich daut

Enjoying this newsletter? Help make the next one even better! Send submissions to info@ekmha.ca

Upcoming activities at the Heritage Centre

- Annual General Meeting – May 31, 7:00 p.m.
- Travelogues – Coming Fall 2024
- Call 519-326-0456 or email info@ekmha.ca for updates

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Rev. Jacob P. Penner teaches a music class at the United Mennonite Educational Institute in the 1950s. (EKMHA)