

# SIBERIAN DIARY

of Aron P. Toews

With a biography by  
**Olga Rempel**

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CMBC Publications  
600 Shaftesbury Blvd.  
Winnipeg, Manitoba  
R3P 0M4

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German edition, *Einer von Vielen*, published  
in October, 1979

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**CANADIAN MENNONITE BIBLE COLLEGE**  
Printed in Canada  
ISBN 0-920718-07-8

**Written in memory of my dear father  
and many others  
who belong to the martyrs of the twentieth century**



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## Foreword

The struggles of Mennonites who had to adjust to a new Russia after the 1917 Revolution have been recalled and discussed countless times. Memories of civil war, the famine of 1921-1922, the revived hopes of the NEP period, confrontations with Soviet authorities, and the unmitigated pressures of the pre-War Stalin years are vivid for surviving emigrés even today.

Aron Toews, a teacher to begin with, and then a minister of the “Old Colony,” Khortitza in Ukraine, lived through the total span of those unforgettable times. His courageous resolve not merely to survive, but to provide a meaningful and relevant ministry to Mennonite families who had not emigrated, is the unifying theme of this account. Another important dimension may be seen in the deep involvement of his family in this endeavor, especially the poignant reflections of his daughter, Olga, who is the author of this book.

The biographical section does not rely entirely on memories and reminiscences, however. Much documentary material has been utilized to enrich the telling. The appended letters, as well as photos and maps, also help to create a firm historical framework for noting the major spiritual contributions which Aron Toews made, and which shaped his personal legacy for the family and others who lived with him at the time.

A diary kept during 1936-1938, the years of exile in Goltjavino and elsewhere in Siberia, provides the centrepiece for this portrait of “Aron Petrovich”, as he was affectionately called. This document has a story and a significance all its own. Written in solitude, and often after long hours of toil, its entries set forth the deep feelings of a father and husband separated from his loved ones, but also noting the daily happenings and the struggle to “keep the faith” and carry on.

One cannot miss his ongoing concern for the welfare of the larger Russian Mennonite community. Its strengths and weaknesses, it seems, he could see even more clearly now than when he had been among his people at home. Much of his writing in exile emerged, therefore, as sermons and meditations, the medium by which he had shared his concerns so often before he had to leave his congregation. Toews felt greatly strengthened by the poems and letters which he could get from his church members, other friends, and his own family. He was uncomplaining about his situation, and never ceased to thank God for daily mercies which he knew would sustain him in every

circumstance which might befall him in the days ahead.

Toews was able to send the diary to his family. A letter dated February 6, 1938, was the last one to reach his wife and children. Soon after that he vanished without a trace. Family members managed to bring the diary with them on the long trek to Germany in 1943, and finally to Canada. Here the original remains intact in the files of the Mennonite Heritage Centre archives along with other materials which were gathered for the preparation of this volume.

Credit must be given once more to the undaunted efforts of the author to get the story of her father together, to Gerhard Ens, who edited the first German edition, to Esther Bergen, who did the translation, and to all those who sent materials, and helped otherwise to bring this book into being. It is the sincere hope of the publishers that the English edition of *Einer von Vielen* will be a door for younger readers, and others who have not read the challenging life story of Aron Toews before.

Lawrence Klippenstein

May 1984

Mennonite Heritage Centre  
Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada



**Aron Petrovich Toews, 1934.**





## Author's Preface

In our world prosperity is seen as something good to be pursued, suffering as an evil to be avoided. One must admit there is real truth in this view, for the Bible sees prosperity as God's gift (Deut. 8:18), and suffering as one result of man's fall (Gen. 3:16-19). However the matter is not as simple as that: prosperity brings its dangers and suffering may have hidden benefits.

We have to face the fact that the Christian life is going to be a demanding struggle. Often this can mean to live and witness in a depressing environment or under persecution. It also challenges each generation to courageously stand up for our faith and to pass it on.

Costly obedience to Christ may seem to take us in the opposite direction to what we desire. Always, though, it leads to something better.

The paths along which God led our people, as well as my father, were not only different but also strange and wonderful. Solzhenitsyn rightly said: "Certain truths can only be comprehended through sorrow. The individual person needs sorrow and trouble, in order to develop the inner being to spiritual heights."<sup>1</sup> Troubles do away with old rubbish, partly also with tradition, and many treasures which were hidden make their appearance.

Persecution, imprisonment and exile actually contain a certain kind of freedom, which is the freedom of the spirit. No organized churches were left! What remained? Only the individual, and no one could rob the individual of his faith in God. The true church of God is and remains unconquerable. Solzhenitsyn wrote: "The church buildings with all their accessories were to be taken over by the State, while the church would be only the church which, according to the Holy Scriptures, lives within the person."<sup>2</sup>

Brotherly love has the highest priority. Whether one is an ordained elder or not, one's obligation is to bring spiritual healing to the brother. The constitutions and other ordinances which in today's church have an important place, are then in second and third places of importance. They are inconsequential in times of persecution and dissolution of the church. They are swept away by the storm of godlessness.

The Red governing authorities struggled not only against people. Their greatest struggle was directed against God. Therefore, God and "Self", faith and atheism, are two opposing forces which can never be reconciled. Every personality cult which glorifies the talents and qualities of a person, even though it bears a religious character, is worldly (idol worship) and should have no place in the Christian church. This striving for power and the

cult of the personality has led to many quarrels among the Mennonites. It has hampered the effectiveness of our Mennonite people in every age.

Concerning authority, Jesus said: "But it shall not be so among you, but whoever would be great among you must be your servant."<sup>3</sup> We as Mennonites have always been very proud of our tradition, which of course contains much that is good and permanent. However, knowing how many different groups of Mennonites there are in the world, we also see that each has its own traditions and culture. Finally, however, tradition and culture cannot be the bond that unites us as Mennonites.

It is nothing less than our confession of faith that unites us. My father recognized this. He once wrote in a letter to Mr. Dietrich H. Epp: "I have come to the conviction that it is only the religious motive which has made our people what they are."<sup>4</sup> It is the faith of the Anabaptists, our forefathers, who were willing to leave everything for their faith. When we look back at our tradition, we must admit that in this country we have already given up many things. How beautiful and simple were the weddings in the earlier years! When did the Mennonites ever rehearse walking to the marriage altar? Then there are the funerals with viewings at the funeral homes, where the flowers are counted and the value of the coffin appraised. Why didn't anyone of our generation protest against this when we immigrated? Was it because we wanted or had to accommodate ourselves to a higher standard of culture in Canada? If we sincerely ask ourselves what we should preserve, we see that we have already lost many things which we valued. We gave up so much in order to accommodate ourselves to the society around us or to other ethnic groups.

Having determined that the Anabaptist faith binds us together, it is of great importance that we study the faith and lifestyle of our forefathers. It seems to me that our young people at school today are also awakening. They ask about the purpose and goals of life. The younger generation has a strong sense of reality. By and large, they minimize the capabilities of others. They are practical and objective. They think that the handing down of tradition and authority is not the right way, but that new paths must be sought. They are right: no one can pass his or her faith on to the children. The faith can only be demonstrated to others, but each person must experience for him/herself. The Anabaptists held fast to biblical teaching and were willing to lay down their lives for the faith. The supreme need today is for biblical insight, mature faith and sound doctrine.

It makes me happy to know that young people are asking about their forefathers; in order to understand ourselves as Mennonites among fellow Mennonites, we must know our origins. Only when we know about the past and apply this knowledge in the present do we receive strength to build for the future. Everyone who, without careful evaluation, critically disregards everything that our forefathers have built up, is like a tree without roots and

has no strength to lead a productive life.

Some time ago I walked along the shore of Lake Ontario and saw some beautiful, tall spruce trees near the water's edge. They have lived out their life, for the waves of the lake have washed away the soil from their roots. These beautiful trees stand there, yet their roots search in vain for the life-giving soil which earlier gave them nourishment for growth. I stood there for a long time, thinking of the great truth which these roots, bleached white by wind and sun, conveyed to me: "Where do we find nourishment and support? When the next great storm rages, we must fall."

Have we understood the lesson which the Lord taught us in Russia? When I follow my father's thinking about the last fifty years of Mennonite history, it seems evident that materialism ranks high as a real danger for our spiritual life. Do we not have the same problem today? Possessions as such are good. The fact that Mennonites are hardworking and persevering has been evident wherever they have pioneered. Perseverance and diligence are worthy traits, yet they can bring blessings to ourselves and others only if one regards the acquired possessions as not our own. If one considers possessions as being God-given, one also receives strength to give them up.

The emigration from Prussia to Russia was by God's leading. God had a plan for us. It is important to stress this fact. It is, however, also true that after 130 years the Mennonites already doubted that it had been God's will, since the revolution of 1917 brought so much misery, robbery, murder, and other violent deeds upon our people.

Today some historians maintain that we should have remained in Russia after World War II. Who can ever fully understand God's ways with mankind? Who would judge or criticize in a biased manner? Criticism is good, yet if it is to be useful, it should not be given in a condescending way.

The excuse that no one can influence events outside his own person is not entirely valid. We can do a little, and this small contribution is decisive for our faith in God, as well as for the effectiveness of sound criticism. Because so many of our people were imprisoned and exiled, there have been many revivals in Siberia, with small, new, living churches springing up. God's plan with His people stands like a rainbow above the history of the Mennonites.

Solzhenitsyn presents an old truth: "Let us not forget that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church."<sup>5</sup> The call to live to the glory of God is valid whatever the times we live in or our view of history. May the following pages and the diary of my father be a blessing to many.

Olga Regier Rempel

March 15, 1984



**Friends and relatives of David and Maria Sudermann (top right) on the Alexeevka estate on their silver wedding anniversary.**

# Part I

## The Life Story of Aron P. Toews

### Chapter 1

The name Toews is a Low German abbreviation of the name Matheussen, which became Toeussen, Teeoffs, Taews, Toeoffs and finally Toews, as it is written today.

Our forefathers originally came from Friesland. From there they emigrated to Prussia, where they were invited to settle in the lowlands of the Vistula Delta. In order to make the swamps tillable, they had to build dams which took much hard work.

Our ancestors bought a farm in Heubuden near Simonsdorf. A Martin Toews is mentioned in the church books of Heubuden as early as 1748: he had bought land in Warman (Kasalitzky in Russian). While we were in Germany during the Second World War, we visited Gustav Reimer who looked after the church records of the Mennonite Church. We also found the old house of our ancestors in Heubuden. The name Toews, though weather-beaten and barely visible, was engraved on the cross-beam above the door of this house.

My grandfather, Peter Aron Toews, was a farmer (*Mittelbauer*) in Fürstenu in the Molotschna Colony. He was a small, unassuming man and served as lay minister in the church at Schönsee. Allegedly he was not an eloquent speaker, but was nevertheless widely appreciated as a spiritual leader. My father's mother was Susanna Hoemsen; she married very young and was apparently a very lively person. It was said that she did all the talking in the home. However, she faithfully accompanied my grandfather in visiting the sick in the village. When someone died she took the responsibility of preparing the body for burial.

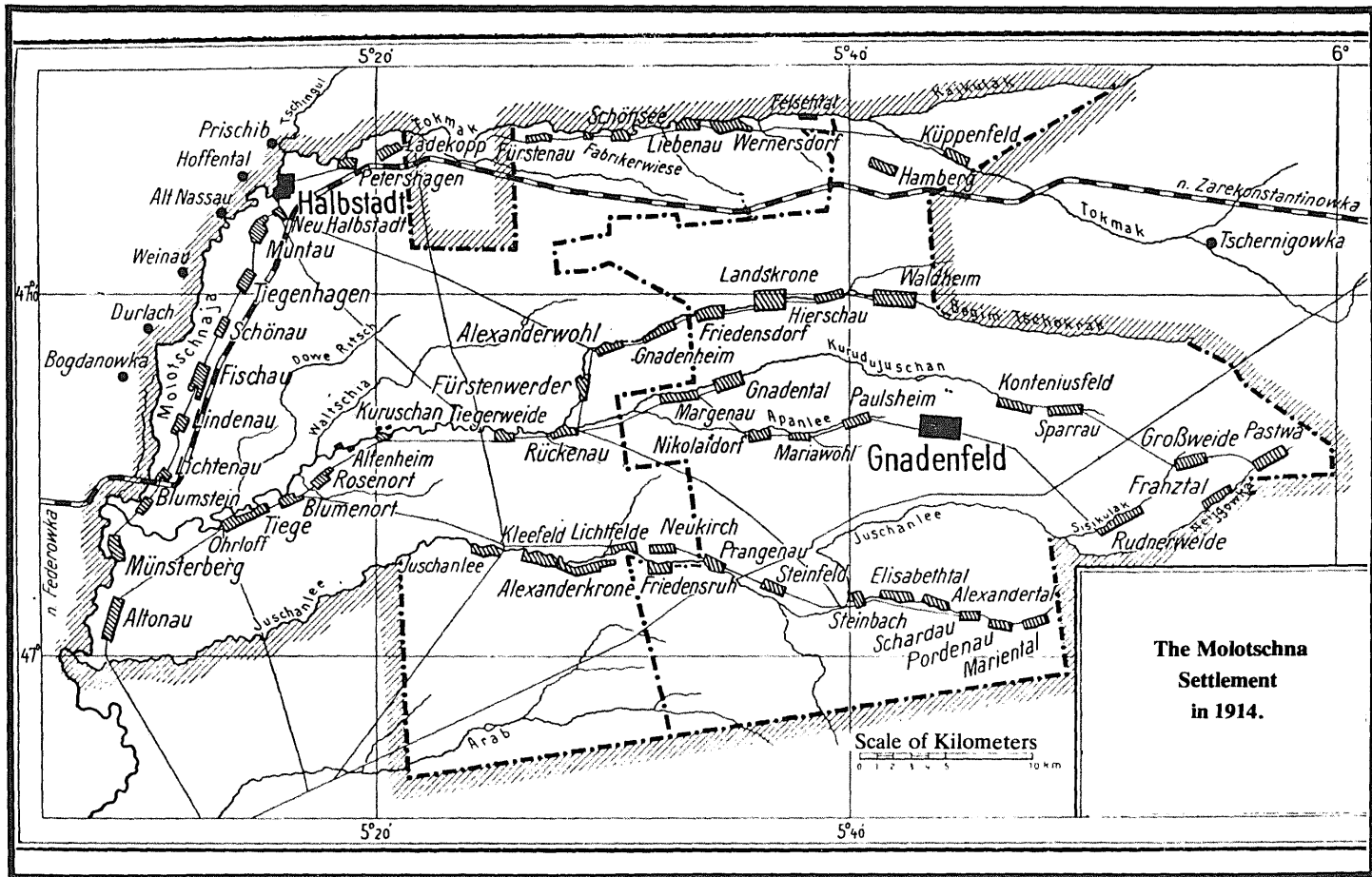
My father's parents were rather poor, since they owned only 3½ desjantins<sup>1</sup> of land. My father had one sister, Sara, and three brothers. Sara, the sister, took employment as a housekeeper on the estate of K. Epp, whom she later married. Father grew up in very modest circumstances.

Since the Toewses were generally happy and lively, there were many boisterous occasions when the four boys were all at home. However, the noisy





**Father's family. Seated, the parents Peter and Susanna Toews, with youngest son, Peter. Standing (l-r): Aron, Sara, Heinrich, a minister, and Gerhard.**



conversations died down very quickly, if at the breakfast table Mother would suddenly say, "Peter, hitch up the horses, we must go to Blumenort today. I dreamt of white flowers and I think old Mrs. Welk<sup>2</sup> has died". Actually, quite often someone would come just then to announce a death or an illness or that someone needed help. Were her dream interpretations simply superstition? I won't pass judgment, but she was always ready to go wherever help was needed. Unfortunately I saw my grandmother only once. It was in 1923, when father took my sister and me with him on an inspection tour to the Molotschna.

Grandmother always wore a big blue linen apron. Once when I ran to her for a handkerchief, she grasped me firmly with one hand and with the other wiped my nose with the corner of her apron. It was stiff and hard, since no doubt she had wiped all my cousins' noses with it. It really hurt and I determined never to ask for a handkerchief again.

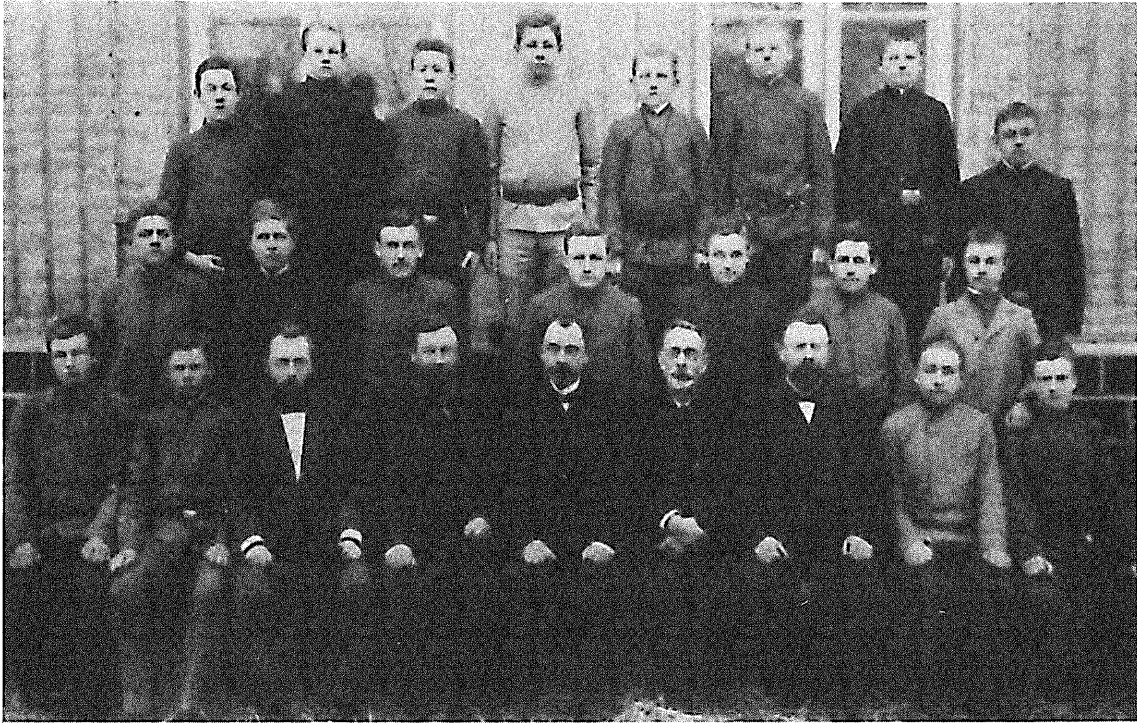
That is all I remember of my grandmother. She died at the home of my uncle, Heinrich P. Toews, in Arnaud, Manitoba, Canada, and was also buried there. I regret never having seen my grandfather. He had already passed on at the time.

My father was the second son of the family. He was born on February 10, 1887, in Fürstenau in the Molotschna Colony, the Tauride gouvernement. Here he attended the village school before moving on to the High School (*Zentralschule*) in Halbstadt. He enjoyed his studies, but was always ready for fun and joking, to the dismay of his father.

One of father's schoolmates personally told me an episode from my father's life. Supposedly it took place at a worship service in Schönsee. The minister was speaking from the pulpit. The young people were sitting in the balcony. Suddenly one of father's school friends beside him took a mirror and comb out of his pocket and began to comb his hair. I don't know what Father thought of that. Then Father reached over, and his friend gave him the mirror. Instead of combing his own hair Father spit on the mirror, closed it and handed it back to his friend who, not wanting to attract attention, put it back into his pocket.

When the service was over the boys could hardly wait to go outside and fight it out. Father told how his father took him aside immediately upon arrival at home. He was sure he would receive a beating. But not so. After a very serious discussion his father prayed for him. This prayer left an indelible impression on him. That same evening Father heard again how his father talked to God, asking for strength and wisdom to raise his boys in such a way that they would always ask to do God's will. This prayer was a turning point in my father's life. He never forgot it.

Since there was no church building in Fürstenau, everyone belonged to the congregation at Schönsee. However, an active spiritual life had developed in Fürstenau. Bible studies and choir practices were held in the school



**Students of the High School (Zentralschule). Aron is standing on the extreme left of the second row from the front. His nickname was “Zieperogja Tews” (lit. squinting Toews).**



**After completion of the teachers' examinations in Halbstadt, 1906-1907. Left to right: Johann Enns (later Ältester), Aron Toews (later minister), Johann J. Harder and Heinrich J. Wiebe.**



house.

In 1906 my grandfather died of pneumonia. At this time Father was nineteen years old and hoped to finish his teacher training. His older brother Heinrich was also a student. Thus the management of the farm became the responsibility of Grandmother and Uncle Gerhard. Father's brother Peter needed his father most at the time, since he was the youngest.

After Grandfather's death, Grandmother went to Muntau to train to be a midwife.<sup>3</sup> She carried on this work in the villages for many years.

Father had made many friends at the High School in Halbstadt, not only among the students. He spoke highly also of his teachers. In a special way he valued his teacher, K. Bergmann, who not only imparted much knowledge to him, but also, through faithful spiritual care, helped him to find the way to salvation in Jesus Christ. Father was baptized in Schönsee. After completing his pedagogical studies he went to Simferopol where he took his state examinations.

He was now ready to look for a teaching position. He found one on the David Sudermann estate at Alexeevka in Ukraine.

# СВИДѢТЕЛЬСТВО.

Предъявитель — его сынъ послѣднимъ со-  
отвѣстника Аронъ Петровичъ Шельвъ, родившійся  
28 января 1887 года, мѣсяца января 1887 года, мѣсяца января  
на основаніи ВЫСОЧАЙШЕ утвержденныхъ 22-го апрѣля  
1868 г., 13-го декабря 1894 г. и 11-го декабря 1895 г. мѣсяца  
Государственного Совѣта о специальныхъ испытаніяхъ по  
Министерству Народнаго Просвѣщенія, подвергшись полному  
испытанію въ Педагогическомъ Совѣтѣ **Ялтинской Але-**  
**ксандровской гимназіи** и выдержавъ оное удовлетвори-  
тельно, — удостоенъ званія учителя начальныхъ  
училищъ.

Въ удостовѣреніе чего дано ему это свидѣтельство за над-  
лежащимъ подписаніемъ и съ приложеніемъ печати Ялтинской  
Александровской гимназіи, 1908 года февраля 21 дня,  
Г. Ялта.

*Настоящее свидѣтельство даетъ право Арону Шельвѣ  
заниматься обученіемъ лишь своихъ учениковъ*

Директоръ

*И. Шельвъ*  
*Александръ Шельвъ*

Члены Педагогическаго Совѣта



*С. Шельвъ*  
*В. Шельвъ*  
*А. Шельвъ*  
*С. Шельвъ*

Писъмоводитель

*И. Шельвъ*  
*С. Шельвъ*

Симъ удостоверяю, что означенный въ семъ  
 свидѣтельствѣ Фроимъ Петровичъ Швецъ со-  
 ставилъ въ качествѣ учителя начальнаго  
 училища Екатеринбургскаго уѣзда съ  
 1<sup>го</sup> Октября 1908г. по 1<sup>е</sup> января 1914 года.  
 1914 года февраля 5 дня. Екатеринбургъ. Швецъ.



Исполнительный уполномоченный  
 Екатеринбургъ 1914 года 5  
 февраля 2-го района

М. Каминетъ



## Chapter 2

Alexeevka, the estate of my mother's parents, was situated about twenty-five *verst*<sup>1</sup> from the town of Nikopol. My grandfather had bought the land from a Russian nobleman. The grounds were well laid out with a beautiful garden, and a large yard surrounded by stables, granaries and other farm buildings. In the middle of this large yard was a small tower with a bell from which a thick rope hung to the ground.<sup>2</sup>

My first childhood memories are of this bell tower. How happy we were when it was time to ring the bell for dinner or suppertime.

Since such estates were often situated quite a distance from the villages, it was not possible for these people to attend the worship services regularly. Another difficulty was school attendance. Private tutors were hired at all the estates to teach the children and to prepare those who desired higher education for entrance into the state schools. On Sundays worship services were held in the homes.

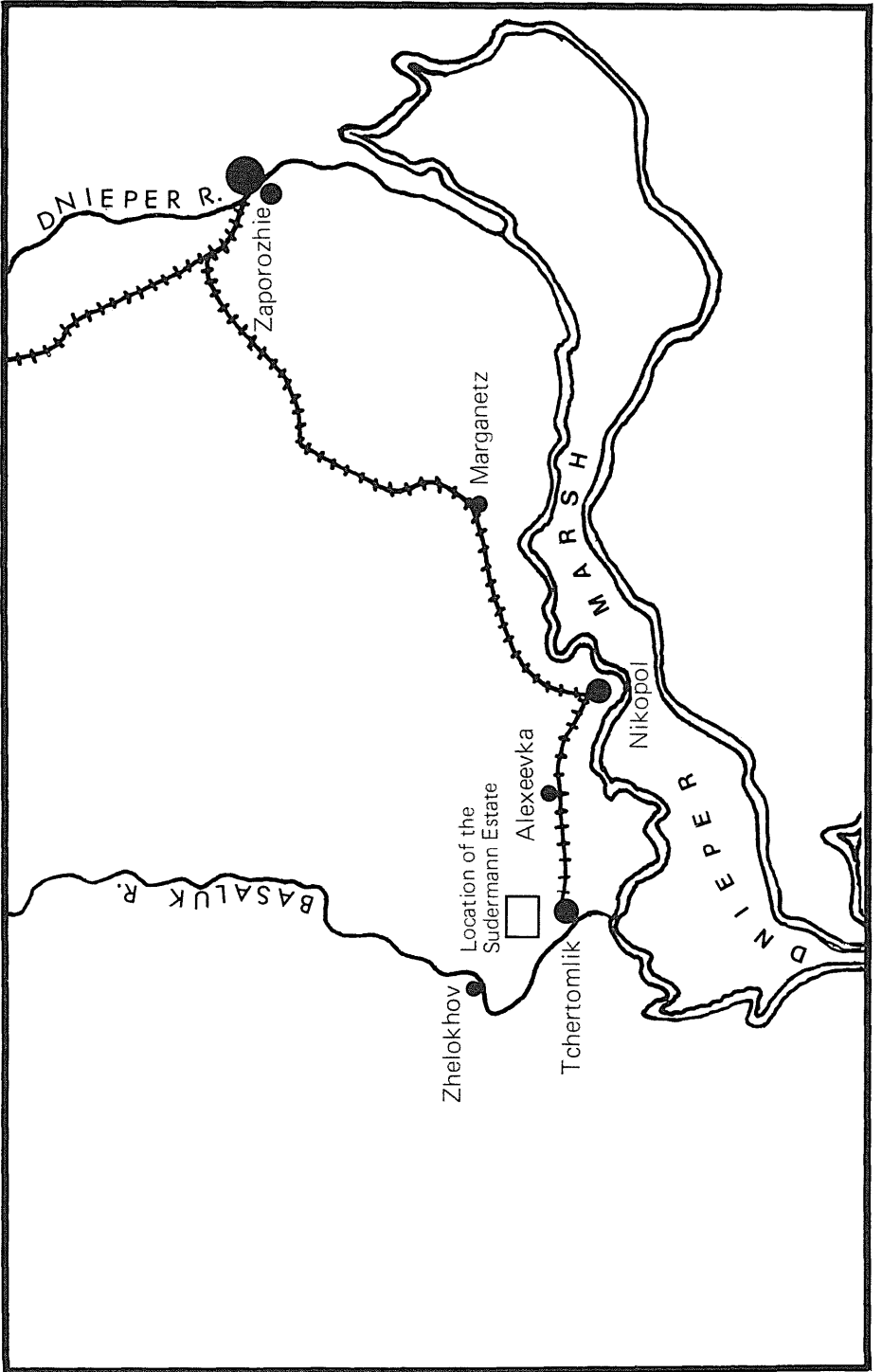
This kind of secluded life also had its positive aspects. The family could grow together more, as an entity, than was the case in the villages. There was music and singing, and good books were always available.<sup>3</sup>

Whereas the young people in the villages had many opportunities to participate in various clubs, Christian Endeavour groups, choirs, etc., the young people on the estates had to rely more on their own initiative and could develop their talents within their own family circles.

But as life always has both its bright and its dark side, so it was with life on the estates. There was little opportunity, except in the summer holidays, to get to know other young people, in order to form a better opinion of village life. This isolation made it especially difficult to find a life partner.

From the stories my mother told I know that the children in the Sudermann family were raised with the strictest discipline. All the girls had to help with the house cleaning even though there was enough hired help to do these chores. My grandmother's maiden name was Heese. She was a great-granddaughter of Heinrich Heese, founder of the High School in Chortitza.

I regret not having known Grandfather Sudermann either, since he died in early middle age. Consequently the great responsibility of the huge household fell on Grandmother's shoulders. The oldest son was nineteen years old when his father died. Together with a manager he took charge of the fields, cattle and farmhands.





As I look back on my life, I am deeply grateful for all the humble, faithful and godly people who influenced my childhood and youth. Of my mother's relations I remember my grandmother, Maria Sudermann, as a simple, honest and upright woman. She seldom wore jewellery, except for a narrow wedding band which she never removed while working.

During the last four years of her life she was blind. At her funeral my father made a comment about her that I never forgot: "She was a woman who never lied, and she was to me a mother to whom I could come with all my problems." Often I feel remorse when I think of how little gratitude I showed her during my youth.

In the fall of 1908 my father became a teacher on the David Sudermann estate. He was to teach the youngest son. Since the children of the workers were also included, a small school was built next to the farmhouse.



**As teacher on an estate, 1909.**

What did the time-table of such a private tutor look like? I don't know much about it, but if one of the children had a birthday, there was no interruption in the lessons. In spring or in summer when there was much work to do on the yard or in the garden, the children had to help. But after work Grandmother always had a surprise waiting for the children. Often it was a picnic in the nearby valley where they went with horse and wagon; sometimes there were yard games. In winter it was music and singing, or indoor games like chess and crokinole. Also, there were always good books and magazines for avid readers. In winter the nearby river had good ice for skating. There were also sleighrides with jingling bells on the horses, when the family would go visiting the neighbours.

In all these activities the teacher would also be included. Thus it is easy to see how a poor teacher might fall in love with one of the proprietor's daughters.

This happened to my father. He became engaged to the oldest daughter, Maria Sudermann. Their wedding took place on the Alexeevka estate on May 6, 1910. Rev. David Epp, later the editor of the *Botschafter* (Messenger) and also the last elder in Chortitza, officiated at the ceremony. His sermon text was Revelation 2:10: "Be thou faithful unto death and I will give thee the crown of life".

According to my mother's accounts it was a very large wedding, lasting three days. Many guests were invited. A big tent was set up in the garden, and many rooms prepared for overnight visitors. No doubt this was a necessity since all the relatives lived at a great distance and had to come by train. Naturally some people made remarks such as, "so Aron Toews has found himself a rich wife". These came especially from the relatives in the village, who had known my father's circumstances.

Father's bridal gift to mother was a volume of Karl Gerok's poems. Mother brought this book as far as Poland when we left Chortitza, but the last time we had to flee it was left behind in an old chest. This chest also contained a photo album with pictures of all the couples whom father had married. He had entered all the wedding texts as well as the year and date of marriage. What a treasure it would have been for our archives today!

When father was no longer needed as a teacher on the estate, he took a position at Neuendorf in the Old Colony. Since my mother was expecting a child, she decided to stay with her family at the estate.

In Neuendorf father learned to know Johann G. Rempel, who was also teaching there. Soon the two became very close friends. After the close of that school year father went back to the estate at Alexeevka. His first daughter, Natasha, was born there in May, 1912.

On the estate however there was no employment for father so he looked elsewhere for a teaching position. This time he found a place in the beautiful village of Niederchortitza (Lower Chortitza) on the Dnieper River.

Dr. David G. Rempel of California has shared his memories regarding our arrival in Niederchortitza. "I remember clearly when your father and his young wife arrived at the school yard with all their belongings. Their possessions were loaded on two hayracks pulled by teams of oxen. That was a novelty in our village since we seldom saw wagons pulled by oxen, except when the so-called 'Tchumaki' came from a distance to buy watermelons.<sup>4</sup>

"On the island of Chortitza and in Niederchortitza one could grow good watermelons since the soil was sandy. Your father's colleague at the school was Kornelius Sawatzky. I remember so clearly your father's brisk walk, how he fidgeted with his hands and how he fairly swallowed his syllables when he spoke."<sup>5</sup>

Often father and mother told us of this first teaching position which they occupied together. The village was located in a beautiful setting quite near to the Dnieper River. Both father and mother were gifted with a fine aesthetic



**Aron and Maria Sudermann Toews as a bridal couple in 1910.**

sense so they enjoyed this place in a special way.

Father often took his class for outings to enjoy the beauty of God's creation in the great outdoors. They picked flowers, dried them, studied the various species. Thus the field day became a living nature study. The tall granite boulders which interrupted the flat, sandy shore of the Dnieper gave much opportunity to study the various stone formations.

How eagerly the students awaited the breakup of the Dnieper in spring. No one wanted to miss the moment when “the ice began to go”. At first one would hear a dull rumble as if thunder were rolling in the distance. Suddenly somewhere the ice would break, a block would rear up a meter high, then other blocks followed. Pushing and crashing, the ice floes tumbled over each other, water spurting high in the air as the powerful current set the huge mass in motion. The ice was going. Everybody knew. It was spring!

To this day I recall how impatiently we and the high-schoolers waited for this moment, not wanting to miss it. When the teacher came in for classes the whole student body would shout, “Let’s go, let’s go, the ice is breaking today.” When I think of spring breakup at home, I remember the beautiful words of the poem *Pfingsten* (Pentecost):

From ice set free  
Are brook and stream,  
By springtime’s soft  
Life-giving beam.

In the summer of 1914 World War I broke out. Events were moving toward an uncertain future. For this reason my parents with their two daughters, Natasha and Olga (I was born on April 5, 1913), moved back to Alexeevka.



**Father’s first students in Neuenburg, 1911-1912.**



**Aron and Maria Toews in 1913.**

## Chapter 3

The war broke out quite unexpectedly in August. Many farmers had already finished harvesting and had stored their grain.

At this time four Mennonite mother colonies and a number of daughter colonies existed in Russia. The land holdings of the four original settlements, Chortitza, Molotschna, the Trakt, and Old Samara (Alexanderthal), altogether amounted to 4,362,902 acres<sup>1</sup>. Our people had not remained poor.

At the time of the general call to military service many of our Mennonites were also recruited. The traditional exemption privileges of the Mennonites were respected, however<sup>2</sup>. Whoever didn't claim these rights was recruited as a volunteer for active service as a soldier.

Many however volunteered for the *Sanitätsdienst* (medical service) which was directed by the All-Russian Union of Zemstvos (*Semskii Soyuz*) and several other organizations. My father also chose to sign up with the *Zemstvo* union. By March of 1915, over three thousand Mennonites were serving as *Sanitäter*<sup>3</sup>. My father was assigned a place on Medical Train Number 194.

A medical train was a special train carrying doctors, nurses, and medical personnel for the purpose of returning wounded soldiers to hospitals. Opinions about this form of service have varied among our people. Many have insisted that it was a service not to the victims, but to the perpetrators of war. But being a Good Samaritan to a wounded person is always the will of God, no matter whether it is a friend or foe. The Sermon on the Mount teaches that very clearly.

At this time Mother and the children lived with Grandmother on the estate, waiting for letters and reports from the front. I can remember once when father came home on furlough. I was three years old at the time and hardly recognized him since I had never seen him with a beard. Father made use of this time to be together with us as much as possible. He played with us and took part in our childhood games.

We children did not understand when Father, Mother and the other relatives spent long evening hours discussing the situation in Russia and what it meant for the Mennonites. Much later, when we were already living in Chortitza, he told us about his experiences on his trips to the front. How we children enjoyed these stories on a Saturday evening!

On those days we would have cold cuts for supper with tea from the samovar. It was so cozy listening to the samovar's soft humming, watching



**The medical corps men of Train #194 in 1914-1915.**

the glow of the wood embers and smelling their aroma. "Papa, tell us about when you were in the service," we asked again and again. And so father related:

"On a cold day in December we received orders to go quite close to the battlefield in order to rescue the wounded. During the day we heard loud artillery fire interrupted by the thunder of cannons. We waited till dark and slowly went closer to the battlefield.

"Everything was ready in the train: a dressing room with all the necessary equipment for operations such as removing bullets. All the lights had to be extinguished on the train. We disembarked and made our way to the battlefield with stretchers. Such a scene was heart-rending. The icy north wind whistled over the scattered bodies. Children, do you know what I thought of when I knelt beside a man to examine whether he was alive or dead? I thought that he too has a mother somewhere who is praying for him and hoping that he will come home safely and well. There they lie and we don't know where to begin. I hear a groan and as we hurry over we see that someone is still alive. Thank God!

"That evening we found a good number of wounded who all had the same kind of abdominal wound. They had been standing, weapons in hand, ready to make a charge, when they were all hit from the side with shrapnel. Some were dead, others unconscious and half frozen. They had lain there many hours. The blood was frozen onto their torn clothes. It took hours of labour trying to bandage the injured and bring them to the train. The wounds had to be cleansed later inside the train. Only after we had removed the clothes and cleaned up did we see how serious the wounds were. There was something else, however, which made the work more difficult. That was the unbearable stench of filth and excrement. Many of our medical personnel who ordinarily didn't smoke reached for a cigarette, and I did, too.

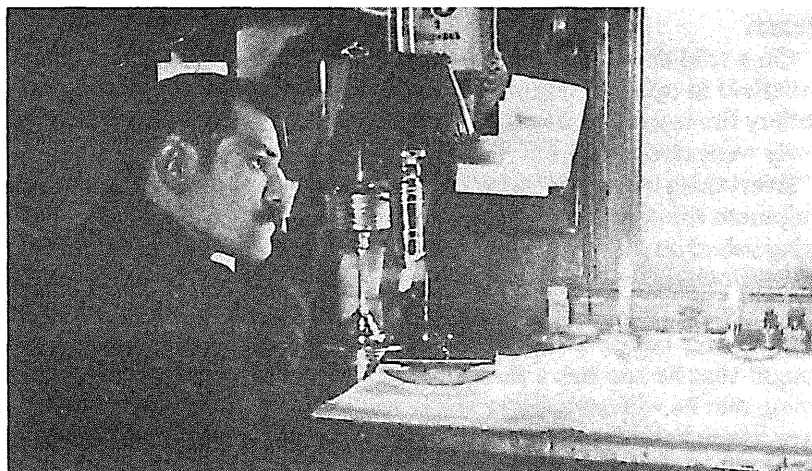
"Among the wounded on this particular day was a big, strong man, who had a severe head wound. He was lying on the operating table after the bullet had been removed and the wound was ready to be sewn up, and the doctor wanted to give him chloroform. But the man gritted his teeth and said, 'Do your work, doctor, I can stand it. I am a blacksmith'."

With great astonishment we listened, not suspecting that we too would one day live through a world war and have to leave our homeland. How good it was to be at home, surrounded by the love of Father and Mother!

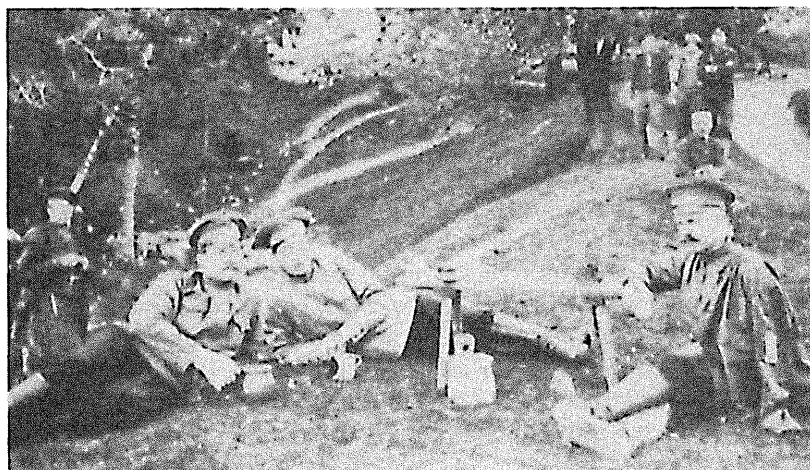
In the confusion of the war all thinking persons and in particular the Mennonites asked themselves: "Why does all this have to happen? What can we as Mennonites learn from world events?" In general people tried to cope with those difficult times, hoping that they would be temporary. Yet there was to be much, much more hardship in store for the Mennonites as well as for the other peoples of Russia.

From October, 1916, until shortly before the beginning of the Revolution





**Father in the office of medical services Train #194, 1914-1915.**



**Father as a member of the medical corps. Aron Toews (left), Johann G. Rempel (later Ältester), right.**

Father served in the head office of the All-Russian Union of Zemstvos in Moscow. Here he worked together with his old friend and teaching colleague, Johann G. Rempel.

On March 12, 1917, the Czar of Russia was compelled to abdicate and a new provisional government came into being. Many had new hopes for peace, tranquility and more ordered living conditions. At the head of this provisional government was Prince George Lvov. The same men who had forced the tsar's abdication on March 15 were themselves nearly thrown out of office by the Bolsheviks in July, 1917. Alexander Kerensky took over as new prime minister when Prince Lvov resigned.

There were uprisings everywhere in St. Petersburg. Industry suffered a total break-down. Labourers were without work and without food. Railways suspended operations since only half the locomotives could be put into service. There was chaos everywhere.

In September 1917 the Workers' and Soldiers' Council (*Soviet*) in St. Petersburg resolved: 1. to abolish private ownership of land; 2. to transfer ownership of factories and industrial enterprises to the workers; 3. to terminate Finland's independence from Russia; 4. to dissolve the *Duma* (imperial parliament). The moderate Socialists on the council were not in agreement with this proposal, and refused to carry out these resolutions. They resigned and then the real Bolsheviks came to power. The first thing they did was to re-introduce the death penalty. Legally there really was no government in Russia, since the new government had not been elected according to a constitution. In October of 1917 a pre-parliamentary convention met in Mary's Palace in St. Petersburg, the former seat of the Imperial Council. Ringing speeches were made declaring "All power to the Workers' and Soldiers' councils!" "All land to the people!" "Long live the Constituent Assembly!"

This is what things were like in St. Petersburg when Father arrived by train from Moscow. He stood in the doorway and heard all the speeches which lasted from morning till evening. Here he could see with his own eyes how much work had been done beforehand to bring down the provisional government.

All over the streets, barricades, and speakers' platforms were people waiting for something — waiting for a better future. Sailors, labourers, servants, students and also some farmers from the surrounding area waited for things to come. Lenin and Trotzky made fiery speeches about true freedom for the people, and the populace shouted its approval.

At the end of October 1917 Father came back to the estate. Meanwhile trouble had also erupted in the villages and on the estates.

Newspapers had circulated the news that all land now belonged to the State. In the vicinity of the estate Alexeevka there was a manganese mine. Father, fearing that a raid on the estate might come from there, rented a house in the nearby town of Nikopol in case we had to flee.<sup>4</sup>

On November 7, 1917, it happened. The Revolution was carried out. My uncles, owners of the estate, fled to a neighboring village, while Father stayed behind with us, our grandmother and the aunts.

A troop of workers arrived demanding to speak to the landlord. Father went out to the yard to negotiate with them. They demanded money, provisions, horses and wagons. Father begged them to allow him two sleighs and horses so we could leave the estate, but this was not granted since everything was now state property.

So Father went by horseback to the village of Ebenfeld in order to borrow sleighs and horses from Mennonite farmers. A faithful Russian worker who had stayed with the Sudermanns went to Blumenhof with a letter from Father asking for one night's lodging for the family. Through my investigation I learned that it was the family of Heinrich Regier who actually took us in. They were the forebears of my first husband, Jacob Regier from Chor-titza. Winter had come early and Grandmother, the aunts and Father had already packed all kinds of things to take along.

Everybody felt the gloom of departure. Faithful maids, their faces stained with tears, helped wherever they could.

On a cold, gray November day the sleighs arrived. However they did not stop on the yard where visitors were usually received, but at the back entrance which led to the big garden. It was best to be as inconspicuous as possible.

I remember that morning so clearly. Our very beloved nursemaids dressed us children warmly and tearfully kissed us goodbye. Then Father carried us both out, one after the other, in his strong arms, and bundled us into the big, warm fur blanket. There were also some hot bricks which kept us warm for a long time.

Away we went; the strong horses stepped briskly along, and the sleigh runners creaked in the deep snow. Soon we reached the field path. Faster and faster we went as we left our home behind. Softly the big fleecy snowflakes fell. We looked back once more, but the dear old house, the garden, the security of our childhood were lost in the darkness of nightfall.

The re-evaluation of all we held dear had begun. "The old collapses, times change; new life blossoms from the ruins". That sounded so certain, so hopeful. Would that that life had really been a better one!

Why, we ask ourselves today, did this revolution have to be carried out in such a brutal way and with so much sacrifice and bloodshed?

Granted, the czar had abdicated. On reading Russian history, we naturally wonder whether the events of those days didn't represent a brutal popular struggle driven by dreadful nationalistic hatred.

The cry was for freedom and equality of rights which can never happen since people's knowledge, intelligence and conception of this freedom vary so much.

In spite of the revolution the poor Russian farmers received no land. Today the whole world can see that in a country where for over fifty years freedom and equal rights have been proclaimed, one can still travel first or second class. The party leaders have their summer villas on the Black Sea just as the czars used to have.

It has become a capitalistic Communism. Even the farthest reaches of Siberia have become a part of this mighty empire. Today guides proudly show off this great development to the tourists. Yet how much of this has been built by the blood and tears of the exiles!

Cheap labour was produced by the worst system of justice in the world. The government created its own criminals and sent them in hordes to the north, where no one would go under normal circumstances.

It had become quite dark when our sleigh stopped at the large farmyard of the Heinrich Regiers. There was a friendly welcome as the door opened and we entered a warm farmhouse from which so much peace and tranquility still radiated.

We spent one night in this farmhouse and resumed our travels the next morning. Soon we arrived at the town of Nikopol. We moved into the big corner house which Father had rented some time earlier.

## Chapter 4

The town of Nikopol lay on the Dnieper river. After we had moved into the corner house and made ourselves reasonably comfortable, the Advent season was upon us. Some of our relatives had also moved into the house so their children and we played together a lot.

However, the Christmas festival of 1917 was quite different from other times, even though we had a Christmas tree. Whenever we stopped our games and looked at our parents and aunts we saw grave faces and heard conversations that filled us with fear. The uncles were still hidden somewhere and sometimes came around to bring food, only to disappear again.

Father looked for a job as an accountant in order to earn something. He was fortunate to find such a position. In all this uncertainty Mother probably suffered the most since she was expecting her third child.

Quite frequently men would come into our house demanding ammunition. Naturally on such occasions the house would be searched. From Aunt Anna Sudermann's writings I learned that at one of these house searches an old czarist flag was found. They wanted to know whose it was. Father said it belonged to him; he had intended to make clothing out of it since it was impossible to buy any.

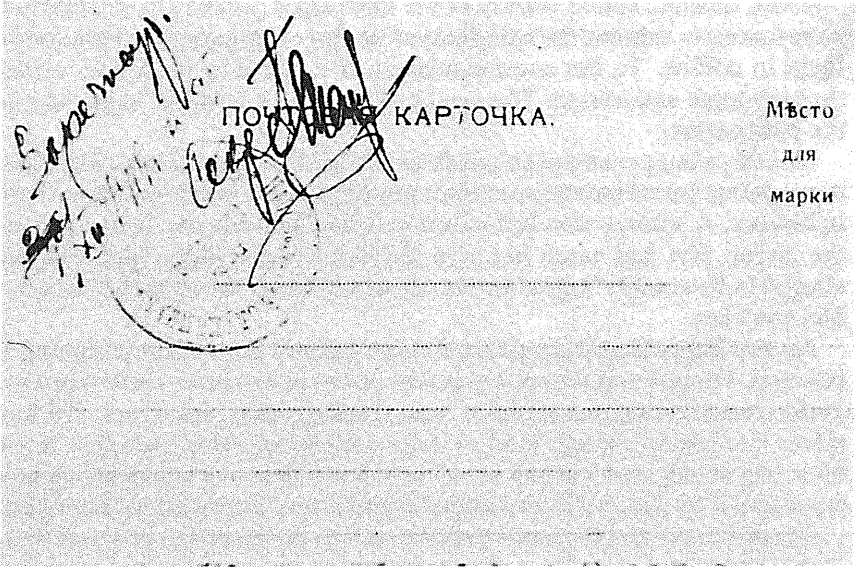
Father realized it was a mistake to have rented such a large house, so he looked for a smaller one. The Sudermanns also found a different dwelling.

My brother Kolya was born in May, 1918, after we had moved. The birth was difficult and since there was no doctor his left arm was broken. The arm never was splinted correctly. In addition he had rickets, and this was a real concern during those difficult times.

Later that summer we moved into another small house quite close to the Dnieper River. That winter all the men had to cut ice on the river to fill the ice cellars before the spring thaw. Father caught a bad cold doing this and developed pneumonia. Mother went from bed to bed — from Father to my little brother who was sickly and often had cramps. But in the evenings at dusk we always sang. These melodies that Mother sang will stay with me all my life.

Father had many friends in Nikopol, including several among the Jews. There was a certain Dr. Kogan who always came by to see how Father was feeling. After Father was well we moved again, more into the centre of town.

In these times of lawlessness and anarchy, Nestor Machno and his bandit



Father's membership card in a professional organization at Nikopol (1919).

gang also carried out raids in Nikopol. Once he had loaded a group of three hundred Jews onto a ship and set a heavy guard over them. Father too was compelled to take his turn at guard duty on this ship, although he refused to use a weapon. The orders were as follows: if Machno should be routed a sign would be given and the ship with 300 on board was to be sunk. The Reds did defeat Machno's forces, and took over the ship. Now all those who had taken part in guard duty were to be shot. Mother got to hear about it. We waited anxiously for Father's return.

Late that evening two men knocked at our door and asked to speak to Mother. But she was afraid to open the door. One of them then said, "Aron Petrovitch is alive, we have hidden him and he will come home later. He is our friend." Praise God! We shouted for joy and Mother, looking through the window at the sunset, wiped away tears of joy.

The house in which we now lived was very small, having only two rooms, a kitchen and a hall. The windows were very low, so that anyone passing by could look directly inside.

My sister and I went to school in Nikopol. My parents had become good friends with the highly esteemed Rev. Abram Penner and his family. Also the family of Peter Hooge, friends of the Sudermanns, helped us where they could.

When Machno seized control of the town again, all the able-bodied men were forced to exhume the half-decayed bodies of his gang members and lay them in coffins. To the accompaniment of music they were then carried through town and buried. The stench of decay was horrible, especially for the pallbearers.

One day a huge crowd of people flocked together on the street. We looked through our low windows to see what was happening. What we saw was hard to believe. A woman who had committed child murder was being led down the street. She had eaten her own children because of hunger. She was alleged to have said, "I gave birth to them and I have the right to kill them." She was shot.

As was happening throughout Russia, typhoid fever soon broke out in Nikopol. Hunger and unsanitary conditions were to blame. Daily more and more emaciated figures could be seen shuffling down the street. We ourselves had barely enough food to share among ourselves each day. It was both frightening and dangerous to walk down the street. Spotted typhoid was carried by lice, while abdominal typhoid was attributed to starvation.

Grandmother and the aunts had moved into the basement of a well-to-do Russian family's home. Very often our parents sent us to check whether they were all right. Small children were mostly safe from attack by bandits. During this time our parents taught us our first Bible verse, Psalm 50:15: "Call upon me in the day of trouble..." We thought of this whenever we were sent to Grandmother's.

One day when Father came home from work he saw a man lying on the path, a man later identified as one of Machno's gang. He was unconscious. Father carried him to a house and laid him on a bench. That same evening he found lice in his shirt. After a few days Father developed spotted typhoid. One night when the fever was at its height we thought he would die. Unexpectedly the little Jewish doctor knocked on our window asking about Father's well-being. When he saw how seriously ill he was, he ran to get some coffee beans for Mother to make into a cup of strong coffee. This was to stimulate the heart.

I would like to mention another unforgettable event. Someone knocked at our door one winter evening. As Father opened up, we saw Grandmother standing there in only her petticoat, a vest and a kerchief. We could hardly believe what we saw. Her face was bloody with many round marks caused by being hit with a pistol. She stammered two words, the names of her two daughters. They had become the prey of the bandits while she had tried to protect them. After that Grandmother and the aunts moved in with us.

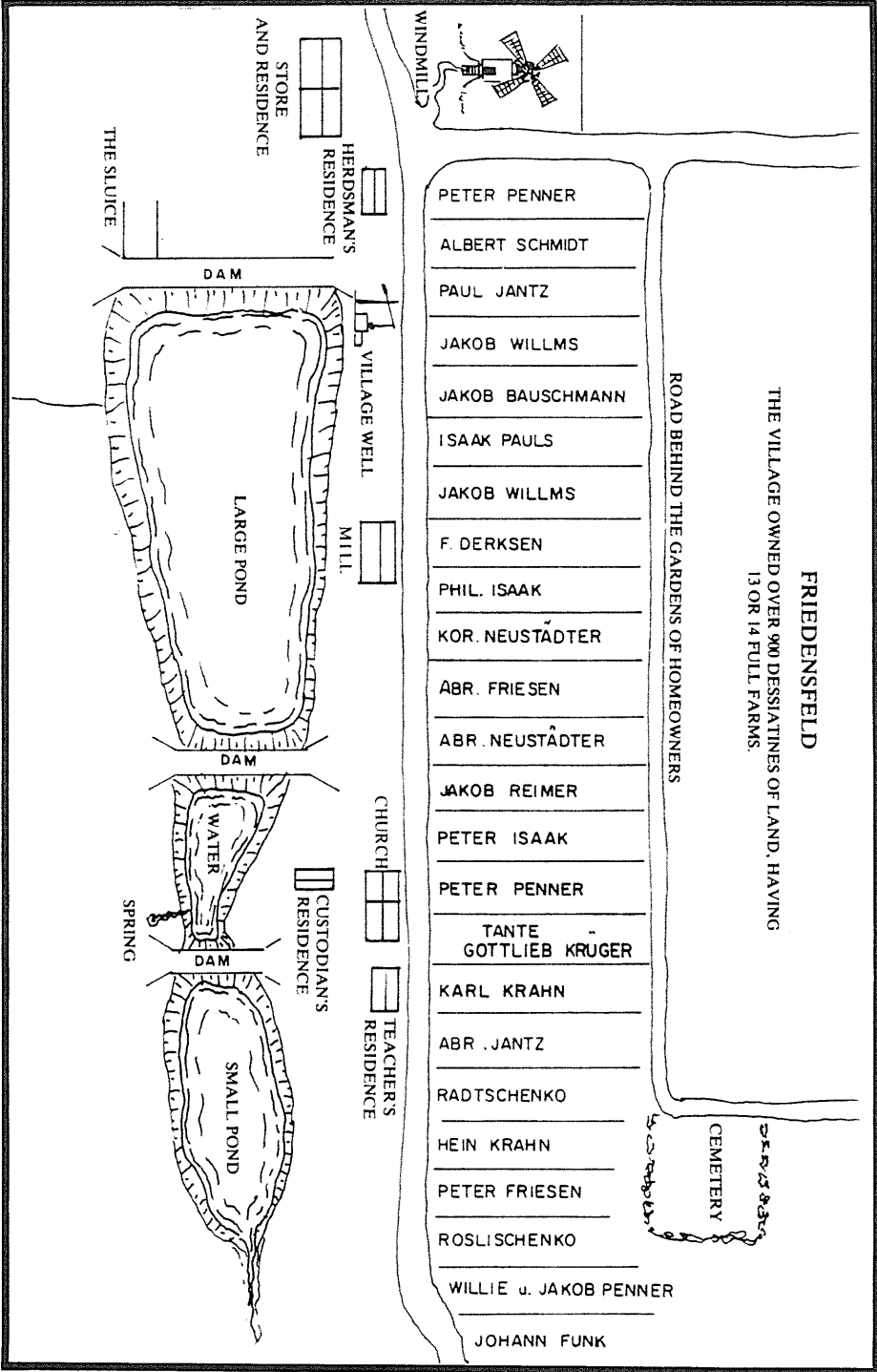
Now all the women and children slept in one room. Father literally slept on the doorstep since bandits were continually coming around to demand things. Women and girls were in constant danger.

Naturally under these circumstances mail service was irregular. One day Father received a letter with the news of the death of his brother Gerhard Toews. At the last minute he had joined the self-defence units (*Selbstschutz*<sup>1</sup>) and had been murdered by the bandits on his first scouting sortie. His wife had waited for him at home. After his death his son, also named Gerhard, was born. He is still living in Russia today.

On March 19, 1920, another daughter was born to my parents. She was named Maria, after her mother and grandmother. In spite of all the hardships Mother had endured at that time, the baby was strong and healthy. We were all happy to have a baby sister.

Early in the summer of 1920 Father again was able to find a teaching position, this time in a Mennonite village with the beautiful name of *Friedensfeld* (Field of Peace).





PETER PENNER

ALBERT SCHMIDT

PAUL JANTZ

JAKOB WILLMS

JAKOB BAUSCHMANN

ISAAK PAULS

JAKOB WILLMS

F. DERKSEN

PHIL. ISAAK

KOR. NEUSTÄDTER

ABR. FRIESEN

ABR. NEUSTÄDTER

JAKOB REIMER

PETER ISAAK

PETER PENNER

TANTE  
GOTTLIEB KRUGER

KARL KRAHN

ABR. JANTZ

RADTSCHENKO

HEIN KRAHN

PETER FRIESEN

ROSLISCHENKO

WILLIE u. JAKOB PENNER

JOHANN FUNK

FRIEDENSFELD

THE VILLAGE OWNED OVER 900 DESSATIINES OF LAND, HAVING  
13 OR 14 FULL FARMS.

ROAD BEHIND THE GARDENS OF HOMEOWNERS

CEMETERY

WINDMILL

STORE  
AND RESIDENCE

HERDSMAN'S  
RESIDENCE

DAM

THE SLUCE

VILLAGE WELL

MILL

LARGE POND

DAM

WATER

SPRING

DAM

CUSTODIAN'S  
RESIDENCE

CHURCH

TEACHER'S  
RESIDENCE

SMALL POND

## Chapter 5

The beautiful little village of Friedensfeld was located about 45 *verst* (30 miles) northeast of Nikopol. It had been founded by members of the Kleine Gemeinde<sup>1</sup>. Later all the landowners belonged to the Mennonite Brethren Church.

This village had 13-15 farmsteads which were all situated on one side of the street. But each farmer also had land on the opposite side. Some had planted orchards, while others had sold these plots to landless families (*Anwohner*). Therefore there were only a few buildings on that side of the street — the church-school, the teacherage, the blacksmith's shop and a few homes of the *Anwohner*.

My parents moved to Friedensfeld in the summer of 1920. The farmers moved us with two hayracks on a very hot day. Being over-tired, we children soon fell asleep and didn't notice the heat until we were thoroughly sun-burned.

When we arrived at the large schoolyard we saw a nice roomy house. It was almost like a dream. Was this really where we would live? Nearby stood a nice barn. But the centre of attraction for us was the large apricot tree in the middle of the yard; a tree which we could climb to our hearts' content. What a spacious place in comparison to the cramped quarters in town.

But the lovely name of Friedensfeld could not promise peace to the villagers. There were times when bandits attacked and robbed the farmyards. Many of these were looting robbers who took advantage of the chaotic situation to pillage and burn.

It was Christmas Day of 1920. Many people had gathered in church for the service, among them Father, Mother, and the two smallest children. My little brother Kolya, who was already four, but still couldn't walk, sat as usual on Father's knee. The choir had just begun the first song, when the people heard the sound of horses' hooves outside; through the window appeared several riders stopping in front of the school. Then the church door was flung open and several armed men rushed in, their guns pointed at the people. They shouted that the singing should stop immediately and that everyone should be quiet because they had something to say.

A paralyzing fear gripped the assembly. Then Father got up, carried my brother over to where Mother was sitting, and went to stand behind the pulpit. In a loud voice he spoke to the people: "Let us not become discouraged; remember how our forefathers suffered for their faith. Let us not be

afraid, for we are in God's hands." Then he went over to the bandits and in a calm, friendly voice asked them in Russian what they wanted.

Because of his quiet manner the congregation and also the bandits calmed down. They asked for a sum of money, and after discussing the matter with Father they agreed that a few men and Father would collect the money in the village. One of the riders accompanied them from house to house.

After they had collected the money they went back to the church, passing along the broad village street. The blacksmith had a shotgun and was unaware of what was going on. Wanting to help Father, he hid behind a bush and fired a shot. Luckily the shot hit only the bandit's horse, which reared up. Father instinctively raised his hand and shouted "Don't shoot!"; but already another bandit came running out of the church to see what had happened. Hadn't Father promised that no resistance would be attempted? However, when the bandits realized that everything was in order and that they would get their money, they settled down. God had intervened and helped. The Christmas program was resumed and turned into a celebration of praise and thanksgiving. Later at the dinner table Father showed us his hand which had taken a few pellets of buckshot. He had also been spattered by the horse's blood, but otherwise he was unharmed. We stood around listening to Father tell of the event.

About this time Father wrote a letter to his brother in the U.S.A. The letter said that we still had food to eat, but that the fare was very meagre.<sup>2</sup> However, in 1922 there was a complete crop failure and together with us many thousands suffered from starvation. The *Rundschau* recorded a telegram stating that a certain A. Slegel arrived in Zaporozhye with provisions on February 24, 1922. A second telegram read: "Relief work organized in Chortitza area on February 25. 7180 persons in danger of starving to death. 1000 starving in Grünfeld, Baratov, 3000 in Nikopol area. Seventy cents enough for one person per month. The Crimea and Kuban in critical position. Please send more money". Signed by Hiebert and Krehbiel.<sup>3</sup>

Father wrote the following to his brother Peter Toews on February 20, 1922:

We are anxiously waiting for American Mennonite Relief. I am authorized to work in this respect, i.e. to travel, to plead and even to beg. Recently we have been told that we can write to our friends and acquaintances in America through the American Menonite Relief Administration. Hopefully this letter will reach you through this service. We have another five months before we can harvest a crop or vegetables and many are dying of starvation daily. Many more are suffering from malnutrition. I had to close school since there was no fuel to heat it. Under these circumstances I cannot demand any wages as a teacher.

We have had to barter away our remaining possessions at ridic-

ulously low prices — for instance the piano for 1 *puđ*<sup>4</sup> of rye flour. Bread is exorbitantly high. No sugar, coffee, or fats available.

I would despair if I were not convinced that God can help us out of this difficulty.

At that time we had no idea that the congregation had decided to provide our family with one meal a day.

One winter evening we were all sitting and looking out the window. The little oil lamp was not to be lit until it was completely dark and time for Mother to put us all to bed. As usual we sang a few songs. I heard Mother say, “There are still five months before harvest; our provisions are gone. We don’t even have a crust of bread for the children tomorrow.” After a long silence Father said, “We must pray and trust the Lord. We have a God who can do miracles. Think of the feeding of the five thousand.”

Later as I lay in bed I thought for a long time about Father’s words. Suddenly, as if a ray of light had shone into my heart, I was convinced that we would have bread for breakfast next morning. I heard Father and Mother pray; and, although I was very hungry, I fell asleep peacefully.

Next morning my sister and I helped Mother place the cups and empty breadplate on the table. It seemed to me that Mother didn’t have much faith that we would receive bread from somewhere. Unable to contain myself, I said to Mother, “Let’s call Father and pray, and then God will send us bread.”

Mother looked at me with a kindly smile and nodded. Father sat down, and we folded our hands. Father had not finished praying when there was a knock at the door. “Come in,” cried Father and Mother almost in unison.

I shall never forget this experience. A lady entered with a small loaf of rye bread and a jug of milk which she placed on the table. I shouted for joy, because now I knew definitely that God answers prayers. My parents thanked the lady, and she told them of the congregation’s decision.

There is a saying that a drowning man will grasp at straws. That is the way it is with starving people. It is unbelievable to hear what people ate in those times: cats, dogs, gophers, hedgehogs, crows, etc.

One day my sister Natasha and I decided to catch crows too. We knew how to do it from watching others, so we tried our luck. We set up a large wooden trough, to which we fastened a long cord which reached to the barn. Then we propped up the trough with a thin stick. There was cow dung under the trough as bait for the crows. My sister and I sat behind the barn door and waited. We actually caught ten crows in one day. They were butchered like doves and prepared for a good meal for us all.

During the time that Father worked for the American Mennonite Relief he had to travel a lot. The local situations had to be assessed, lists had to be prepared and kitchens set up. For this purpose help had to be found in each village.



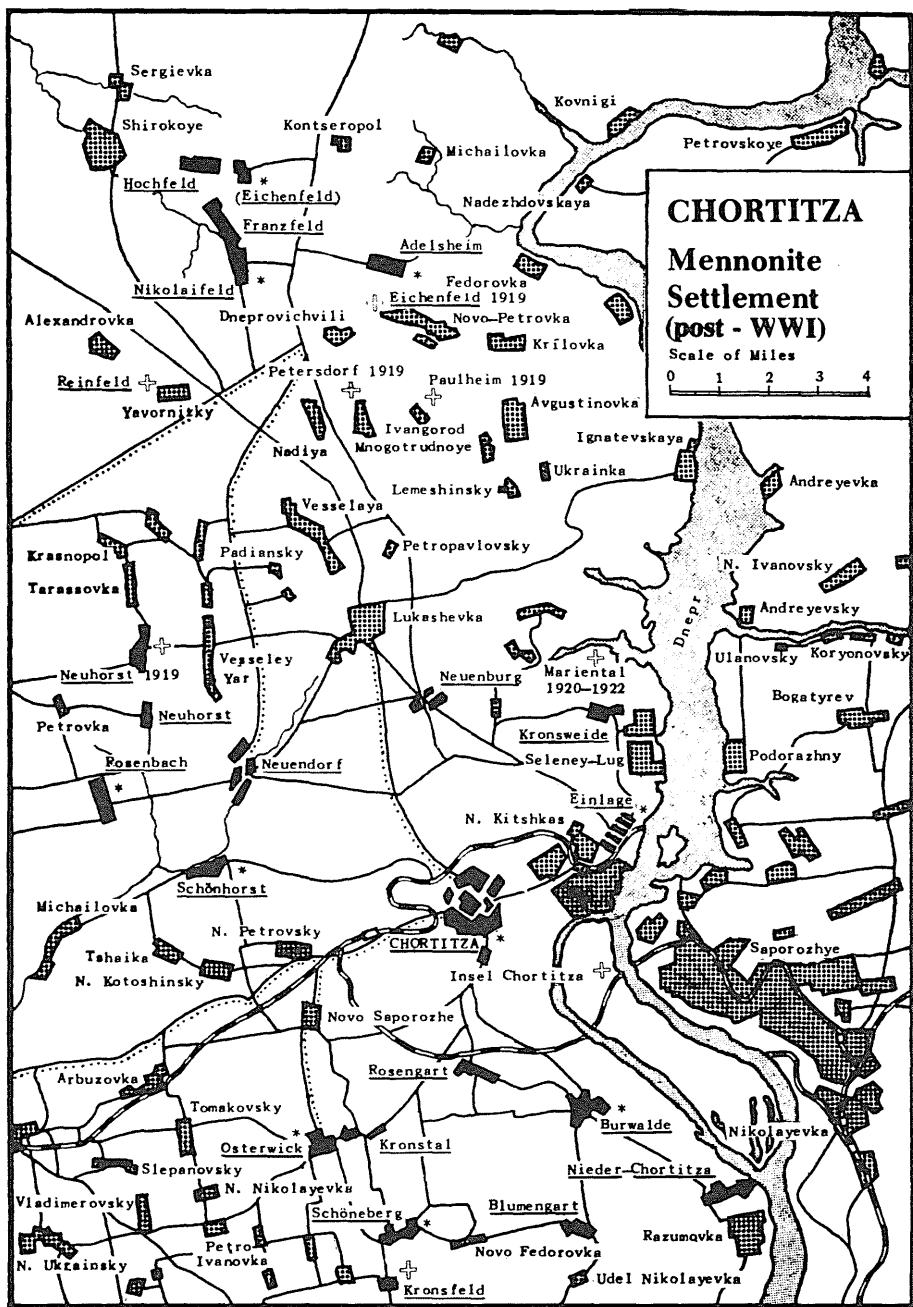
**The AMRA in Saporozhie (Alexandrovsk). Aron Toews is seated in front of the USA flag.**

Father told us the following about one such inspection trip: He had stopped at an old mud hut in one of the villages and knocked at the door. A gaunt, half-starved woman appeared in the doorway and in amazement asked the men what had brought them there. In one corner of the darkened room stood a couch. Father could not believe what he saw; a child's head was sticking out of each corner of the ripped-open feather bed. They were full of feathers and as they looked at Father with their big eyes and starving faces, he thought they reminded him of birds rather than children. The lady stood there stunned. Finally she said that she hadn't know how else to keep them warm. She had long ago exchanged all bed linens and other belongings for bread. Help had come at the last minute.

Coming home from these trips Father often brought samples of various kinds of baking. Bread was made out of beet leaves, cabbage, Makukha (hulls of sunflower seeds) — anything that was available. Even the bark of acacia trees was ground into flour. Each little piece of bread which Father brought as a sample had a note, telling what it was made of.

We children were interested in all of them, especially the "pastry square", made of acacia bark. It looked so brown and flaky, so tempting to taste. However, the whole family that had eaten of it had become very sick and some of the children had died. It may have been because they ate too much. All these samples were sent to the head office of the American Mennonite Relief Administration with a report attached.

In the summer of 1922 we moved to Rosental-Chortitza, the oldest Mennonite settlement in Ukraine.



\* Mennonite Churches  
 + Mennonite place  
 — Road  
 ——— Railroad  
 ..... Telegraph  
           Mennonite villages underlined



**The home of Jacob M. Dyck of Chortitza, Ukraine, served as one of the distribution offices for AMRA during the famine of 1920-1922.**



## Chapter 6

Our Prussian Mennonite forefathers had settled in Chortitza-Rosental in 1789. I can well imagine their disappointment when they looked down from the hill to the deep valley below. They were farmers looking for soil as good as they had had in the flatlands of Prussia. At the very bottom of this valley the little Chortitza River meandered in and out, finally emptying into the Dnieper. The name Chortitza stems from the Russian word “Chort” meaning greyhound; Chortitza is the feminine form.

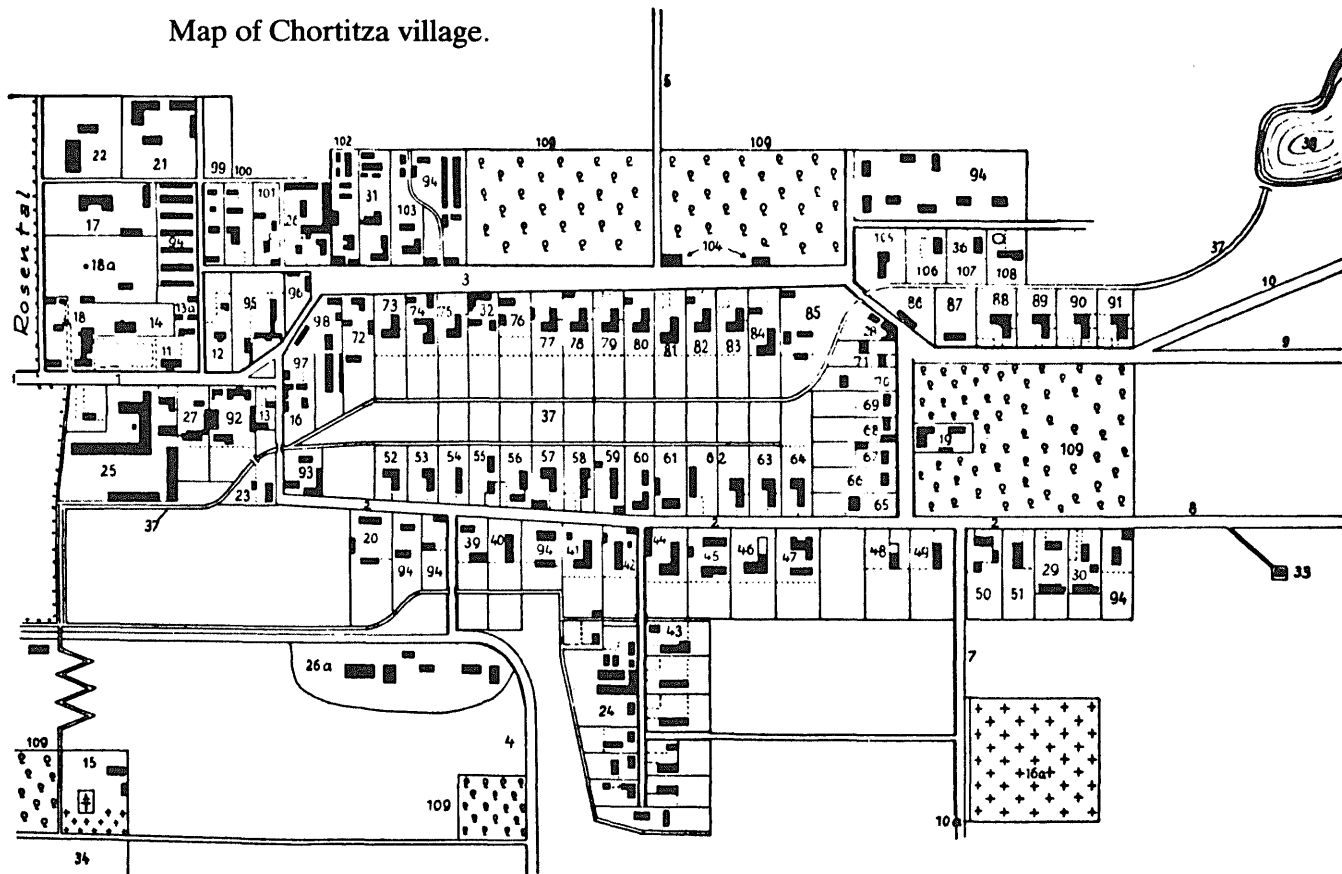
The village of Rosental was separated from Chortitza only by a street. It had received its beautiful name, meaning Valley of Roses, from the early pioneer Johann Bartsch. He had discovered the wild roses which grew in profusion in the valley. Even the leaves of the rosebushes emitted a lovely scent when rubbed between the fingers.

Our forefathers arrived here in July. It was the rainy season, so everyone tried to find a dry spot as quickly as possible. After a long search they found some old mud huts in the valley below. These gave them temporary shelter from wind and rain. The huts were what was left of an old village long forsaken by its inhabitants. There was no sign of life anywhere. Trees were numerous, beautiful tall oaks and elms grew in the smaller valleys which all ran into the large valley. In Chortitza stood a very old tree, commonly known as the “hundred-year oak”. Next to it grew a very tall poplar tree. Many of our people have pitched their tents under the shade of these great trees.<sup>1</sup>

Often our people made their way to a new country. Sometimes they came voluntarily, but often they came because of the pressure of political events around them. Again and again they had to make a new beginning. I am thinking of the migrations to Canada, U.S.A., Mexico, Brazil, Uruguay, and Paraguay. Those of our people who were left to themselves somewhere in the steppes of Russia in midwinter were especially unfortunate. How often we were deprived of all material sustenance! Surely God is speaking to us through all this!

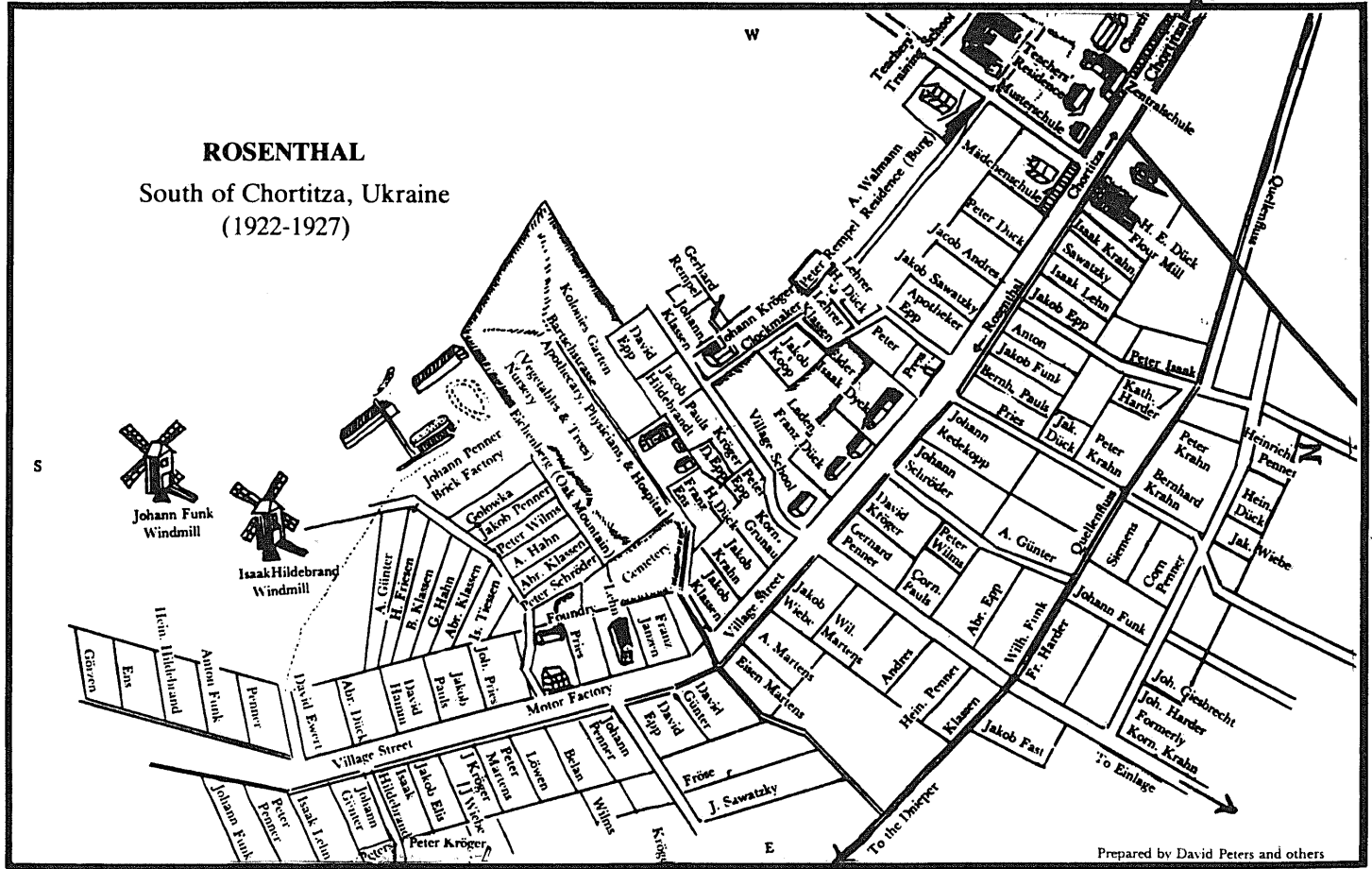
The first settlers had many disappointments. The land round about was fertile. Anxiously they waited for their chests and bundles which still had not arrived. What a disappointment when they did arrive! Many chests were filled with other trash rather than what had been packed in Prussia. They had been robbed. And yet how wonderfully the Lord had led them! Again and again the Lord taught our people not to put their trust in man and

# Map of Chortitza village.



# ROSENTHAL

South of Chortitza, Ukraine  
(1922-1927)



material possessions.

Strangely enough, in Mennonite history one also notes a recurring difficulty in obtaining elders (*Älteste*). This was especially true of the Chortitza Mennonites. The first acting elder was a layman, not actually ordained and the last one, my father, was only a minister. Our elder, David Epp, died one month before Father was arrested. There would have been enough time for an ordination. Had the Mennonites already come to recognize the meaning of the priesthood of all believers? In 1 Peter 2:9,10 we read very clearly that each believer has the responsibility of spreading the Word of God. Father carried out all the official functions. That is how it was at the beginning of the Mennonite church. Only at the end of the second and third centuries were the formal offices and titles of bishop and priest used.

The first elder of the Chortitza church was Bernhard Penner, a school-teacher, who was later confirmed as elder by letter.<sup>2</sup> He was so poor that he had no shoes when he held the first reception of young people into the church. He wore Russian *postols*, similar to American moccasins. On one occasion while having a meal he asked whether someone would make a pair of boots for him.

Thereupon one person donated the uppers, another contributed the soles and a third stitched the boots together. The latter was the deputy Johann Bartsch.<sup>3</sup>

My father also was so poor that the congregation gave him a pair of over-shoes (in Russian—*goloshe*). The ladies' group presented my parents with a cotton quilt.

Our old church in Chortitza was a large but simple building with very thick walls and rather small, shuttered windows. The windows were no larger than those on the farmhouses. This was already the second church house in the village since the first had become too small. It was built carefully according to the pattern of the one at Heubuden in West Prussia. However, the inside was somewhat different. We had no organ. Men and women were strictly segregated, with the women sitting on the main floor and the men in the balcony.

The church stood parallel to the street. In front of the church stood a row of tall, lovely elm trees. At the main entrance there was a particularly beautiful tree whose spreading branches later almost reached across to the High School. One could also see the remains of a sturdy old fence made of rough beams with iron rings attached. The farmers tethered their horses to this fence when they still came to church with wagons and sleighs. Along the street was a solidly built brick fence which also surrounded the district administration building.

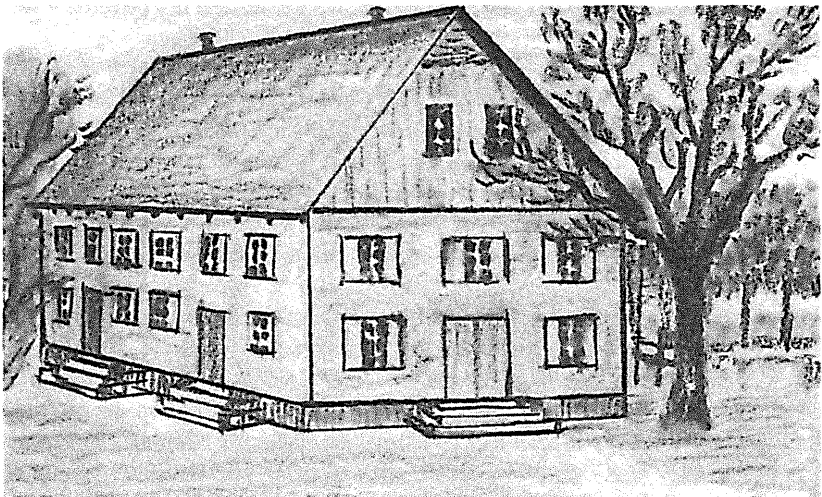
In the summer of 1922 our family moved to Chortitza from Friedensfeld. Father rented a house on the hill. Earlier it had belonged to the teacher and painter, Henry Dyck.<sup>4</sup>

How different the valley appeared now, compared to the time when our forefathers first saw it! Beautiful farmsteads interspersed with factories, schools, mills and stores lay on each side of the wide streets. On the hill (Hamburg) in Rosental stood two windmills. In addition, there were two steam-powered mills. A third one, the Peters' Mill, had been destroyed by fire. The Mennonites were no longer poor settlers. The Lord had blessed them; some had become very wealthy. But through the Revolution many had lost everything and in the hungry year of 1922 things looked very dismal in Chortitza also.

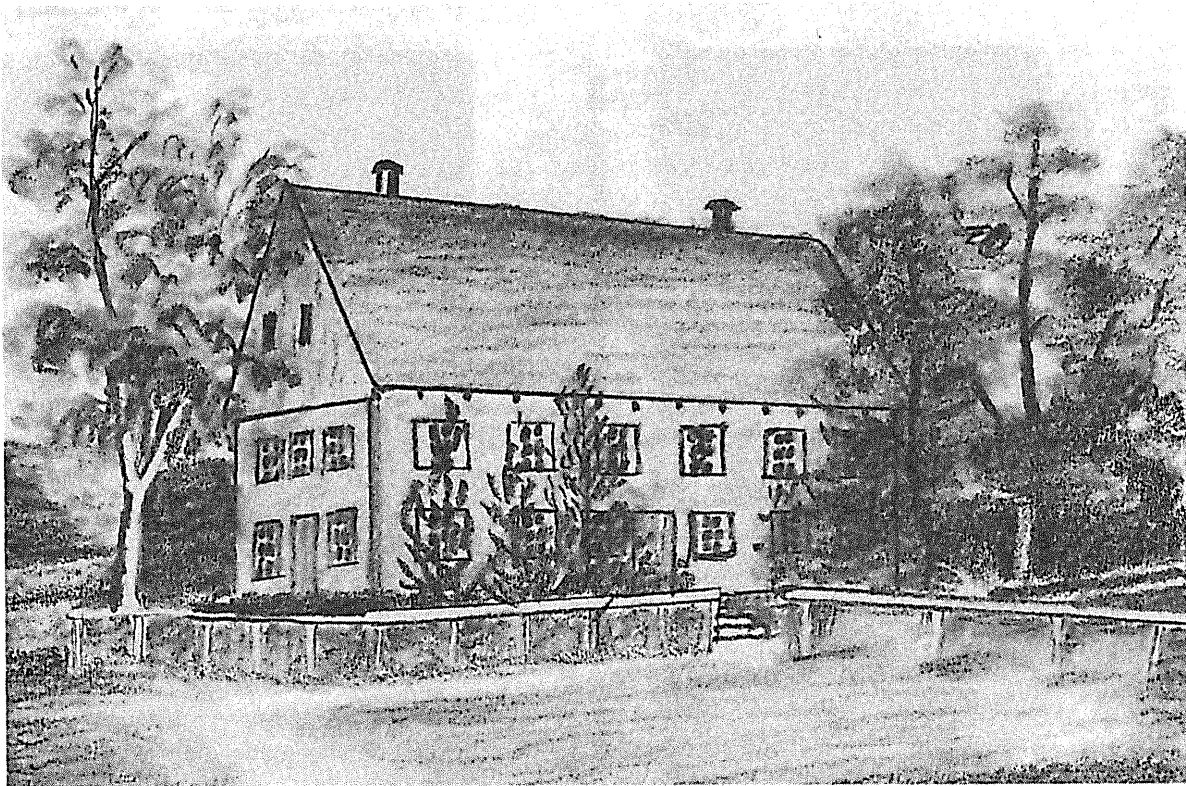
The mills were no longer working; the stores had almost no stock at all. In the fall of this year the economic situation improved slightly because of the "New Economic Policy" which Lenin had proclaimed.<sup>5</sup> Some mills started working again and business picked up somewhat.

In Chortitza-Rosental a public relief kitchen had been operating since February.<sup>6</sup> The head office of the American Mennonite Relief Administration was in Zaporozhye. Father was assigned as inspector of the relief kitchens. Because of this he had to rent a small room in Zaporozhye. He came home only for Sundays.

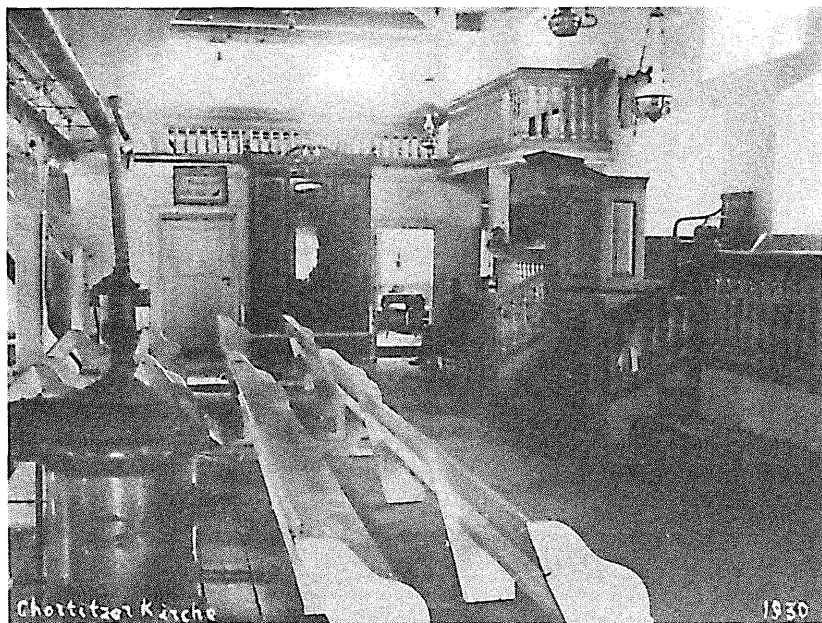
Setting up such a kitchen involved a lot of work. The A.M.R.A. worked together with the village committees, using a system by which all the citizens were registered. The number of needy persons was recorded, as well as the



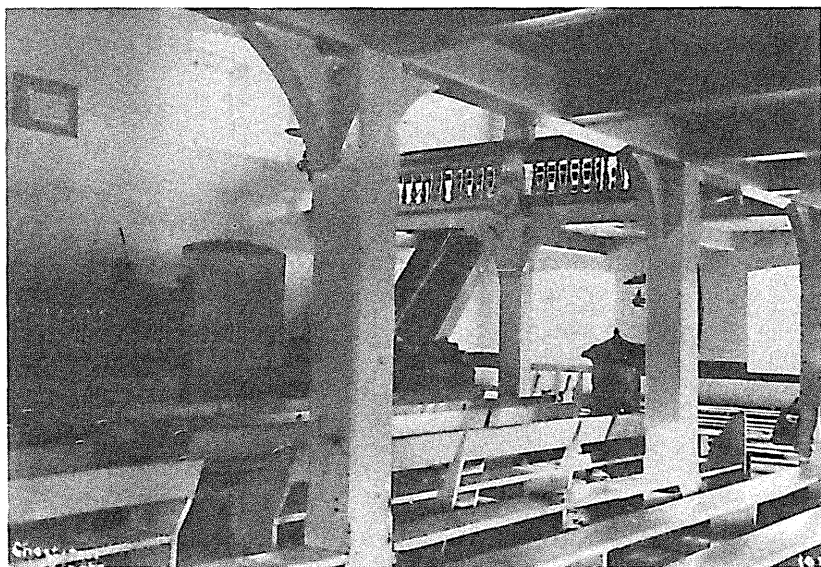
**The Chortitza-Rosental church, rear view. Sketched by Henry Pauls, Leamington, Ontario.**

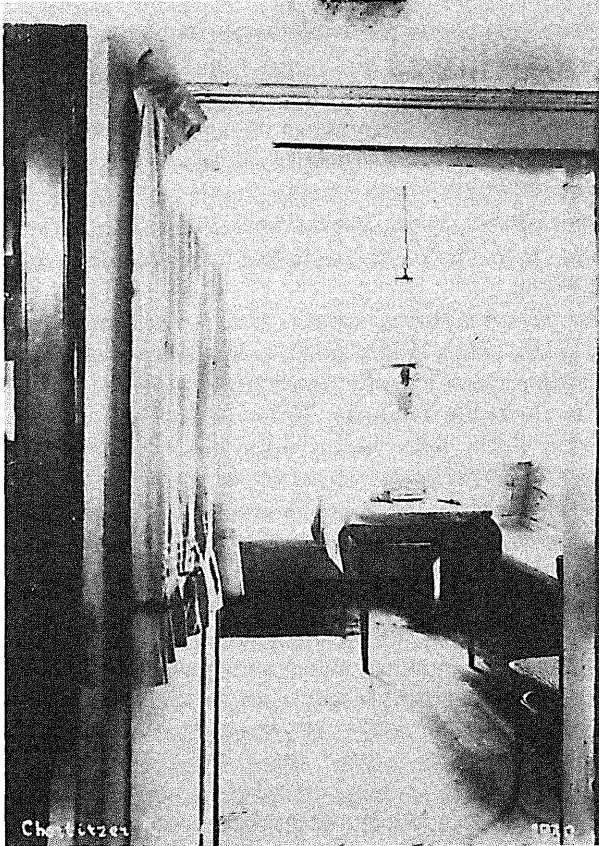


**The street side of the Chortitza-Rosental church, showing the old fence around it. Sketched by Henry Pauls, Leamington, Ontario.**



**Inside views of the church. Rempel, the church custodian, 1930 (top), and the Rosental section of the church (bottom).**





**The ministers' room of the old church, 1930.**

property they owned; they were divided into categories accordingly. For example, if a family possessed a work horse or a cow, certain family members were excluded from the food allotments. First in line were the small children, expectant mothers and the elderly. However, many 15 to 60-year-olds were also included, along with many non-Mennonites. The food consisted of rice, beans, fat, cocoa, porridge and white bread. We also went to get a good meal daily. Never will those who were hungry forget the light fragrant white bread. Even today, after 55 years, when I take my freshly baked bread out of the oven, I am deeply grateful. This famine has taught us many things. I will never throw a crust away.

According to statistics, 10,000 persons were fed daily in the Molotschna colony. I have been unable to determine how many there were in the Chortitza colony.



In addition to the famine, there was a great shortage of clothing and footwear. A large clothing depot was opened in Zaporozhye. Again distribution had to be arranged with the village committees. My father was put in charge of managing this clothing depot. Whenever he was not travelling he worked in this depot. It was a difficult task since it was impossible to check the needs of each family. In the evening people often came to ask for clothing. There were often long unpleasant discussions, since Father sent them to the depot in order to check their needs later. He did not have sole responsibility for decisions.

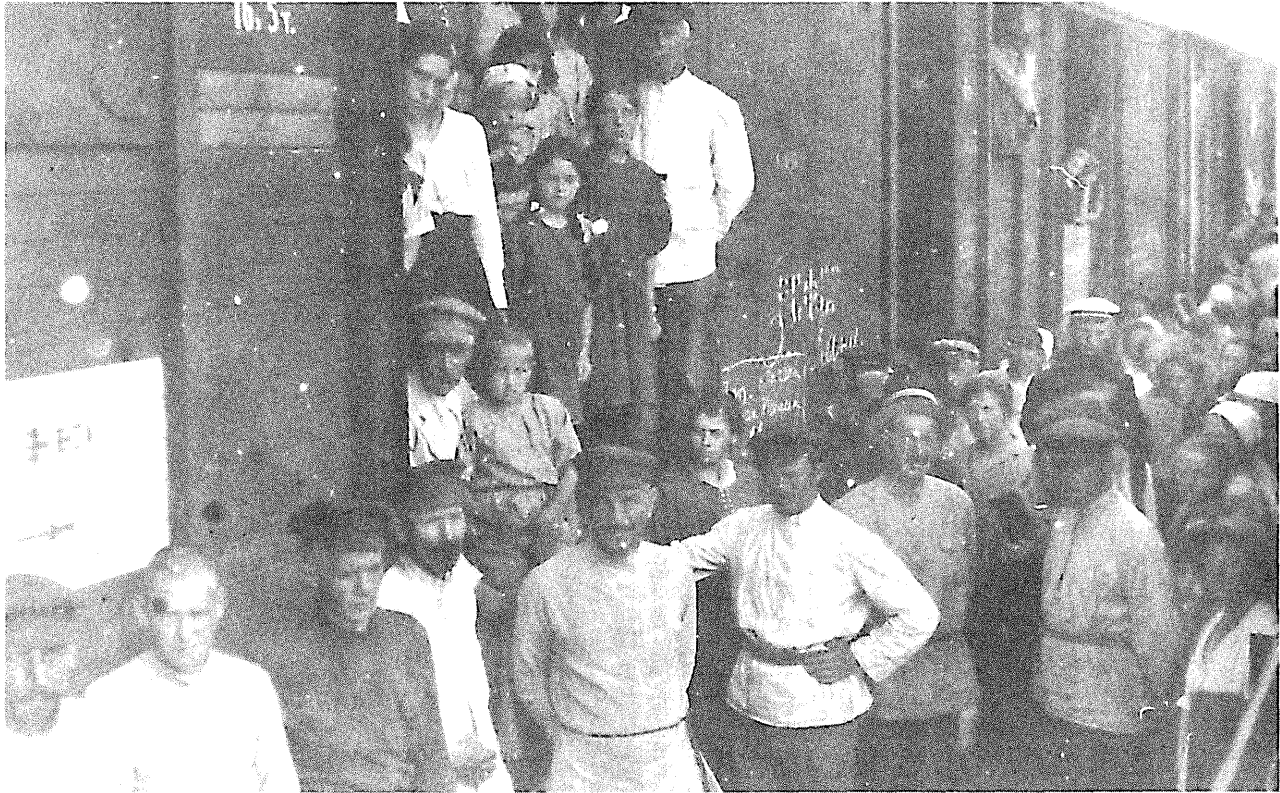
During this period a young woman, Miss Anna Hamm (later Mrs. Ediger) worked in this office in Zaporozhye. She knew English, so Father and other relief workers took English classes with her. Father made use of every free minute to study the language. He wrote his first English letter to his younger brother Peter, who had served in the White Army. Peter and 62 other Mennonites had been able to get away to America by way of Constantinople<sup>7</sup>, settling in Mountain Lake, Minnesota. This correspondence was arranged for by the A.M.R.A. and was the means by which the brothers found each other.

A letter written by my father in Zaporozhye to his brother Peter shows how very poor we really were. Father writes: "As usual I am sitting at my English studies. Living expenses here in town are high. I earn 22 dollars a month of which 8 dollars goes for rent, light, food and water. Only 12 dollars a month is left over for my family. However, as all other A.M.R.A. workers, I receive the so-called 'payok', which consists of flour, rice, fat, porridge, cocoa, canned milk and sugar. That is our biggest help. There is much talk of emigration. Already a list of 5000 persons has been drawn up. My family and I are also among them. It sounds as if the first emigrant train is to leave in April."<sup>8</sup>

But God had other plans for Father. He had had trachoma as a child. Although the eyes were healed, he still had scars left from the treatment. The passport pictures and all papers were ready. Father's brother Heinrich P. Toews in Blumenort, Molotschna colony, also made preparations to emigrate.

The first group of emigrants left for Canada from the Chortitz train station on June 21, 1923<sup>9</sup>. This first emigration left many a gap which was hard to fill. It was especially noticeable in the church, since more and more people decided to emigrate. Despite the fact that the New Economic Policy was considerably more liberal, the government could not be trusted completely. The Mennonites had gone through too many tragic experiences, especially in Ukraine.

In the summer of 1924 Father's brother Heinrich P. Toews and family emigrated. Father was not ashamed of his tears as he bid farewell, since he was the only one of the Toews family remaining in Russia. But life went on



**The first emigration train at the station in Chortitza.**

and Father struggled along. Deep in thought he strode along the dusty street from the Chortitza station towards home in Rosental.

Mother and the children had come to feel quite at home in Rosental. My sister and I, the two oldest, attended the village school. My brother Kolya, even at age five, could still not walk as a result of rickets. We had several student boarders living with us, so Mother always had plenty to do. This also meant a little extra income.

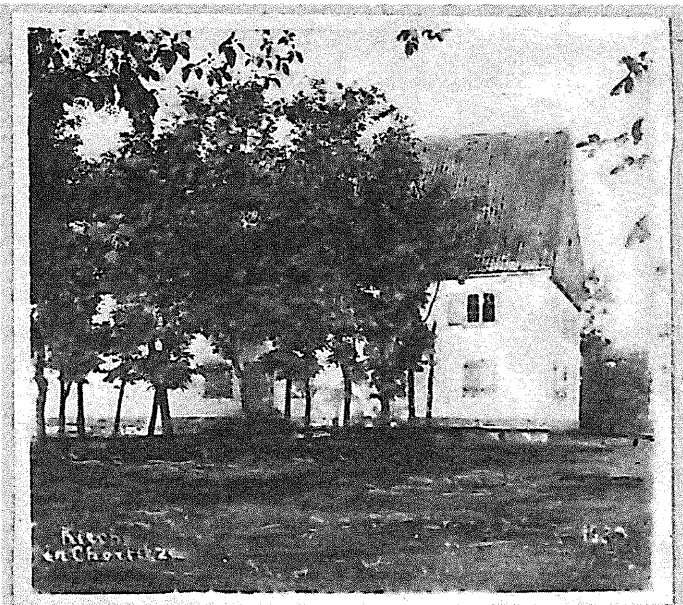
Every Sunday we made our way happily to the worship service. Father always sat in his place facing the pulpit. At that time we had a young elder, P.P. Neufeld, who had also organized the church choir, and elder Isaac Dyck from Rosental. The latter was quite old already. The choir sang almost every Sunday from the choir loft on the Rosental end of the church. When the mixed choir sang all the singers, men and women, sat upstairs.

Father was a good friend of Elder Johann P. Klassen of Schönwiese. At the time he wanted to emigrate, he offered to sell his cow to Father. It was to cost twenty-five dollars. Father had no money so the following agreement was made. Father would write to his brother Peter in the U.S.A. asking him to lend him the money. As soon as Elder Klassen would arrive in Canada he would get in touch with Peter Toews, who would give him the twenty-five dollars. I have received this letter as a legacy from my uncle Peter Toews.

This reminds me of another incident concerning this cow from Schönwiese. We were so happy when she was finally in our barn. But when Mother tried to milk her, she gave no milk. A neighbour came to try his luck, but the result was the same. Finally Father came into the barn, saying, "Oh, I forgot to tell you that when you milk this cow you have to sing." We children were only to glad to comply and we did our best. My brother especially had a nice high voice. And really, then the cow gave her milk! Whatever happened to this musical cow eventually, I don't know. She probably fell into the hands of a butcher when all the disenfranchised citizens had to pay a meat tax during the time of persecution.



**The Toews family photo taken for an emigration passport.**



Klar und heiter Schreite weiter  
Bis zur Lebenswende.  
Fest und treu Dein Leben sei:  
Es gibt nur Aufstieg, niemals  
Ende.

1931,

A picture done by mother's brother, Jacob. It is a touched-up photo of our old church.

## Chapter 7

To begin this chapter I would like to touch on the economic situation of our farmers. The question of land distribution had not been settled. One farmer writes: “We had worked our summerfallow diligently, yet this year someone else seeded it. Thousands of acres of land lie under weeds. If we go to the authorities, they let us know in no uncertain terms that we are strangers. If we are regarded as strangers anyway, we might as well emigrate. For example, look at the grain prices. On the market rye costs 25 rubles. A suit costs almost as much as a year’s crop of rye. One *arshin* of cotton cloth costs 7 *pud* of rye.”<sup>1</sup>

In the spiritual realm matters also went from bad to worse. The teachers were expected to present anti-religious propaganda. When we speak of the “struggle for survival”, we usually think of material progress. Yet the demands on our parents in this struggle for survival were much greater. Their physical and spiritual strength were often tested to extreme limits.

For many, such suffering represented “fighting the good fight”. In some villages teachers were dismissed because they refused to carry out anti-religious propaganda. Father corresponded with Mr. Diedrich H. Epp, editor of the *Immigrantenbote* in Canada. He described the situation of the Chortitza church to him. He asked for assistance and support for the teachers in Chortitza and Rosental. Several times Mr. Epp sent funds for this purpose. At that time Father had not given up the hope of emigrating. He worked as an accountant in the Union.<sup>2</sup>

In November of 1924 an election of ministers took place in the Chortitza parish (*Kirchspiel*). In Chortitza three candidates were chosen: Gerhard I. Dyck, Johann Jakob Andres, and my father, Aron Toews. After this nomination Father faced a serious decision. A few days earlier he had been asked to be a candidate for the position of chairman of the District Executive Committee, which would have made him an official of the local government, like mayor or reeve.

At that time there were two elders serving in the church: Elder Isaak Dyck of Rosental, who was already aging, and P.P. Neufeld of Chortitza, still young and active. God spoke very clearly and distinctly to my father. On December 2, 1924, he was appointed secretary and keeper of the church registers for all the parishes, with a monthly salary of 30 rubles. Ministers at that time received no remuneration. But Father accepted this task and on Christmas Eve in Chortitza he preached his first sermon.

On January 6, 1925, he was ordained as minister in the Chortitza church. The same Bible verse which had been read at his wedding was to be the motto for his new service: "Be thou faithful unto death and I will give thee the crown of life" (Revelation 2:10). Our Chortitza-Rosental church membership at this time stood at 3337. The decision had been made. For Father and the family this meant putting the idea of emigrating completely aside. Father knew this path would not be easy.

As early as 1924 a government statute had been presented to all the churches. The government demanded that the churches work according to certain rules. This did not at all comply with the essential character of a Christian church; on the contrary, it could only lead to a systematic breakdown of the churches. As a result the Mennonites in Ukraine organized a Committee for Church Affairs (K.f.K.)<sup>3</sup>. A memorandum was prepared which clearly stated what the Mennonite Church stood for. This was sent to the government with the request that it be accepted. However, government pressure became stronger and stronger. All ministers had to register as "cult workers" and thereby were disenfranchised — that is, they lost certain citizenship rights, such as the right to vote. This meant they would not be accepted for a job.

With regard to non-resistant standing for young men, there was much work to do and many trips to be made. Every Mennonite young man had to appear before the people's court (*gubnarsud*) to appeal for non-resistant, i.e. conscientious objector, status. Anyone who failed to appeal before the deadline on his call-up notice and then refused to serve in the army was punished severely. For this reason notices were given in all the churches warning the young men not to neglect this petition. Father represented these men in the court proceedings.<sup>4</sup>

Religious instruction for groups of children up to 18 years of age was forbidden. Church choirs were allowed to sing and practise only in church buildings. This was especially hard in winter, since there was no fuel for heating nor petroleum for the lamps in the big church. Very often the choir gathered secretly to practise at the home of Elder P.P. Neufeld.

The pressure of anti-religious propaganda was felt more and more in the schools. Several party workers came from Germany to "enlighten" the Mennonite youth on the new order. Anyone attending church on Sunday saw his name on the blackboard at school the next week.

A public debate was announced in Chortitza, to which all citizens and students were invited. The theme was "What is Man?" The room was filled to overflowing. I don't remember the details, but I remember the hearty applause which Father received after his concluding remarks. "You believe in the pile of dirt in which your sow wallows, but I believe in a higher being, a God who made heaven and earth."

In spite of the fact that the Committee for Church Affairs was very active,

№

44

Департамент Юстиції ОКРУГА

Регстраційна картка службовця культу.

Меве

1. Прізвище, ім'я, та по батькові

Аврам Мешерович

2. Рік народження

1887 року

3. Коли вступив на службу до релігійних громад

1925 року

4. Професія до вступу на службу до реліг. громад

бухгалтер

5. Освіта (точно зазначити назви учбових закладів, що скінчив,

або де вчився)

Галицька духовна семінарія у Львові та інше в Москві

6. В яких реліг. громадах служив і які обов'язки там виконував

в різних церквах (радова, св. Іоанна)

7. В якій реліг. громаді служить зараз (точно зазначити місце пере-

бування — село, місто, район, повіт, губернія)

с. Калішівка в районі Калішівки

8. Які обов'язки виконує зараз

проповідник

9. На якій мові відправляє службу

руською

10. Якому церковному управлінню підлягає, та якого єпископа визнає

Української православної церкви

11. Розмір місячної платні, що одержує від громади

німає

12. Чи має будь-які допоміжні заняття, які саме й скільки від них

має прибутку землек. розробка в селі

13. Майновий стан:

а) Чи володіє нерухомим майном (землею, будинками) до революції

не мав

б) Чи володіє землею, будинками зараз

не мав

14. № попередньої реєстраційної картки

№ 61

15. Підпис службовця культу

Меве



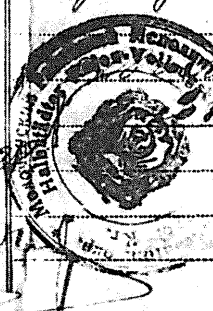
16. Відмітка про взяття на облік та зняття з нього в райвиконкомі або окрадмінвідділі.

Взято на облік

Знято з обліку

*14/1-28. Укр. Рад. Республіка  
Донецький район*

*Зав. райвиконкому  
Трудовий*

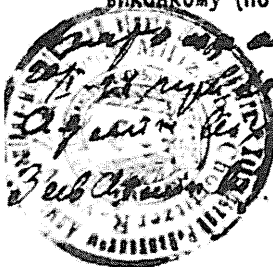


*14/1-28  
14/1-28  
14/1-28*

17. Відмітка про зречення від сану та служіння церкви (зазначити дату зречення, та в якому часописі оголошено про нього).

18. № реєстраційної картки зречення

19. Підпис зав. окрвідділення культів, або зав. адмінвідділення райвиконкому (по належності).



*Трудовий*

Друк. „Укр. Роб.“. Зам. № 116/206. Укр.головоліт 1673/6. Тир. 60,00 прим.

Opposite sides of a certificate designating Aron Toews as a “cult minister”, i.e. worker in the church.

many of the petitions for greater freedom sent to the government were simply lost in the shuffle. Several requests for permission to publish a Mennonite periodical had been submitted but for a long time no response came. What a joy it was then to receive the news that the first issue was at the press! It was to be called *Unser Blatt* (Our Paper), and would appear in October 1925. The Committee for Church Affairs was responsible for publication, with Rev. David H. Epp serving as editor. He had earlier published the *Botschafter* and lived in Lichtenau, Molotschna colony.

A four-day ministers' conference was held that year at Chortitza on October 12-15. The government had granted permission for it. The themes for discussion were the following: 1. Pastoral care and the early Church (Galatians 2); 2. The personality of the Mennonite minister. The essays, exchanges of ideas and evaluations proved to be of great significance for the participants and also the churches.

Among private papers of Mr. D.H. Epp I have read several sets of church council meeting minutes as well as a detailed letter from Father about the situation of the church at that time. These documents show clearly that the matter of preserving the faith in the face of government opposition was taken seriously. They also indicate that many people were willing to sacrifice and suffer for their convictions. Father writes:

“The Lord is leading us through deep waters of humiliation. Never as yet have our churches been under such surveillance despite the decree that church and state are separated.”

The ministers had to register with the Committee for Church Affairs once more. A photo was demanded of each. The fact that each travelling minister had to report his itinerary beforehand made their work still more difficult. Father writes further:

Our greatest concern presently has to do with the conscription of our young men. One hundred and nine of them are now before the courts in Dnepropetrovsk seeking exemption from military service. Only 50% are being released. One gets the impression that the verdicts are decided beforehand. The reasons given for rejecting a certain number sounds dubious. For instance: one man is a member of a professional union; another is too young a church member since he was only baptized in 1924. Another is disqualified because his father was murdered by the Machnovtsy, which proves that he must have borne arms, even though the witnesses state the contrary. Yet another one is told that his brother was in the Self-defence League, and later active in the White Army.

Now these young men want to appeal to Kharkov. There is so much paperwork and expense involved in this! Yet we feel that the Lord is speaking to us. The judge demands conviction, and it is right that he should. A Christian has to have convictions. We

realize now that we come short in this respect.

Many of the young people had been born into their tradition and therefore, sad to say, their Christian faith was not a matter of personal conviction. It was hard for those living in a land where personal faith meant nothing to arrive at such a conviction. Not nearly all families in the villages observed daily devotions or Bible reading. Now that it was forbidden to sing in a choir or attend religious instruction before the age of eighteen, it was most difficult for young people to come to a personal faith in Christ. The time for baptismal instruction between Christmas and Pentecost was all too short. The faith of our fathers is something that must be experienced personally, as Goethe has said so well: "Appropriate what you have inherited from your fathers, so that it may be truly yours."

Through all these hard times our people were being shaken up so that a serious struggle for clarity resulted. In this battle many of our people were strengthened.

The following is an example showing how hard it was for some to stand up for their faith:

In the summer of 1924, eight young men, aged 23 to 26, some of them married, were sentenced by the court to one year hard labour and prison. Their crime was not having registered with the court in time. The sentence was very severe. For the church, though, it proved to be a cleansing experience which brought about a renewed interest in Bible studies and prayer meetings. Many earnest prayers went up for these men. Whenever a letter arrived it was read in the congregation.

At one occasion Father took me along to Alexandrovsk to a court proceeding concerning military exemption. These trials were always open to the public, and though many attended out of curiosity, such proceedings always aroused the people's attention. Once a group of men approached Father after a hearing and said, "If that's the way it is, it would be good if all were Mennonites!" A good example still has the most power!

On March 3, eleven young men from Osterwick drove to Dnepropetrovsk, where they had been summoned by the court. They had already been declared exempt in Alexandrovsk, but were once again accused and brought to trial. The penalty was one to two years imprisonment for all but one who decided to join the army. One of the condemned wrote the following letter to his wife:

"Since half an hour ago I am a condemned man with a two-year sentence. How much I would like to write you that I am a free man! But I willingly submit to my lot and pray to God that you will be resigned to God's will, and believe that everything He sends will be for our good. So be calm and do not grieve. Pray that God will keep us well and deliver us from this trouble. Two years is a long time, but by God's grace and mercy we will use this time to grow in His favour and to thank Him. Of the eleven men eight more have

joined up, so now there are only two of us left. The others were dismissed immediately.”

After these men had been in prison in Kiev for one month they were allowed to work as convicts in a sawmill 12 *verst* away. The work was hard, and the food meagre. Mornings and evenings they got hot water, for dinner a thin millet or vegetable soup with two lbs. of soggy black sourdough bread made from rye and barley flour.

In the spring of this year new lists of would-be emigrants were drawn up. A poem:

### Why?

Lonely we sit behind prison's hard bars  
Waiting in silence for days to go by,  
Yearning for freedom, yet closed are the doors.  
“Why are we here?” we keep asking, “Oh why?”  
    Many have walked in the garden of life,  
    Treading on roses in pathways of joy,  
    Nothing to mar or to burden their step;  
    Yet we are not free and we say, “Why, oh why?”  
Why must we walk in the valley of life,  
Suffering pain and reproach all alone?  
Spending the days of our youth in this prison  
Far from our friends and our loved ones at home?  
    Yet upon further thought and reflection  
    Lessons are learned in adversity's school  
    After the cold and the darkness of winter  
    Sunlight bursts forth over valley and hill.  
First we must taste of life's sickness and pain  
Ere we can cherish our health to the full;  
He who would treasure his freedom again  
Languishes first in the dungeon's dark cell.

(Anonymous)

# A M E R I C A N M E N N O N I T E R E L I E F

Американская Мennonитская Помощь.

Александровск  
Дачная № 22.

Lieber Bruder!

Deinen Brief vom 3ten August habe ich erhalten. Ich wundere mich darüber, dass Du uns so wenig schreibst: entweder hast Du uns nicht mehr zu sagen, als wir in Deinen Briefen, oder Du hast nicht Zeit längere, umständliche Briefe zu schreiben. Du erwähnst in Deinem Brief z. B. dass Du auf Arbeit gegangen bist und hast 3 Doll. pro Tag verdient. Das kann ich schon nicht verstehen: denn Du hast doch Arbeit in der Werkstatt, oder wie ist das? Ich interessiere mich auch sehr wie es mit Eurem Geschäft geht: ob Ihr viel verdient und wann Ihr glaubt das Geschäft ausgekauft zu haben? — Auch interessiere ich mich dafür, was Frau Fuchs macht, ob Du ihn auch einmal besuchst und was Ihr überhaupt in Euren Musterten den Treib; ob Du die Sprache schon erlernt hast. I do learn english reading and writting, but I can only very little. — Bald, nach 3-4 Monaten denke ich Dir schon englische Briefe schreiben zu können. Ich würde gegenwärtig allem meine freie Zeit auf englisch lernen, denn wenn man vom Kantor dienst abhänsg ist

dann ist es immer besser, wenn man die  
Englische Sprache meist kann. — Du wirst  
fröhlich sein, wenn du glaubst, dass Mamma und die  
Geschwister bald nach America kommen werden.  
Für dich ein Jahr wird das wohl nichts werden,  
denn die Geschichte zieht sich schon wieder  
in die Länge. Am besten wäre das, wenn  
wir ein Freipass und Affidavit bekämen  
dann könnte man viel selbständiger und  
sicherer hinausfahren. Wie viele haben unsere  
neigen ihren Kranken Augen müssen hier bleiben,  
und hatten schon alles verkauft, und nun  
sitzen sie daheim, ohne Brot und viele ohne Dach.  
Nun die Russländer werden dir schon  
erzählen, wenn du sie ansprichst. Hier von  
Choditsa, Rosenthal und Schenweise können  
nicht wohl alle. Pab. Fed. Fiessen vom Ruzen  
sol ist mein Nachbar gewesen und da wirst  
du viel von uns erfahren können. —  
Nun bleib Gott behütet. — Marietchen und  
die Kinder bestellst die besten Grüsse.

Es küsst dich in Liebe dein

Alycuandromsk

den 12/11 1923 —

Stach

Two pages of a letter from Aron to his brother Peter in the USA.

## Chapter 8

The spring of 1925 came in earlier than usual, with snowdrops blooming and seeding done by March 18. In the “Ziegelscheun” valley<sup>1</sup> one could already pick used tulips, crocuses, and even a few violets. The starlings and other summer birds had come back. Every day we children watched eagerly for the storks to return to their nest on Andres’ roof. This meant that we could go barefoot.

Yet all this beauty could not lighten the gloomy spirits of the heavy-hearted farmers.

The redistribution of land in Rosental and Chortitz had been postponed till the fall of 1925. Each farmer was promised 16 dessiatins (about 43 acres) of arable land, plus some pastureland. In addition each farmer was allowed to rent another 16 dessiatins. All other families who lived among them were given the same amount of land. The farmers who possessed horses or supplies were to help the others till their land. Since some families had no food, the church council gathered rye flour for distribution among the poor. The Mennonite men in prison or serving in Siberia also requested financial assistance. But where was one to find the funds?

At this time the Rosental and Chortitz Ladies’ Aid came up with a good idea: All eggs which the hens laid on Sundays were to be sold and the money sent to help these men. This request was also sent to other villages. The eggs sold well and the price was good, so this was a great help.<sup>2</sup> At the next brotherhood meeting someone supposedly remarked that the chickens laid most of their eggs on Sundays.

Since Father was the church’s official representative, he was sent to Moscow as a delegate to an All-Mennonite Conference in 1925. In October of the same year he went to Moscow again for a special hearing with Stalin in order to obtain permission for group religious instruction. However, this hearing did not materialize and so nothing was accomplished. But he did have an interview with the Secretary to the Chairman of the V.Z.I.K. (All-Russian Central Executive Committee) regarding enfranchisement of ministers. He was told that this was a matter to be decided by the local boards. Furthermore, he was told that the Central Committee had nothing against giving these rights to ministers who received no salary from the Church.<sup>3</sup> Father, however, never got back his franchise rights.

On June 7, 1926, a church council meeting was held in our home. Many delegates from other villages were in attendance. Our yard was full of

wagons and houses — a busy day for all. Mother tried to cook at least good borsht for everyone.

The main item on the agenda was how to help the young men in prison. It was decided to send Father to visit and encourage them, and to work for their release. Father was familiar with the laws of the land, even the fine print. Officially, of course, we had religious freedom. The results of the trip which Father made were not immediately apparent. Father gave a report on Sunday and the congregation prayed for these young men.

Another ministers' conference was held in October, 1926, at Einlage. The theme was "Tradition or true faith". The following ministers spoke: Elder P.P. Neufeld, Rev. Giesbrecht of Neuendorf (a powerful speaker), Rev. Johann Rempel of Einlage, Rev. Neufeld and my father, Rev. Aron Toews of Chortitza, and Elder Johann Martens. There was a discussion after each talk. The spirit of unity was evident.

During this year twenty-two Mennonite men had been executed, fourteen of them after eight months of jail. Another four died of typhoid brought on by malnourishment. In Kiev nineteen were arrested, some receiving a two-year prison sentence and three years' loss of all rights. Others were sentenced to two years of prison and a 300-ruble fine. Seemingly after 400 years of Anabaptist existence history was repeating itself, since our people were again experiencing persecution, suffering and death for the sake of faith in Christ.

The fifteenth anniversary of the ministry of Elder Isaak Dyck was celebrated in the Chortitza church in 1926. I have very fond memories of Elder Dyck. I remember him firmly striding to the Dnieper in order to be the first one in spring and the last one in fall to swim in the river. We were neighbours during the first years so we children learned to know and love him. He was always ready to talk to us. In summer he would send us climbing his high pear trees to shake down the pears. He was also a good speaker; no one slept during his sermons. He was a man of honest and upright character, never hesitating to present his views. He still made home visitations, though his health was failing.

This year was a troubled time for our villages. Hearts were filled with gloomy forebodings. There was talk of forced resettlement. All those who had had 60 dessiatins of land or more were to be expropriated and resettled.

During the Christmas holidays there was a great commotion in Chortitza and Rosental. The *troika* (local three-man commission)<sup>4</sup> suddenly held house searches for ammunition. Five persons were arrested, but released again. The Communist cell with the village often held anti-religious meetings where blasphemous speeches were made.

On January 21, 1927, Elder Peter Neufeld died after a short and painful illness. His funeral was a very sorrowful occasion. The old church could not hold all the people in attendance; both stairways to the balcony were filled



and there was a crowd outside. Many elders spoke. Later when the coffin was carried out, it was opened once more for all to take farewell. Silently the crowd of 1500 people moved along the street to Elder Neufeld's house. The choir sang a song and then he was laid to rest in the Chortitzta cemetery. In the evening a memorial service was held, with Elder H. Epp of Nikolaipol and Elder A. Klassen both speaking. A highly-esteemed and beloved leader had been called home.

In 1927 the congregation again faced the election of an elder, since Elder Dyck was quite old by now. On February 20, 1927, Rev. David Epp was elected as elder. His home was in Lichtenau in the Molotschna colony. He had already celebrated his 40th anniversary as minister the previous year, having been ordained in 1886 by his father, Elder Heinrich H. Epp. On May 22 he was ordained as elder in our church by Elder Isaac Dyck. He was the last ordained elder of this large church in a span of 145 years, from the time of the first settlement till the invasion of the German troops. The church bought a house for him in Rosental.

He was sixty-six years of age when he took over his new charge. He accepted this office only on the condition that Father would continue to represent the church in its external affairs. During this time we had to give up our home in Rosental. The local church council decided to assist Father in buying a 78-year-old yard with a wooden house. It was a solid house surrounded by a good garden and an adjoining hayfield. This yard cost 3000 rubles, payable in two to three years. Father thought of selling the large granary and with the money liquidating some of his debt. He had borrowed 975 rubles at 12%. He wrote the following to his brother Heinrich in Arnaud, Manitoba:

We are living in our own house now, as the Americans do, with a mortgage. But our house motto is: "Teach me thy way, O Lord; I will walk in thy truth; unite my heart to fear thy name" (Psalm 86:11). In summer we want to put in a garden and raise lots of vegetables to sell on the market in fall.

In December we were hard up since I was sick with neuralgia of the head for two weeks. Now we are working full steam again. Sunday, January 15, we are having a Bible study at our place; theme: the sacrifice of Isaac. Lichtenau has invited us for the 17th, 18th and 19th for a longer Bible study on Philippians 2.

Because of my complete involvement in the work of the church my household affairs are left undone. I often think of the proverb, "Man can do what he wants, if he wants to do what he can." There are Bible studies, instruction for youth and other gatherings; and not enough time. It seems as if there is more life in the church. The verse in I John 2:18, "Children, it is the last hour", has no doubt brought many to realize the gravity of the times.

The beloved old David Epp is now our elder. It is a joy to work with him; he is always so lively and energetic. Food, heating and fodder are very expensive, as a result of the huge Dnieprostroy project. Eleven thousand men are at work there in summer. All of Chortitza has received electric light.

The social situation of our people had not improved. On the contrary, though the previous year some people, including ministers, had received their franchise rights, this year ministers, deacons and other church workers had these rights taken away again.

It was announced that a law was to be enforced which would forbid parents to influence their children in religious matters. If such a case were found, the state would have the right to take the children, educating them in Communist children's homes. No wonder that many of our people thought only of emigration. Someone wrote for the *Bote* of July 4, 1928, as follows:

"It is reassuring to know that our present existence is only a relatively short prelude to our future becoming; since for each person all material things serve only as means to an end. Therefore we do not feel it wrong to avoid some of these struggles by moving to Canada; especially if we think of our children."

A visitor from Germany who came to Russia for a while in 1927 shared the following opinion in the *Bote* on the position of the Mennonites regarding emigration: "I want to come to the heart of the matter: Do our Mennonites have to emigrate or ought we rather to conclude that God has prepared a way for us in the Soviet Union? I want to say that I have held to the latter view, that we should not leave our homeland merely because of an uncomfortable system or passing difficulty. This view has been strongly shaken in discussions about the future of our children. It is impossible to send our children to a higher school, unless they become *Komsomolzy* (Young Communists). I have seen that the Mennonite schools have suffered much. Will these turbulent times help our children become strong? Only if parents transmit to them these inner strengths by God's grace. All our material treasures have been taken. The question 'What does God want of us?' has troubled me even more. Shall we, despite everything, be brothers to the Russian people? I repeat, I am taking the question of emigrating or staying rather seriously. I have been deeply impressed by the quiet heroism which I have found among the Mennonites, especially among the teachers and ministers."<sup>5</sup>

Many teachers had given up their positions and as a result had neither earnings nor bread. They tried to get other employment wherever they could. They remained true to their convictions.

Unfortunately there were also others who didn't want to emigrate mainly because they had planted new orchards. Father was not one of these. On one occasion a village farmer sold him a walnut tree with the remarks: "And so

you want to plant a tree yet? How do you know you will be around tomorrow?" Father replied, "Yes, all my life I have eaten the fruits of trees others have planted, and that's the way it will remain."

The struggle against the church and the Mennonite teachers grew continuously more intense. The farmers who had owned 65 dessiatins of land were called *kulaks*; they were disenfranchised now. Things looked very dismal since the weather conditions were unfavorable this year. Most of the winter wheat had to be ploughed under. It was cold and dry. Would there be a crop failure again? Father wrote the following to his brother Heinrich Toews in Arnaud:

It seems the spectre of starvation which we saw in 1921 is showing itself again. All we have is some rye flour and some wheat flour for dumplings. We cannot reduce any of our debts this year; they are only growing. Isn't that the American way? Yet I see God's sovereignty in the events of the times. I seem to hear the verse again and again: "Looking to Jesus the author and finisher of our faith." In the spiritual realm many things are praiseworthy. We had a very good baptismal service and many were in attendance at communion.

The Fürstenland (Georgstal) congregation of 200 members joined the Chortitza church. However, the church was not spared disappointments and sorrowful events. A number of Mennonite young men already serving had made application for acceptance into the active Army. In accordance with a request they apparently withdrew their membership from the church. However, ministers and other persons also received letters from them describing their plight and requesting prayerful support from the congregation. They were working on a dam, six to nine meters (about 25 feet) high, which they had to build up with wheelbarrows. They were expected to haul a daily average of 5½ cubic meters of dirt. Daily nourishment was a thin soup with a small ration of bread. One man wrote:

On a certain Sunday, when we had met for worship, the commander disrupted our gathering and forbade us to have further meetings. He wrote down all our names. In the evening we were again confronted with the threat that we would be arrested if we held any more services. So this precious hour was taken away from us. But the Lord hears each one of us and no one can take away life itself from us.

They cannot take our spiritual life; but many have given their physical lives. It reminds me of the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer: "The true freedom of the congregation is not found where all outward possibilities are met. It is found only where the Holy Spirit, in his own power, blazes new trails where here on earth, from the human point of view, all doors are closed."

## Chapter 9

The year 1928 brought many unforeseen problems. Because of a cold winter three-quarters of the winter wheat had frozen; added to that the summer was unusually cool. Garden vegetables on which everyone counted so much could not really thrive. The new five-year plan,<sup>1</sup> with its heavy personal demands, took from the farmers all that was left. Even seed grain was swept together on the granary floors and sent to the cities for relief. All *kulaks* were to be resettled. Anyone having more than two horses, a cow and three dessiatins land was pronounced a *kulak*.<sup>2</sup> By these measures everyone else was to be forced to join the collective.<sup>2</sup> Those who had no franchise (*Stimmrecht*) but still remained in their old households were counted as “agricultural experts”.<sup>3</sup> We were classed in this category since we still lived in the old place and as a minister father had no franchise.

All elementary and high school teachers had to undergo political examinations. Out of 192 only twenty were found qualified to teach. Rather than teach a philosophy contrary to their conscience these other teachers looked for other work which brought them only a few hundred grams of bread and a little pocket money. I can see them in my mind’s eye — my public school and high school teachers, among them also my Uncle Jacob and Aunt Anna Sudermann.

No results of a labor are so concealed as those of a teacher or minister. Kerschensteiner has said, “Education is that which remains when everything has been forgotten.”<sup>4</sup> Even though all the chemical formulas, physical experiments or grammatical rules have been forgotten, there remains the character and personality of the teacher which he has in a special way impressed upon the students.

In Chortitza the anti-religious propaganda set in with full force. Godless societies were organized where readings were held to “enlighten” the youth. Some teachers came from Germany, among them a certain Mr. Discher, who was also my teacher. He taught anthropology, the science of human origins. He initiated a debate at the local theater to which all students were invited. The theme was to be: “Is there a God?” The auditorium was crowded. My heart beat wildly when the curtain parted and I saw my father on the stage. It was a very long debate, interrupted with shouts from the audience. Father’s last sentence was most important to me: “You yourselves are the best evidence that there is a God.” “How so? Why? How can you prove that?” Father responded: “One doesn’t strike against something that

doesn't exist!" Many people heartily applauded; others boomed. Meanwhile Mother was sitting at home and praying. On the way home we never said a word. Arm in arm Father and I walked along the new street, each of us engrossed in private thoughts.

The Easter service in the Russian church on the hill was disrupted. About this time my father wrote the following to his brother in the U.S.A.:

We have no flour for bread unless we buy it. We stand in line for hours before we get it. In one village there are 65 families totally without bread. The Red Cross is opening kitchens for the poorest and the schoolchildren. Many people eat "makucha", the waste from sunflower seeds after they have been processed for oil. However, we do not despair, because we trust in God.<sup>5</sup>

Father struggled on slowly but steadfastly, always giving others encouragement and comfort, though he needed it so much himself. How often he came home tired and spent. Once again my parents began to talk of emigrating.

In schools, factories and collectives a six-day week was introduced. After October 23 Sundays disappeared from the calendars. The free day was called *Vykhodnoi* (going-out day).

The year 1929 claimed many victims; many people died, especially children. The passing of Elder Isaac Dyck was a difficult experience for our church. He had suffered several strokes but had always recovered. For quite some time he had not taken an active part in the church, except for visiting the sick. Thus my father and Elder David Epp now were responsible for this large church.

Along with this, Chortitza experienced a natural disaster. The village seniors could not recall such a downpour of rain. It was as if the clouds had burst. The dam at the horsepond in the Schleh valley broke, and the water gushed down along the Chortitza river with a terrible force, seeking its way to the Dniepr. The homes near the great oak were especially hard hit. Vegetable gardens were covered with silt and stones. The worst of it was that the hay crop was destroyed. There was water everywhere.

A tax of 350 rubles was imposed on Father. He had no idea how to raise the money. There were debts on the house and yard and Father hadn't been able to pay even the interest. Thus he was forced to sell our highly treasured first home. In a short time someone was found who would buy it. With the money that remained Father bought the little house that stood near the street on the same yard. It was old and decrepit, but we were glad to have a roof over our heads. So we moved. We had the same driveway as at the former place. A beautiful, very large oak tree stood beside the driveway. There was a small barn for a cow, a calf and some chickens.

There was more to come. A meat tax was imposed on all disenfranchised citizens, so we did not know whether we could keep the cow. The govern-

ment was still working on the lists of families slated for forced resettlement. We were on that list too. After the lists were ready and reviewed by the R.I.K. (District Executive Committee), a Jewish friend of Father's intervened on his behalf and succeeded in getting our names as well as the names of two other families taken off. After all, Father was no longer involved in farming. At that time I was seventeen years old, and was allowed to work in the collective. Since the law forbade children of disenfranchised parents to receive higher education, my older sister had been dismissed from the medical school in Halbstadt. I had not been given my High School diploma. Several years later my youngest sister was also expelled from school.

On a beautiful spring morning in 1930 the inevitable happened. Nature was at its best: the trees were green, larks were singing and seemed to say: Dear people, it's time to do your seeding. You were always so diligent. It's spring, the earth is warm, the winter wheat is swaying in the wind. Already the hayracks on the yard were waiting to take the *kulaks* away. They were allowed to take only a few possessions, no horses or cows. Many couldn't grasp what was happening. They had still hoped that something would intervene to change the situation. There I see an elderly, faithful farmer's wife, going back into her house once more to say farewell. Here she was born, here she married and lived in the summer room with her husband. Later she became a widow and took over the farm; now she is old and has to move to a strange place. She stands humbly watching her things being loaded. When they try to help her onto the wagon she faints. They simply place her on the straw, the driver cracks his whip and away they go into an unknown future.

This group was to be settled in Eichenfeld, a village whose inhabitants had been massacred by Machnovtsy bands. Others left their homes voluntarily releasing their property to the collective and moving to a new area. Many were arrested and later exiled together with their families. It is not surprising that many should have considered emigration.

There were no individual farm holdings left now in Chortitza and Rosental. Whoever hadn't joined the collective had given up his land. In the district of Chortitza about 2,000 dessiatins of land were released. In Chortitza itself six families of the new section kept their original houses and seven did so in the old part. Only five families remained in Rosental. But the population of Chortitza increased since many people had found work at the Dnieper power station. A new blacktop road was being built from the Chortitza railway station to Dnepropetrovsk. Three hundred persons were working there and more were to be added. In Chortitza alone, 5,500 bread ration cards were distributed. It is evident that the agricultural village had turned into an industrial town. Factories were operating again. An iron foundry had been established in the Lepp and Waldman factory. Building sites were allotted and new streets laid out, reaching almost to the railway station. All this moving in and out made Chortitza-Rosental a different place alto-

gether.

Many people whom one now met on the street were strangers. In an article that appeared in *Der Bote* on February 26, 1930, Benjamin H. Unruh of Karlsruhe wrote the following about the mass exit of German-Russian farmers from the Soviet Union:

What has happened at the gates of Moscow is of symbolic significance. It is a matter of something much deeper than economic suffering. For one and a half decades the Mennonite farmers suffered so much, and still they patiently hoped, endured and worked. In their heart of hearts, thousands of farmers are in revolt against the suppression of that which is of utmost importance to them. It is their faith which Bolshevism detests and which it is trying to root out with every means at its disposal.<sup>6</sup>

In theory we had religious freedom, but the publication of Christian periodicals such as *Unser Blatt* was forbidden. Many ministers were arrested, or else burdened with such heavy taxes that they were forced to sell everything. Father had to sell the old house on the street and was obliged to look for a new dwelling. At that time it was definitely not an honour to have a minister as a tenant. And yet there were dear people in Rosental who rented us a few rooms in their house.

The newly elected members of the village council and the members of the factory council were asked to dismantle the church building and do away with the Mennonite monument. Our Elder David Epp received financial assistance from the church to pay his taxes. The former *volost* administration building near the church was turned into a club. From here agents could observe all the church goers in order to report them. A petition was sent by the K.f.K. to Kalinin requesting the release of all ministers and permission to keep the church building. Hadn't they paid all their heavy taxes? On Christmas Eve all the schools organized performances in order to keep the children away from the church Christmas program. What this meant for the children is illustrated in the following account:

It was the school year of 1930-31 and we were in the sixth grade of the former High School, now known as the Seven-Grade School. Our classroom was next to the time-honoured simple church of our home villages Rosental and Chortitza.

In the beginning of the school year I had been elected class-president by the students. Our school was too small for all the students so we had our classes in the second shift from 1:00 to 5:30 p.m. Since we operated on a five-day, and later on a six-day week, we mostly also attended on Saturdays, Sundays, and the church holidays. Thus we had a day off only every fifth, later every sixth day, the so-called day of rest.

So on Christmas Eve we were in school. But when the clock on

the Kroeger tower struck 5:30, marking the end of our school day, our teacher didn't allow us to go home. After keeping us for a while she said to me: "While I go to the teacherage to see about my family, you as class president are to watch that no one leaves the classroom."

As soon as the teacher was gone we tried to leave, but at the outside door the principal stood with outstretched arms, allowing no one to get out. So we went back, waiting only a short while in the classroom, until I remarked, "Those who want to go to the Christmas Eve program in our church, follow me." And so about six other students and I jumped out the back window, climbed over the high fence and got to the church just in time to join the crowd gathered beneath the beautifully decorated Christmas tree. It was one of the last and most lovely Christmas Eves of those difficult yet wonderful times of our youth. We sang the lovely Christmas carols and heard the Christmas message from Luke 2:1-14, which our dear Rev. Aron Toews read and expounded so well. It was a wonderful Christmas Eve. None of the listeners will ever forget it.

Then we students went home very quietly with forebodings of what the following school day would bring.

Christmas Day arrived all too soon. As usual we had classes and were not allowed to stay home without a very good reason. As I entered the long dark hall, near which the teachers' room was located, the director of the school district suddenly stood before me shouting: "We shall have a special talk with you." I was scared and shaken, yet not too fearful. As far as I remember, I didn't respond, but for a while waited for that "special talk". Christmas came and went and many days more, yet that special interview never materialized. Probably the anxious waiting was to be the punishment.

Thus our dear heavenly Father manifested Himself in the celebration of the birth of His Son. We thank Him for this and want to continue to be thankful. "In Him we live and move and have our being" in the Christmas season as also in the rest of the year, even the rest of our life.<sup>7</sup>

On July 23, 1931, Father wrote the following to his brother Heinrich in Canada:

The stormy springtime has subsided somewhat and things have become relatively quiet. We don't know where our many dear brethren have been sent. People from the Molotschna have written from Chelyabinsk. They are now to work in the coal mines, after having been imprisoned for a while. They had to sign docu-



ments signifying that they went there voluntarily. From here 800 persons went with that group, among them seven ministers with their families. The very old and feeble, those not fit to work, were released after being in prison for a while. These have related what blessed times they have had in prison. They were in high spirits, with no hatred in their hearts, resigned to the Heavenly Father's merciful will.

Yes, when life becomes so serious, the cares and troubles of this world seem so small. "What wondrous sweet communion, What fellowship divine, When heart and soul, O Saviour, Forevermore are Thine!" Today we understand more clearly the time of the martyrs of the first Christian era. Paul writes to Timothy, "Fight the good fight of faith!" That is a very solemn truth. No one can hide behind the light. Many are like Demas, having fallen in love with the present world. We are pressed to a decision this way or that way.

There is much work in the churches since the many fellow-workers who are in exile have to be replaced somehow. I have ten or twelve sermons and actions of office (*Amtshandlungen*) a month. I greet you with II Corinthians 4:8.<sup>8</sup>

The two little rooms we lived in were very cramped. Father often worked in the pastor's study in church. It was almost twice as far from Rosental. Father mulled over the idea of building a house somewhere, but where would we get the money? First of all a piece of land had to be found. One day a Russian acquaintance came to Father, offering him a piece of land in exchange for a cow. But our cow had already been given up to pay the meat tax. In the meantime the heifer had grown and was to calve the next year. The deal was struck. How happy we were to have a piece of land again. There were even young fruit trees on it, which would give a bit of income in a few years. Soon God provided building materials through good friends from Osterwick who gave Father an old pig barn. This was dismantled and so we had beams, roof tiles and boards. But would there be enough?

This place was located up on the hill on the street that divides Rosental from Chortitza, across from the valley which runs as far as the colony garden. First of all we needed water. Not everybody knew how to dig a well. Father hired two men to do this, but we ourselves had to lift the clay by means of a barrel and dump it out on the ground. Soon a huge amount of clay was piled up on the yard. Bricks were made from this clay, mixed with old straw and chaff, and were laid to dry in the sun. Father himself dug the cellar and made a small foundation.

This time was especially hard for Father. Added to the material worries was the concern for the believers for whom matters became more dangerous and threatening. It took so much strength and courage to stand firm against

the attacks of a government which was hostile to the church. Father was arrested several times. They were looking for gold. Many villagers were taken into custody because they were suspected of hoarding gold, but most of them were released. Once Father was arrested because he had received money from Canada for needy ministers in the Chortitza district. They took him soon after he received the funds and requested the number of the money order. He had it at home but couldn't remember the number. However, Father gave them the names of the persons among whom he had distributed the money. Next night while in prison the number of the cheque (1298) suddenly flashed before his eye. When he was called for the hearing he gave them the number and so was immediately released. Someone wrote the following about these times:

To all former members of the Chortitza Church. The following excerpt of a letter from Rev. Aron Toews of Chortitza was sent to the editor to be published:

"This is purely and simply a begging letter, made necessary by the desperate situation in which we find ourselves, some more, some less. You will know that our churches have not practised the custom of providing for their workers according to their due. Now that most of them can't, it is so much more difficult. My dear wife has been sick for two weeks as a result of malnutrition, according to the doctor. Very frequently we have no bread and lard, our main diet consisting of potatoes, carrots, cabbage, pumpkin and lately porridge. Until the new year we will get along with the \$5.00 which the Board sent us. However, if we judge the situation correctly, very hard times are ahead of us beginning in February and March. I know a lot of families in all the villages who already are suffering from malnutrition and who don't know what the next day will bring. Many children from Burwalde and Lower Chortitza go begging for their livelihood. We know that our dear Heavenly Father whom we trust will help in a way that is best for us. We do not want to complain about the ungodliness, blindness and demoralization of our people, even though we have reason to. Parallel to the outward proletarianization that is taking place, there is also an inner impoverishment which causes people to grope about wildly and destructively. How often do we as ministers feel we are fighting the wind. We have only six workers left in this big church. But we trust Him who rules the wind and the wave. I had the inner compulsion to write to you, my dear brother. Perhaps there are those out there who will share something with Rev. Penner of Schoeneberg and Johann Giesbrecht of Neudorf."9

The *Bote* continues:

This difficult situation will concern in the first instance all the former members of the Chortitza congregation. When you give your offerings, please remember the old home church. You are in effect giving to missions. But we hope others who feel compelled to support the ministers who are working under such diverse conditions will remember them also. The offerings should be sent to Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization with the designation: For the six ministers of the Chortitza Church. The Board will forward the money.<sup>10</sup>

Spring arrived with a warm wind virtually overnight. It was thawing everywhere. The little river Kanzerovka, which usually dried up in summer, swelled immensely. Snow-water from slopes and ravines tumbled and roared into the valley, flowing swiftly into the great Dnieper. This year even the broad Dnieper overflowed its banks, causing a flood in Rosental. The water covered the Dnieper street almost up to the Elementary School. If you wanted to go to Chortitza or to the Hamburg hill you had to drive or wade through the water.

This year I attended the baptismal instruction class, so I also had to go through the water with Father. We dried our feet at the school, hung the rag on the fence, and made our way to church. It really wasn't too bad. Usually a flood like that didn't last too long. The worst part of it was getting drinking water. The wells were all contaminated from the manure piles and toilets. So the water for the household had to be hauled by boat from the spring. For the children it was great fun, especially when they had to wash their feet. They simply sat on the steps and dangled their feet in the water. Some even bathed in the water.

From time to time Father took my sister and me up the hill to work on our house. We helped to make the clay bricks. Clay, chaff and water were mixed, kneaded with the feet, pressed into forms and dried. The wagons with building lumber came from Osterwick. Many willing volunteers came to help put up the frame. There was not quite enough material, so Elder David Epp's pig barn was dismantled and the wood and roofing material brought to the yard. Then the walls of brick were put up. How happy we were when in late summer the roof was on the little house, though much needed to be done yet. We were all so thankful, especially Father, who more and more had the feeling that it would not be long before he too would be arrested.

Moving day arrived. It was a beautiful fall with sunny days, with asters and other late-blooming flowers. Spider webs of Indian summer glittered like silver threads in the clear air. Wandering around in the "Knochenal" (valley of bones) one could smell the aroma of "Tymian". Nature seemed to outdo itself in a last effort of bloom and beauty.

When our few belongings had been carried into the house only the chairs

and the table were left outside. Father suggested that we eat our first meal outside. The simple meal was soon on the table. As the sun was setting Father said grace. We all felt he was deeply moved and grateful. Near the front door stood a young plum tree that would soon spread its shady branches. Not too far from the house was the 34-foot deep well with good cold water.

Father often walked to the nearby villages to conduct worship services or give baptismal instruction. Sometimes people going the same way by horse and wagon gave him a lift. Twice he was brought in for questioning by the police right after the sermon. They wanted him to promise to stop preaching. He insisted that he had religious freedom.

One letter which Father wrote to his brother in Canada has survived this period of material and spiritual struggle. I am very thankful for this. Father had come to the wonderful realization that the followers of the Lord must take a firm stand in suffering and persecutions, by word and deed. I quote from Father's letter:

When I read Matthew 24:6-14 it seems to me we are living in a time of inner preparation. Surely this will result in mighty revivals; millions are waiting for the message of salvation. Children of God are being born in prisons and concentration camps; on the northern snowfields, in the backwoods of the Urals the triumphs of faith are being celebrated. God is passing through the world of mankind, offering His grace. As His children we should not necessarily wait for physical deliverance, but in word and life witness to our faith with all our strength. The world is watching how we prove ourselves especially in these critical times, in this suffering.

I ask myself again and again: Will our faith be strong enough to transform the mountains of affliction and hate into an ocean of love? Oh, that the Almighty would give us strength, endurance, and patience to this end.<sup>11</sup>

Because of hard work and a deficient diet, Father became sick with an intestinal infection. He had to stay in bed. We had good doctors in Chortitza who visited him and prescribed medicine. Slowly he recovered and was able to resume his usual activity. However, an unforeseen event took place, which Father had not counted on. Our Elder David Epp resigned for health reasons and retired completely from church work. So Father was alone, although he often went to our dear old "Ohm Doft", as he was called in the village, for advice and encouragement.

One beautiful Sunday morning Father walked to Rosengart, about five *verst* (three miles) from Rosental. He was going to have a service and take a list of the baptismal candidates. Before reaching the first house he saw a young teenage boy coming towards him carrying a live duck. As Father greeted him the boy told Father that the G.P.U. was in the village waiting for

him at the church. He had been sent by his father to warn “Uncle Toews”. He stood there and earnestly insisted on giving Father the duck, so he would have something to eat after his long walk home.

But Father told him in a friendly voice: “I will gladly accept the duck, but run back quickly and tell everybody that there will be a service.” And so it happened. But before the last Amen had been spoken there were two law officers at the door waiting for Father. After a long interrogation he was given another stern warning not to come again.

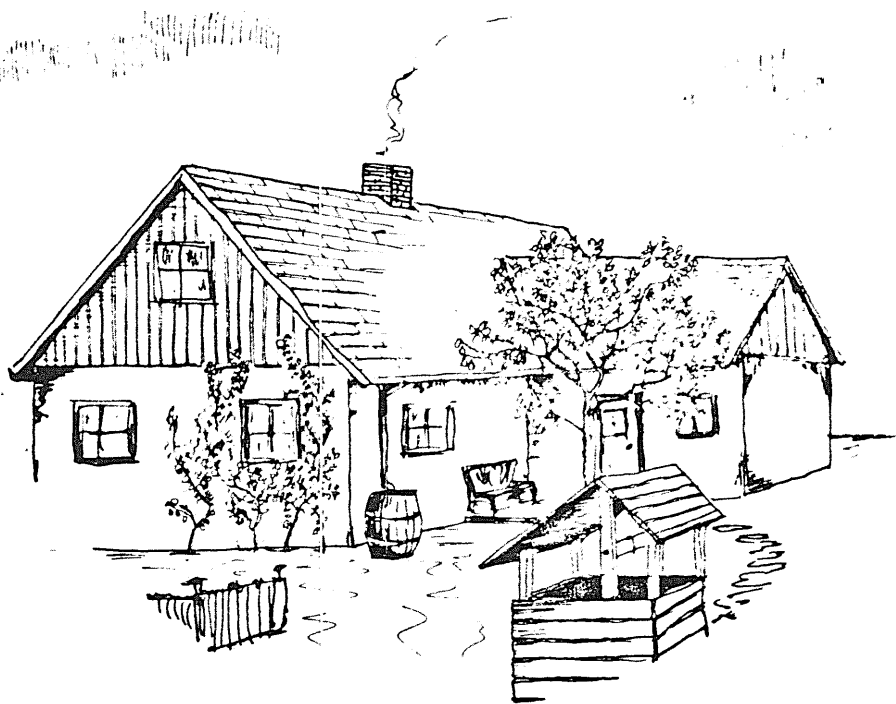
That day he came home very tired. We were so happy for the duck roast. In the evening he had a long talk with Mother, while we washed the dishes. When I came into the room, I saw him looking out the window and saying to himself: “It is not my turn yet, otherwise I wouldn’t be here. Am I unworthy to suffer for Christ?” I quickly left the room while Mother put her hand on his shoulder. My tears flowed freely.

Just before Christmas, on December 21, 1933, Father wrote the following to his friend Abram Walde in Canada:

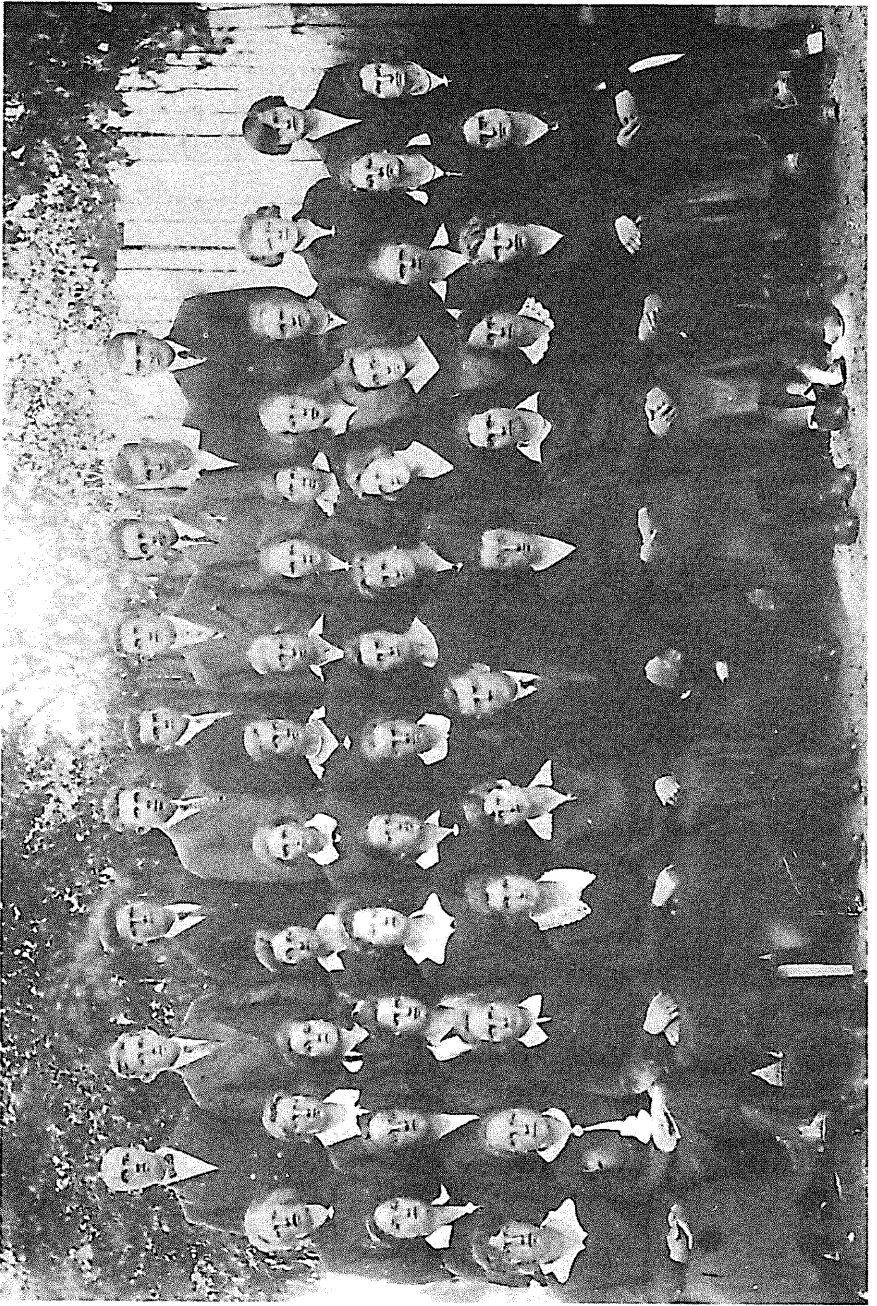
I still have more than enough work, since I began with the baptismal class again as well as Bible studies. There are so few workers. But I am glad to do this and thank God that I can still proclaim the precious gospel. Isn’t that a special privilege?<sup>12</sup>

During the year 1933 everybody was again hard up, even though we had had a fairly good crop. It was called the year of the artificial famine, since the harvest was used for other purposes. At that time I was working as housemaid for a French family on the left bank of the Dnieper. The husband was engineer of the power plant and received good wages as well as living quarters and the allotment which other workers received. These people gave me their ration card for oatmeal, vegetable oil, and flour. Everybody was so happy when I came home with these treasures on Sundays.

That summer we had company from Dnepropetrovsk—my mother’s relatives. Before they left they asked Father to visit them sometime, since they had no minister. At the next opportunity when Father was there, he baptized two young girls secretly in the parents’ home. Father was very independent in his thinking and actions. These two girls had not had the usual baptismal instruction. One presently resides in Winnipeg, and she related the incident to me. She said: “I will never forget how Rev. Toews explained the Sermon on the Mount and baptized us. It reminds me of the Ethiopian official who was baptized by Philip.”<sup>13</sup>



**The last new Toews family residence, built of clay bricks and the lumber of two hog barns.**



A youth group of Chortitza-Rosental, taught by Rev. Aron Toews, and baptized on Pentecost Day, May 27, 1934. First row (l-r): Neta Krahn, Helena Kasdorf, Helene Klassen, Anna Friesen, Anna Epp, Rev. Aron Toews, Agathe Regehr, Neta Sawatzky, Helene Willms, Rita Koop, Greta Heide. Second row (l-r): Tina Enns, Neta Epp, Anna Pries, Anna Janzen, Neta Penner, Mariechen Pauls, others unknown. Third row (l-r): Names all unknown except last on right, Anna von Kampen. Fourth row (l-r): Unknown, Hans Wiens, Abram Pauls, unknown, Abram Neufeld, David Epp, unknown, unknown, Kornelius Pauls.

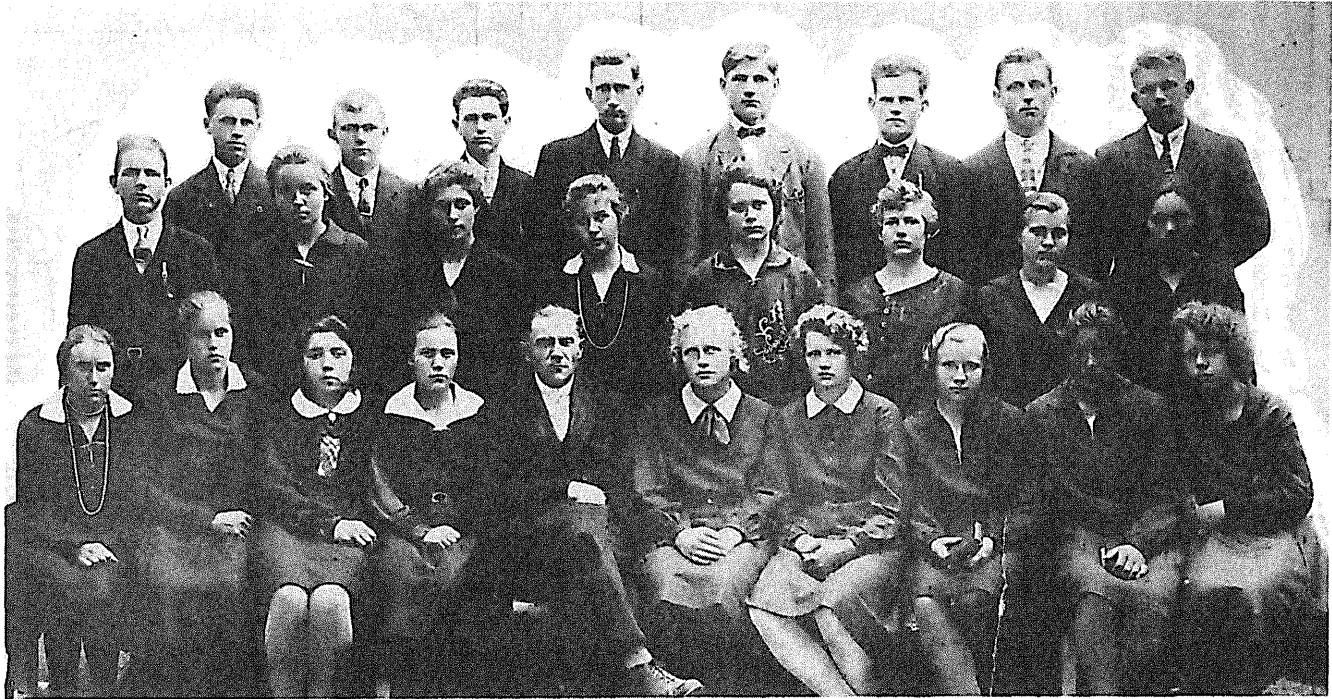
(A number of baptismal candidates had come from the Molotschna for this occasion. We could not determine their names. Ed.)

Werde Gläubigerin des Herrn  
 Marg. Krahn!

Mein Herr Jesus Christus Gottes Sohn  
 für die ganze Welt!  
 Danke Jesus für die Erlösung!  
 Ja, ja, die Erlösung heißt „mit mir  
 nicht werden.“ Danke ist alles  
 bezeugt aus dem 1. Tim. 2: 4-6, was  
 ist die mit bezeugter Bekehrung  
 seiner Gabe! Man muss nicht  
 danken ist aus der Zeit, wo die Erlösung  
 mit dem Herrn = das ist die Erlösung  
 hat gewonnen. Gottes Willen ist!  
 Sondern nicht, das ist nicht möglich sein,  
 oder die Gabe ist alles nicht möglich sein,  
 mit bezeugter der Erlösung alle Gabe  
 danken ist täglich von dem Herrn der Gabe.  
 Die Gabe ist alles Gabe ist die Erlösung  
 mit der Erlösung! Groß ist alle die  
 Erlösung d. Erlösung. Groß ist die Erlösung  
 1. Tim. 2: 4-6

A letter to a member of the congregation.





**A baptismal group in the church at Chortitza (1932). Back row (l-r): Reddekop of Orechevo, Peter Pries, Rosental, Kolja Heinrichs, Rosental, Dietrich Pauls, Chortitza, Abram Regier, Chortitza, Gerhard Friesen, Abram Martens, Isaak Klassen (last three all Rosental). Middle row (l-r): Jakob Epp, Chortitza, five young women from Rosengart, Anna Hoepfner, Susa Klassen, Rosental. Front row (l-r): Tina Dyck, Chortitza, Olga Toews, Liese Thiessen, Liese Martens, Aron Toews, minister, Mariechen Dyck, Sarah Dyck (all Rosental), Katja Regier, Chortitza, Anna Lehn, Rosental, Olga Martens, Rosental.**

## Chapter 10

*Thy Way, O God, is Holy. Psalm 77:14*

An awareness of the temporary and passing nature of all earthly things does not lead to despair, as one would suppose, but teaches us how to sort out important matters from the unimportant. When all is said and done, however, it was God's grace alone which enabled Father to follow God's leading daily, without murmuring or bitterness. We never once heard a critical remark about the government from him, even though the authorities were threatening to close the church. He also knew that petitions against him were being circulated from house to house since they were looking for plausible reasons to accuse him.

He had been strictly forbidden to preach or conduct funerals in the homes, or in the surrounding villages. In March, 1934, Father wrote as follows to his friend Abram Walde in Kindersley, Saskatchewan:

All things change; people come and go; they are born and they die. Former friends find new friends and other happiness. As Solomon says, "All is vanity under the sun." Even times are prone to change and history does not repeat itself. I'm reminded of old Em. Geibel's saying: "Though changes like a wheel turn round and round, And eternal spirit in each change is found." He who guides the paths of the stars, also determines the path of each person, the destinies of even whole nations. To Him be majesty and glory forever. Amen.

Materially this year was disastrous for our family. Many times Father had written to Canada for help on behalf of others. In a letter to Abram Walde in July his depression seems very evident. But then again, thank God, his usual trust in God's guidance comes to the fore. This confidence breaks through the misery of hunger and the desperate situation of our people. He writes as follows:

My future has never seemed as dark as it does today. I receive less and less support from the church as time goes on, and I do not earn anything myself. The children earn very little and the "Torgsin" has seemingly forgotten us. (The businesses where one could buy anything with American and Canadian dollars were called Torgsin.) But why give up hope? Experience teaches us that God's ways for His children are often very different from

what we want. Finally, what is trust in God? The idea of trust touches all of life: as He leads I will follow. Paul would have liked to be rid of his ailment, but was told, "My grace is sufficient for thee, for my strength is made perfect in weakness." It was God's will that he should bear this thorn in the flesh. But we are afraid of this. However, this is the struggle that is assigned to us.

No, we do not want to despair or be discouraged. The devil triumphs over many a Christian when he says, "Command these stones to become bread" (Matthew 4:3). Many have exchanged their faith for bread.

Since the resettlement many families from other villages had come to live in Chortitza and Rosental, working either in the factories or in the collective. Among them was a certain family by the name of Pauls, coming from Lower Chortitza. They moved to Chortitza where Mr. Pauls worked in the "Engels" factory. His wages were very meagre since he was disenfranchised and so the family was very poor. When Mr. Pauls became very ill and was taken to the hospital, his wife and two daughters, six and nine years old, were in desperate need. One of these girls is now Mrs. K. Janzen, living in Tiefenbrunn, Paraguay. She has given me valuable information about one of Father's last ministerial functions. She writes:

In August 1934, my little 1½ year old brother became sick and died. Your father offered to hold a funeral service in our home. My father warned him that it was forbidden. Then your father said, "It doesn't matter to me whether I have to go today or in a week. I must go regardless." So the service was held in our house behind locked doors and windows with many friends in attendance. Your father helped carry the little coffin to the Rosental cemetery.

It was a long way from Chortitza to the Rosental cemetery on the hill. The Chortitza cemetery was not to be used as such any more. All gravestones were taken away, some being used as a foundation for a granary. On this location a sports stadium was to be built.

In October 1934 Father had to go to Zaporozhye for an operation on his jawbone as a result of an infected tooth. This gave him much pain and he felt weak for a long time.

In the home of Elder David Epp the situation was very depressing. Mrs. Epp had been paralyzed for some time and was completely dependent on the care of her husband. In addition, Elder Epp had a weak heart, which forced him to resign from church work. His sufferings increased with a severe bladder infection. Father visited him as often as possible.

Father was present at the death of Elder Epp. As Father knelt by his bedside, Elder Epp blessed him. He died on October 18, leaving Father all alone in church affairs. How often he has sought advice and shared the many

burdens with Elder Epp!

On November 10 our deacon, G. Pries, celebrated his 70th birthday. He had also been resettled and now lived in a little house with his children. He had had a beautiful yard with many beehives which were his pride and joy, yet all this was no longer his. Humanly speaking he was poor; yet he was rich in love and faith. He thanked God for His grace. My parents and other dear friends were present at the celebration, along with Uncle Johann Kroeger (the watchmaker) and beloved "Aunt Tin", his wife. No one could have thought that Mrs. Kroeger would pass away a few days later. It was also Father's last gathering with dear friends.

The 28th of November, 1934, was a day the same as any other, but for Father and us it was a very special day. In the afternoon Mother was patching stockings. The little iron stove was doing its best to keep the three rooms warm. We also had a kitchen, but since there was nothing with which to heat the large oven, it was not used. We used it only in summer or when we could heat the range with wood, manure or straw. Father was carving a toy for little three-year-old Theresa, his first grandchild. It was the time of Advent, and Christmas was around the corner.

At twilight there was a loud knock on the door. Father hurried to the window, gave one glance, and turning around gave Mother a look that seemed to say: "This is it, the time has come." When Father opened the door and the two men entered we all knew who they were and what they wanted. Slowly Father took off his old sack apron and told the men he was the one they were looking for. We all had to stay inside and the house search began. Father had to give them everything he possessed of sermons and other writings, which they stuffed into a sack. Then the arrest warrant was produced and he was told to get ready to go with them.

For each of us Father had a loving word of farewell. Then he stepped across the threshold of his little house for the last time. But before the door closed little Theresa clung to his leg and cried out, "I won't let them take my Opa (Grandpa) away." Very gently Father released her hands and kissed her once more, and the door closed.

We all ran to the window in order to see him once more and wave to him. With tearful eyes we watched him go until dusk hid his form from our view. He didn't look around again; a completely new phase of life had begun for him. How many times he must have relived this moment in his thoughts! My father was 47 years old when he was arrested.

He was taken to prison in Zaporozhye, where the long tortuous hearings began. Apparently they couldn't produce any solid evidence against him. They harassed him to make him confess crimes he had not committed. Since he knew so many people he was told to give their names so they could arrest them. On November 30 they ordered him to get his pack ready and to appear before the commander. He was accompanied by the guard. Father thought

he would be sent away, but he could not believe what they told him. He was free. "Free!" He could go home.

Free. What a wonderful word. Free. To be united with loved ones, and to celebrate Christmas with the church! After he had received his papers and turned to the door the wonderful dream was shattered. It was a deception, a mockery. He had to go back into a single cell where a bright light burned day and night and he couldn't lie down. After that he spent three days in the death chamber, in total darkness. Wherever his hands touched, he felt only cold stone. Yet a ray of God's love fell even into this cell. Then he was sent back to the first cell, where it was more bearable. And so Christmas of 1934 came and went as he lay in jail. Father even wrote a poem for Mother. After six weeks he was taken with the other prisoners to Dnepropetrovsk, the district capital.

Here he was first taken to the G.P.U.<sup>1</sup> prison. Meanwhile officials had come to Chortitza to the village council, asking to interrogate Natasha and me. It was late evening when they came to get us. We were each individually cross-examined by a G.P.U. agent. We were to testify against our father that he had been in contact with foreign countries. They told me that Father had already admitted to this and if we would sign the document there was hope that Father would go free. After the interrogation we compared what we had told the official and there was no discrepancy. Even today when I think of it, I am amazed at how wonderfully the Lord led and protected us. To Him be the glory.

At Dnepropetrovsk there were new trials and examinations in store for Father. Other means were also used, for example, lighting paper strips between the toes, pulling off fingernails, or, what was worse, being placed in a cell with young criminals.

Later when I visited Father he told me of one occasion when he was in such a cell. These boys were all hungry and wanted to smoke. When Father was brought in the official said to the boys, "Here you have a priest, do with him what you like." A wild bellow was the answer. They all wanted tobacco and something to eat. Father stood at the door and looking at them said in a firm voice, "I know I am in your hands, and you can do with me as you please. But one thing is certain, you and I are all under God's protection and power." Again a loud uproar was the response. They hit Father, took his blanket away and mocked and jeered at him. Here also his dentures were broken, so that he could hardly eat the hard, dry bread.

A very difficult time began for Father. One night the full moon shone through the little barred window. Everyone was asleep when one of the boys woke Father saying, "Hey, Deduschka (grandfather), do you really believe in God?" Father sat up and in a simple way told the boy of his faith in God and Jesus Christ. Meanwhile a few other boys woke up and listened. A little seed of God's word was sown in the hearts of these poor, straying boys in a

prison cell. From this time on the boys quit pestering Father. Later, the boy who had awakened him carried Father's pack for him when he was sent into exile. Father was thankful for having had the opportunity to speak of the love of Jesus.

In the meantime, we waited anxiously at home for permission to visit Father. In the spring of 1935 permission was granted. There were many problems connected with such a visit. First of all it was expensive to take a trip to Dnepropetrovsk. Although we had relatives there, we did not want to endanger them by staying overnight with them. Everybody was afraid, since everybody was being watched.

My youngest sister, Maria, then fourteen, was the first to visit Father. My mother had a heart condition and so was sick quite often. My sister writes the following about the first visit:

My first meeting with Father was in the visitors' room of the prison. This was before he was taken to the hospital. I was brought through the large gate into a big room which was divided in the middle by two wooden barriers. On one side stood the prisoners, on the other the visitors. In the walkway between the two barriers a guard paced back and forth. As I entered I looked for Father until I saw him coming through a door in the back. He joyfully waved his cap in the air as he approached. But oh, how pitifully lean and gray he looked. With a toothless mouth he spoke encouraging words to me and asked about Mother and the family. He had been told that his family was already dead. He was so happy and thankful to hear that his loved ones were still all at home.

On May 6, 1935, my parents stood face to face in the same room. It was their 25th wedding anniversary. As Father reached across the barrier to take Mother's hand, the guard quickly ran up and pushed him aside. But Father said to him softly, "Excuse us, but today is our silver wedding anniversary." Somewhat taken aback, the guard turned and walked the other way. So Father and Mother could hold hands and Mother gave Father some money. Only too soon the ten minutes were up. Mother stood waving to Father until the heavy door was locked behind him.

My fiancé, Jacob Regier, returned in the spring of 1935 after a two-year absence. He had been to Vladivostok and Khabarovsk with many others who were doing alternative service for the state. We had corresponded for two years while we waited for this day. Life in our village had changed so drastically. Many had been arrested and deported. Father's imprisonment lay like a dark shadow over the happy occasion of our meeting again.

Our parents, as well as we, hoped that we could be married as soon as possible. We decided to go to Dnepropetrovsk to visit Father and arrange everything. We received written permission to see him.

Many other people were waiting anxiously with us. When our names were

finally called we jumped up and went to the door. But at the door the guards held my fiancé back, saying there was a new rule according to which he could not visit Father. I was surprised when they took me into an empty room with only two chairs and a guard at the door.

It seemed strange that I had been brought into this room, which was not the one normally used for visiting. What had happened? While I was thinking about it the door opened and I saw two attendants in white uniforms leading my father in. He looked weak and very ill. I flung my arms around him and felt his frail body shaking as we both broke into sobs. Was this my father? The attendants had left; only the guard was there. But we could sit and talk; what a blessing! As we talked things over I told him how disappointed I was that “Jasch” (Jake) could not come in. I had always hoped that Father could officiate at our wedding. Now all I could do was ask him for a blessing and a few thoughts for our new life together. He gave us Ephesians 3:14-21, which is a prayer, not for outward gifts and possessions, but for awareness of God’s Kingdom and His great love. He also pointed out that a marriage is something one has to build. Naturally, he had no idea that my marriage bonds too would be forcibly dissolved after two years. That happened in November, 1937, when mass arrests were resumed with full fury.

When we were told that the visit was over, and we had embraced each other once more, Father stuck a notebook into the folds of my dress, saying, “Be careful, so no one will take it away. Read it at home and then destroy it. You will understand everything that is happening today much better, and you will be careful.”

When I left the room I had to pass by the guard again. Father had wearily sat down on a chair, watching me go. The guard held out his hand and would not let me leave. I was to give him the notebook. Father jumped up and begged him to let me keep it, saying that because he hadn’t seen us for so long he had written everything down. Finally the guard said, “I will give it to you under one condition. I need some makhorka (tobacco) immediately.” Father and I agreed. The guard accompanied me to the outer door, told me his name, and I ran off to buy the tobacco. Inwardly I feared that he might not keep his word. Father also was worried that this might cause further complications for us. However, when I came back, knocked at the window and asked for the guard by name, to my great surprise he was there almost right away. And really, when I gave him the tobacco he gave me the notebook. I was about to leave when he asked, “Shall I tell your father that you got the notebook?” I was dumbfounded, so all I could do was nod my head. Then Jake and I went back to Chortitza. Later we read the notebook and, in accordance with Father’s instructions, destroyed it.

On May 26, 1935, Jake and I were married in a granary on the yard of my parents-in-law.

Natasha too was allowed to visit Father in Dnepropetrovsk. In August of that year Mother also went. She didn't suspect that this would be the last time she would see Father.

It was a very hot day in August, 1935. A little group of people, mostly women, stood before the gate of the great prison in Dnepropetrovsk. They had been waiting there since early morning in spite of the oppressive heat. They were waiting for the big iron gate to open. A group of prisoners was to be taken to the Railway Station, where a train was waiting to take them to Siberia. All those waiting were very anxious to see their loved ones once more, or at least to give them one last friendly word or encouraging smile. Each woman carried a pack containing necessary items and perhaps a final token of love, which she hoped to be able to give to her loved one.

Finally the sounds of shouted commands, barking dogs, and coarse swearing erupted from the prison yard. The bolt was thrown back and the gate opened, revealing a troop of prisoners lined up in ranks of four abreast. Heavily armed soldiers and dogs stood guard on each side. The prisoners all had to carry a lot of baggage tied in bundles. Many had been arrested in winter and thus had all their warm clothing with them. Some had been sentenced to ten, others to five years of forced labor in Siberia.

The little group of relatives stood tightly pressed together, each person looking anxiously for a well-beloved face among the prisoners. One of them was my mother. She waved her hands, trying to attract Father's attention. Some called the names of their loved ones, but were brutally driven back by soldiers and ordered to be quiet.

Yet none of those waiting gave up hope. They remained standing on the path waiting for things to happen. Then a command was given and the troop of prisoners began moving. At my father's side was a young lad of 16 to 17 years who helped Father carry his pack. Slowly they moved forward. Those on the path kept pace with them, fervently hoping to be able to communicate with their loved ones at the station. On the way both Father and Mother prayed earnestly for grace to take all from God's hand and to be a support for each other in this difficult time. I shall never forget how Mother told us about this when she came back.

Arriving at the station, all the prisoners had to go through a barricade behind which the train was waiting. An officer called the names until all had passed through the barricade. Slowly the victims climbed into the freight cars.

Mother stood at the barricade, praying, "Lord, give him the assurance that you are there and that no one can separate us from you." Was it true? Or was she mistaken? Father suddenly came to the barred window, and with outstretched hand showed five fingers and spoke two words in Russian: "*Ya spokoyen*" (I am at peace). A friendly smile crossed his face, and Mother smiled back. They never saw each other again!



Whenever Mother told us of this trip she said, “I am so happy for those two words and the smile.” God had answered their prayer.

After Mother came back, many days and weeks went by while we anxiously waited for word from Father. Finally in October we received the first card from him with the brief message that he was alive. We were overjoyed. This card came from a hospital in Novosibirsk. His previous illnesses had weakened him very much, and these were followed by the many hardships of the long difficult journey. He had finally collapsed. God sent help in the form of a German doctor who tried to get him on his feet again. This doctor had also sent the card.

However, Father’s journey was not over. He was sent further into exile, and dropped off in a small unknown place. Here he was a “free citizen” within a radius of 50 kilometers. Each month, however, he was to report to the local police. He was to earn his own living and stay here for five years. The bitterly cold Siberian winter had just begun. Father walked along the village which consisted of huts built half underground. The village seemed dead, except for a few barking dogs. He went from house to house, but no one took him in. Finally at the last house he was let in and allowed to sleep in one corner. With a prayer of deep gratitude he prepared his rustic bed.

Next morning he found out that nearly all the men were out hunting. They often stayed away for weeks. Father split wood and tried to make himself useful; in this way he received warm soup every day. He was allowed to stay in his little corner, which he soon made more habitable by building a table and a chair.

He wrote many letters of love and comfort to all of us and also to many friends in the church. We sent him provisions and money so he could get through this first hard winter.

Suddenly one day he was moved again. He was sent a great distance — to a dairy in Goltyavino where he was to work as a bookkeeper. He even had his own room and received compensation for his work. He wrote letters filled with thankfulness and joy. His fellow workers respected him and regarded him as a friend.

Sad to say, this did not last long. He had to move on to a small village at the edge of the *taiga*. He had to start from the beginning again in another cold Siberian winter. Again he went from house to house, begging in order to keep from starving. Cutting wood was the only work he found. This was very difficult. The logs were transported in floats down the Angara and Yenisey rivers.

Thus life went on for him in this distant, lonely place, far from loved ones and fellow Christians. But his letters and meditations on the Bible were a sign that we remained inwardly united, in spite of the great distance.

Early in 1938 all our letters came back marked “Addressee moved, residence unknown”. Many long months of uncertainty followed. We made

inquiries at the head office of the concentration camp. A long time later, we received an answer with the news that Father had committed further crimes (a lie, of course) and had been exiled for another ten years to the remotest northern part of Siberia. In addition, he had lost the privilege of correspondence.



**A baptismal group of Chortitza in 1933. Members from Rosengart had joined the class.**

## Part II

### Sketches from the life of Aron Toews

*by Rev. Isaak P. Klassen*

In 1922 Rev. Aron Toews was appointed inspector for the AMRA (American Mennonite Relief Association). This position was arranged for him by Elders Johann Klassen and Isaac Dyck. At that time Elder Klassen was the leading minister of the Kronsweide Church, later the first Elder of the Schoenwiese Church of Manitoba, Canada. Elder Dyck was the leading minister of the Chortitza Church of the Old Colony in the Ukraine. Besides Rev. Toews, Peter Janzen, the only Mennonite justice of the peace, was also appointed as inspector.

According to assignment from the AMRA these inspectors were responsible for finding needy localities, appraising the extent of the need, organizing local relief committees, and reporting the results of their surveys to the AMRA headquarters in Alexandroysk (Saporozhye). Relief distribution was set up on the basis of this data. These inspectors were men of integrity.

Bernhard Klassen, a truck driver for AMRA, had this to say about Aron Toews: He was easy to get along with, unpretentious, conscientious, humble. All these were positive character traits.

As inspector he had to do much travelling. This was very dangerous because of the many bandits stirring up trouble and unrest in the early 1920's. Constant contact with Russian villages increased their exposure to danger.

The inspectors were asked to visit the Mennonite villages in Ukraine, Caucasus and elsewhere. On one occasion Aron Toews wanted to take a short-cut to the Molotschna, whereupon the driver, Bernhard Klassen, said, "Toews, you are my good friend but you know nothing about this road—if we go as you want to, we will get nowhere fast. I'm the chauffeur." To which Toews simply replied, "You are in charge, do as you like." And away they went through the valleys southward to the Molotschna.

Aron Toews was practical, yet affectionate. You could come to him with problems and he would have fitting answers to all situations and questions.

The Americans did not really understand the circumstances and conditions in Russia, so the inspectors had to offer much needed advice and

counsel. The Americans had a high regard for them. On one occasion the truck driver, Bernhard Klassen, said to the inspectors, "Your work is dangerous; you must leave Russia as soon as possible."

A serious event took place on one of their return trips from Molotschna to Alexandrovsk (Saporozhe). As they approached a dry ford they saw a fire right across the road. One of a group of men standing at one side of the fire raised his hand to stop them. Mr. Krehbiel, one of the American representatives, said, "Bernhard, stop." But Bernhard, the driver, disregarding him, stepped on the gas and with a start rushed through the fire with ashes and smoke trailing behind. Krehbiel rather angrily demanded, "Bernhard, what are you doing?" But Bernhard shouted, "Those were bandits! Here in this area G. Wieler, A. Siemens and Katja Wiens were murdered—do you understand now?" A deep silence was the answer. And when the event was discussed in Saporozhe the bookkeeper said, "Bernhard, you did the right thing. This time Mr. Krehbiel did not see things as they were. He has had a new experience and this is good and useful for him."

The life of Aron Toews had in it not only tragedy, but occasional humor as well. At one occasion he had to speak at a home service in Osterwick. At the close of the meeting he announced a song to the tune of "Mir nach, spricht Christus unser Held." Thinking he knew this melody, he started to sing. But when the melody ended, there was one line of the verse left over. Embarrassed, Mr. Toews put his hand to his forehead, and prepared to start all over again. Just then a little old lady began the melody, starting the song right. And so he was helped out of the predicament.

He related this incident to me at the Hamburg hill in Rosental. Thereupon I told him of a similar humorous episode which took place in my home village of Neu-Schoenwiese. Our songleader (*Vorsaenger*) in the congregation was the senior Mr. Heinrich Enns. About thirty people were present in the service, among them a Julius Unrau, who was not only highly respected, but also one who had rubbed shoulders with the great humorist, Fritz Reuter. As usual in summer the service on this particular Sunday had begun at 8 o'clock. The *Vorsaenger* called out the numbers of the chorales and immediately began to sing with full voice, "I am willing..." Since no one joined in he began again, "I am willing...I am willing." Finally dear Julius interrupted the singing and said, "Enns, we are willing too, but we can not—please tell us the number of the song and then we can be willing too." Everybody burst out laughing. Mr. Enns said the number and the singing rose loudly and clearly through the open window into a beautiful Sunday air. What a pleasant and carefree "farmers' worship" we had on a Sunday morning in Neu-Schoenwiese. Even a hidden cuckoo called from the woods behind the gardens.

The two of us laughed so hard on the Rosental hill that you could almost hear it as far as the Dnieper. In our younger days we had a proverb: The

Mennonites have the Bible, the Songbook and Fritz Reuter. Olga, I learned to know your father very well, and he even married me and my sweetheart without making a mistake.

I see your father not so much on the street and in the valley, but more on the hilltop of Rosental, where he really was at home. And how! He was a sinewy man, determined and thoughtful, and he had his feet planted firmly on the hilltop of Rosental. Not too far below him lay the Dnieper. This river carried not only the history of Russia, from the past to the future, but also that of the Mennonites. And the story of your father.

When I say that he was sinewy and reflective I mean that this strength of character came from an inner perception of the hills "Whence cometh our help". He saw the hills of time immemorial, the hills of the Old Testament; firstly, Mount Moriah, on which the true offering of Christ was prefigured; secondly, Mount Sinai, from which the Ten Commandments and the ordinances of God were given. He also was the New Testament hills: the Mount of Transfiguration: the mount where Jesus prayed; the Mount of Golgatha, and the Mount of Resurrection.

This strength carried him from the Rosental hill into the shadowy valley of life, and on into the dark night of exile. But the light from these mounts shone into the night of his dark life like a bright moon or twinkling stars. After all the trials and temptations he was transported into a wonderful union with God through Jesus Christ. The terror of persecution could kill his body, but his soul and spirit were alive. "The perishable was being sown, but what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body." (1 Corinthians 15:42-44)

Because of this I can see A.P. Toews clearly before me on the hill of Rosental. His eyes shine, although they are closed somewhat more than usually. At the corner of his mouth hangs a small shell of sunflower seed which he enjoyed so much. His body is firmly set on the ground; the humble, sorrowful face smiles from the strength of the hills whence help comes. The light of eternity rests on his brow because he was a brother in the faith and a martyr. Today he is transfigured, and in spirit he speaks to us:

All the world is hushed and still,  
Only the woods whisper ever so softly;  
And the flower nods from the breath of the wind,  
Night is wrapped in majestic silence:  
Glowing moonbeams, twinkling starlight  
Bathe the world in heavenly splendour.  
Softly now we hear from afar,  
From Thy Throne on high, O Lord,  
Borne on the wings of a gentle breeze  
The sounds of Thy Almighty Word.

It speaks to us with strength and power  
In the quiet hours of the day,  
In the holy stillness of the night.  
O guide me Lord, I pray,  
Now vanquish doubt and fear,  
In Thee I would abide  
And bid my soul be still,  
For Thou art at my side.  
Thou art my Lord and Master  
Thy Name is Wonderful,  
Creator, Father-God,  
And Son and Holy Ghost.  
Lord, in Thy perfect quietness  
Ever may I rest;  
Until my soul is calm and still  
And in this stillness blest.

## **Diary of Aron Toews in Exile 1936-1937**

### **April 18, 1936.**

On April 7, 1936 I received this notebook and a somewhat thinner one with three pens from my dear friend and brother in the faith, J. Wiebe.<sup>1</sup> Today, praise and thanks to God, I finally have a room to myself. For one and a half years I was forced to live with other people who were inwardly strangers to me. A wise proverb says, "The eagle flies alone, the raven in a crowd." Now I don't want to boast and say that I am an eagle and the others ravens. O no! I just want to emphasize that a person who has other than animal desires and ideals needs to be alone. That is why I hoped so much to have a room for myself. Incidentally, the great works by great Masters were created in solitude. Remember John on Patmos where he wrote Revelation, Martin Luther at the Wartburg where he translated the Bible. I thank God that I can be alone in my little room and can rest undisturbed, or read, pray and work. Today I want to write to my dear family.

### **April 19, 1936.**

Today I meditated on 1 Corinthians 13:12b; "Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood." Albrecht translates: "Some day I will know as I have been known."<sup>2</sup> Also 1 Corinthians 8:3; "But if one loves God, one is known by Him." Galatians 4:9; "to be known by God." To be known by God, or as I could also say, to be elected by Him! How wonderful that will be! The father knew his lost son when he came home. God, the Father, has also known us in Jesus Christ our Saviour.

The ways which God bids us go often seem dark and unclear. Many times we feel things could have been different and better. Our knowledge is imperfect, i.e. incomplete. We know neither God nor ourselves. But in eternity we shall know and see. We will comprehend clearly how God has known us. Even the dark entangled paths, the shadowy valleys were necessary for us to come to God and to abide in Him. All of life from the cradle to the grave will be clearly shown. This is the way it had to be. Here we shall be satisfied to know that we have been known and that God loves us. There we shall know as we have been known. "So lead me Saviour, day by day; On unknown ways, yet blessedly."

### **April 21, 1936.**

Today I read 2 Peter 3:1-13, a wonderful and glorious chapter. The last



words, so to speak, that the Apostle wrote to his readers, probably Jewish Christians. The second letter is addressed to them also. Both letters have one goal: to keep the mind of the reader awake, so that he would not become indifferent or sleepy. The Apostle Peter reminds his readers in a special way as he writes: "You should remember." It is quite evident that he is speaking of the return of Christ and of the end of the world. The theme and messages of the prophets and the apostles has not been fulfilled through the ages; there has been no change, no end in sight. The promises of the risen Christ and the hope of the first Christian church had not been fulfilled. Many will have been disappointed. They withdrew themselves, mocked and scorned, saying, "Where is the promise of His coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep all things have continued as they were from the beginning of creation."

No doubt such talk was already heard at the time of the apostles. Here Peter says that scoffers will "rise up". This definitely indicates that the mockers openly and freely scorn and ridicule the Word of God and the Christian teaching. From this the reader shall perceive the signs of the times. The apostle then points out that the fact of the Flood proves that it has not always been as it is now. In general this fact was recognized at that time and is also recognized today by all unprejudiced scholars, geologists and archeologists. It is interesting to note that Peter is so definite in his assertion that this earth will be destroyed by fire wherein the godless will perish. Paul also thinks and writes thus.

1 Corinthians 3:13. Most scholars agree in their conjectures as to the fate of this earth: It awaits a terrible destruction by fire. "The elements will be dissolved by fire" (v. 10). Everything is burning; there will be no quenching, no escape, no deliverance. Read 2 Thessalonians 1:8,9. We believe this and therefore we ask: "When will this happen? When will the redemption of the believers come? How long must they suffer in fear and distress? When will the glorious, eternal and blessed Kingdom of God and Jesus Christ appear?" The apostle does not answer these questions, and why not? Because he does not know and he is not concerned about the "when". The Lord has clearly said, "It is not for you to know." Acts 1:7-8.

The answer to why the Lord tarries so long is: grace. Forbearance! Love to all mankind! It is Grace versus Justice. Compassion versus Righteousness. The Good Shepherd still walks through the desert of life looking for His lost sheep. It is not His will that any should be lost, but that all should come to the knowledge of the truth! All must be saved! Therefore, my beloved, Christ does not return because there are still so many people walking in darkness. What a powerful message it is for those of us who are waiting for Christ's return, and also for those who are still outside the fold, those who have not allowed themselves to be found.

My dear Mary and children, take note of how we so often look out only for

our own well-being, our enjoyment. We do not like to go through “hard” times, but would rather live for ourselves and then be received by our Lord and Saviour! Oh, how we poor people always think first and foremost of ourselves, and some think *only* of themselves. That is not a Christian attitude, that is, not evangelical. How patiently God had to wait before He found you and me. He also wants to redeem others — He looks for them and is still looking. That is why we have hard times.

As we notice in the Revelation of John, it takes heat, the heat of persecution, suffering and tears to ripen and mature the seed. It takes patience and endurance. The children of God are being refined through affliction and hard times because the church which is being driven nearer to the Saviour must be pure and godly. Then the Lord will come. That is how I understand 2 Peter 3:12. And you also, dear reader, must be prepared and strengthened, and have your hopes fixed on the coming of Jesus Christ our Saviour. You should not always complain about the times and the circumstances, saying, “What hard times we have.” That way it is impossible to be serious about our Christianity. Our watchword must be “Always nearer to God”; then He can soon come.

Beloved, hear it once more: the Good Shepherd has found you, His lost sheep, has drawn you to Him. So allow yourself to be drawn closer to Him, grow in Him. Isaiah prays: “Turn us back completely to Thyself.” Let us pray thus, for I know you, and I lack so much.

People who live only for themselves can expect nothing less than a terrible destruction by fire. In contrast to this, the Apostle Paul shows in v. 13 what awaits the believers. We need not fear the end of the world with its fire and destruction — these things have to happen before we reach our goal. Out of the ruins of a world of sin and vice will emerge a new heaven and earth; an earth that cannot be described by the best imagination. Its characteristic is righteousness, sought by millions of people through the ages; righteousness in the deepest sense of the word which is also valid before God. Jesus says to John’s messengers: “Go and tell John that which you have seen and heard, ‘the blind see, the lame walk, the dumb speak, the deaf hear and the gospel is preached to the poor.’ ” They are people who are, so to speak, hurt by nature, compared to those who can see, hear, walk and speak and are not poor.

In Christ’s Kingdom, which is not of this world, there will be no suffering or evil. He came to take away sin and its consequences. His righteousness prevails; all the rough places are made plain. There will be a new earth under a new heaven. This is what we are waiting for — our hope. Hear this, you who are afflicted with physical or mental ailments; hear, all of you, who have to exchange your cross for another, possibly an even heavier one. Hear, you, who must eat your bread with tears, who struggle through life with sorrow and care. May you also hear, you, who are burdened since child-

hood with weakness of mind or insanity. Hear also, mankind, you who are steeped in misery, trouble and despair. We await a new Heaven and a new Earth where righteousness prevails. There will be no sorrow, tears, pain or poverty, only peace and joy, and complete harmony; harmony with the eternal in everlasting bliss.

That is our hope, our expectation. Show me a goal or an ideal equal to this. There is none and can be none; it is God's intention for all men. To this end Christ died and rose again, clearing away all that would hinder the establishment and growth of His Kingdom. But mankind is not ready to listen. See, they stand idly in the marketplace of life, not heeding the call. But God is patient. His longsuffering is for our salvation, as I have mentioned before.

Be careful not to be swept away by the enticement of the unbeliever, thus losing your faith. This warning is so important and grave in our times. There have been many followers who have lost their faith. Also a sign of the times!

Beloved family! Hold fast to what you have, so that no one may rob you of your crown. Even more, grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

### **May 1, 1936.**

All day I have been in my room working on the monthly records. In the evening I was invited to a banquet in the collective. It was a first of May celebration. There was soup, mashed potatoes, homemade beer and brandy, then pastry and tea. The women sang songs loudly and unharmoniously. The cook was dressed as a musician. His son played the drums, someone else played the clarinet, and later an accordian was added. The music was loud, but some of it was good. The girls performed some pretty dances. Everybody was happy and glad, and I was too. I thought to myself: May God be merciful to them and grant them higher ideals and deeper joys.

### **May 2, 1936.**

All day again at my worktable! Have accomplished quite a lot — thank God. I heard the first hoopoe bird (Wiedehopf) today.<sup>3</sup> In spite of snow and ice the messengers of spring are arriving. The snow is disappearing noticeably. Another few days like this and spring will be here.

### **May 3, 1936.**

An important day. I received lovely letters from Oli, Klaus and Mother. Will answer immediately.

### **May 7, 1936.**

I rode to Listwenaja<sup>4</sup> to the G.P.U.<sup>5</sup> headquarters. I came home dead tired. The snow is disappearing noticeably. The summer birds are all here. Today I saw thrushes, ducks and green plovers. Cattle are browsing on the snowless ridges. I sent several letters to Natascha,<sup>6</sup> Gerhard Penner,<sup>7</sup> H.

Loewen,<sup>8</sup> and J. Wiebe.

**May 17, 1936.**

Read Isaiah 5 and Psalm 80. "I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have drawn you with lovingkindness." Jeremiah 3:3. This word is no doubt true for every upright Christian heart. Love is truly the signature of God, the Lord. And this love, because of its own special nature, seeks out the object of love, but also finds those who yearn for such love. "Loved everlastingly and thus drawn you to me."

Whenever I reflect inwardly on my past life, I find so many footprints of the living God on my path where He sought me, loved me, showed me His mercy and patience. The same footprints of love are found on the pathway of all mankind. It is God's will that all should come to the knowledge of truth. This concerns not only individual children of God, you and me, but also the churches, the Christian home, peoples and nations. "I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have drawn you with lovingkindness." This pertains to the people of Israel; they were the "loved ones", His chosen, whom He granted special love and care.

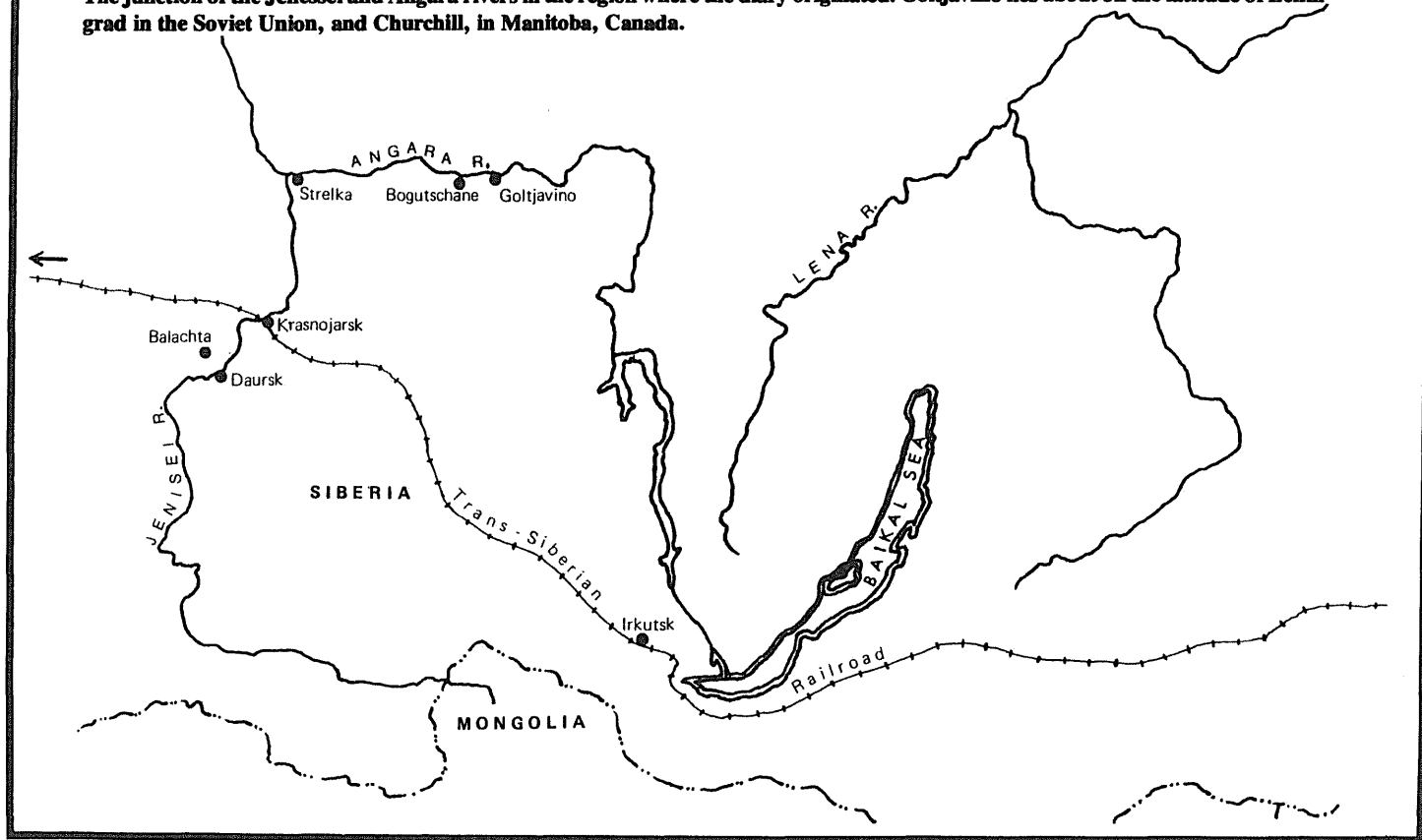
Truly, if one knows the history of this people (and it has been marvelously preserved for us, as none other), one must say: That is right, "loved with everlasting love; drawn with lovingkindness." But Israel rejected this wooing of God with base ingratitude. This is the message the Lord wants to give Israel through the prophet Isaiah; the song he sings is the Song of the Vineyard. By the parable of the vineyard the prophet shows how the loving Father in heaven has planted the vineyard, the people of Israel; how He has pruned, trimmed and grafted, how He provided conditions and accommodations — tower, wine-press and stone hedge — in order to bear fruit. With how much love and care has He protected and tended His vineyard! Again it says, "I have loved you with an everlasting love and have drawn you with lovingkindness." Through the centuries, the generations, again and again, "an everlasting love."

What was the reward? Wild grapes — instead of sweet grapes, little dry berries, as they grow on the wild vine. Wild instead of sweet grapes, leaves instead of fruit. "Ah, only leaves."

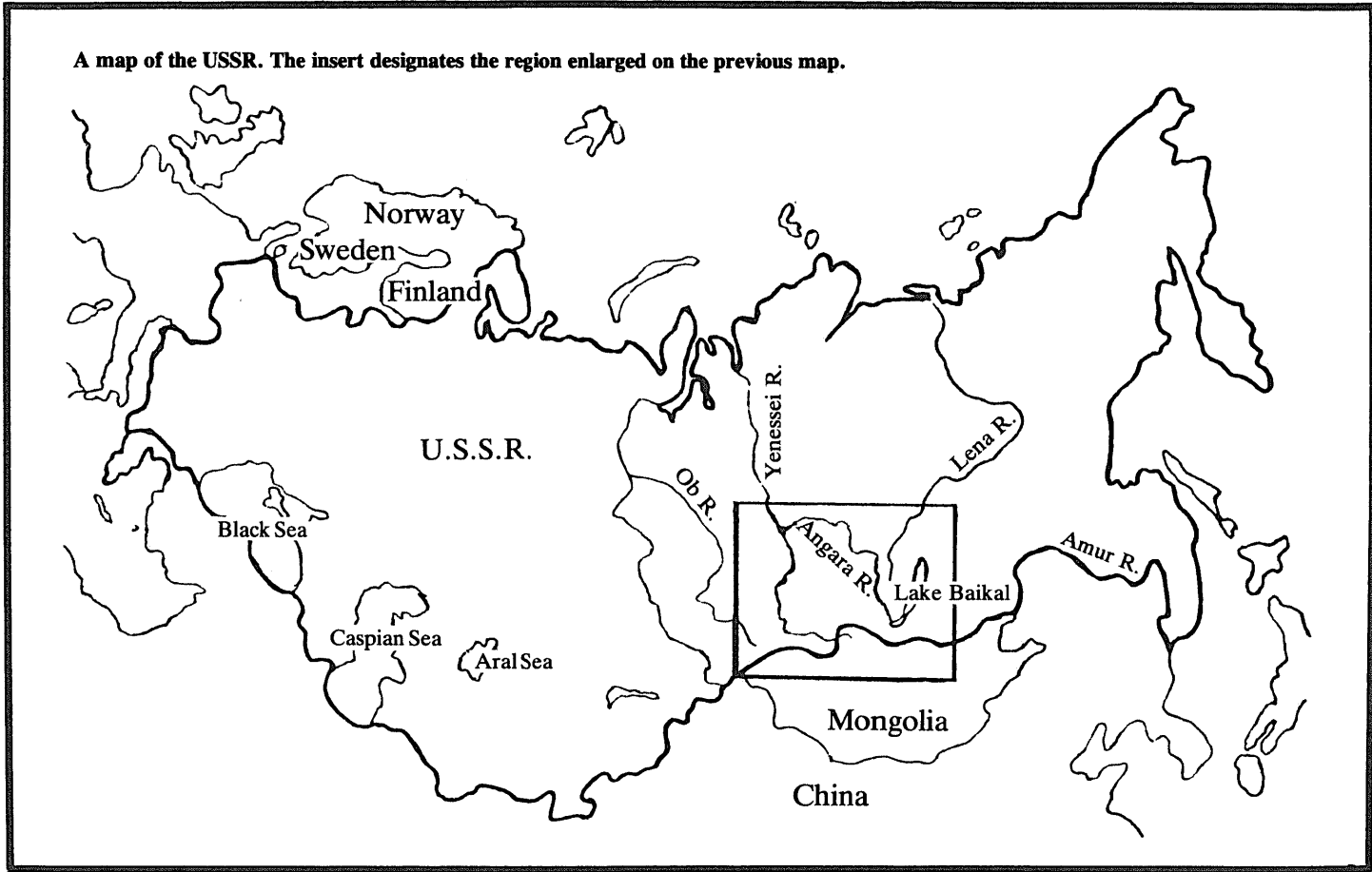
Who bears the guilt? The fruit is bad because the vine is bad. All labour was in vain. The prophet's interpretation of this parable follows in vv. 5 to 7.

In Mark 12:1-9 the Lord Jesus uses the same parable to portray the same truth concerning the fruitless work of God among His people. The prophet Isaiah's parable has become so very important to me. Not only because I have seen the history of Israel clearly depicted in it as seen by the prophet thousands of years earlier, and that it has been precisely fulfilled until the present. Much more, it is important to me because in this parable I also see the story of so many Christians, in particular, the story of the Mennonite

The junction of the Jenessei and Angara rivers in the region where the diary originated. Goltjavino lies about on the latitude of Lenin-grad in the Soviet Union, and Churchill, in Manitoba, Canada.



A map of the USSR. The insert designates the region enlarged on the previous map.



people. A brief look at the story of the Russian Mennonites is enough to prove this truth.

a) Was the emigration from the Netherlands to Holland, from Holland to Poland and Prussia, then to Russia not divinely ordered?

b) And hasn't God planted this vineyard in a good location here? Has He not implanted noble branches into the vine? Wasn't there her tower and wine-press? In the first decades has He not brought forth wonderful fruits of loyalty, honesty and virtue? And wasn't the vineyard protected with a stone hedge? Was this hedge not strong enough?

Then where is the fruit? If I reflect on the last fifty years of our story, of which I am a part, it seems to me that it is the vineyard of the Mennonite churches which should have rendered the finest quality of fruit, but which instead bore wild grapes. Take note that in the 1880's and 90's the passion to acquire land began, not only among the landless, but especially among the rich. This passion increased from year to year till 1914. Others endeavored to acquire more by industrial means. Factories, brick kilns, stores and banks sprang up. Our own schools weren't good enough, so our youth attended Russian schools. Non-Christian teachers obtained positions in our Mennonite schools. Simple wooden houses were replaced by brick and stone buildings, each with a smaller house and a summer kitchen nearby. One spring-wagon wasn't enough, there had to be two; and later the cars were added. In contrast, wealth versus poverty. Some had one, two, even three farms, others had no land, just as one reads in v. 8. By 1905 non-resistant Mennonites had become landlords, guarded by Cossacks. The bank manager placed native guards<sup>9</sup> before the door of his idol. What's more, entire villages hired armed Cossacks to guard their possessions, their mammons. The landless workers, poor widows and orphans remained! (v. 20)

That is the truth, the bitter truth! And the church? How were her democratic principles misused? Where was church discipline? Who spoke up and who had to keep silence in the church?

c) Some, perhaps the more spiritual-minded, sought help in the Brethren, or later in the Alliance Church.<sup>10</sup> However, the situation as a whole was much the same there, and percentage-wise there were also only wild grapes.

Ah, only leaves! Read also verses 9, 13, 14 and 15. Have we not experienced all this, and how bitterly! Read carefully also verses 25 and 26. Then remember our home defense (Selbstschutz), our simple, brave Mennonites mounted on proud steeds with hand grenades and weapons, the "defenseless" in self-defense!<sup>11</sup> Read also verse 26 and the concluding part of verse 30. Notice the bands of Machno.<sup>12</sup> Where was our courage? The rubble heap of burned villages, mass graves of the murdered victims bear witness to what we read in v. 24. This happened literally. Our deeds follow us. It is the terrible consequence of serving God and mammon. Greed is the root of all evil, and greed has wrought so much havoc among our people. Many cry out

with me today, saying, "Thy altars, O Lord, are broken" etc. Yet we do not want to forget it is the Lord, it is God speaking.

Though changes like a wheel turn round and round  
An eternal spirit in each change is found.<sup>13</sup>

Those are footprints of God on the pathway of our people, our church. It was, is and will be God's goodness which leads to repentance and change of heart. But God's righteousness allows this work of perfection, of discipline to come to full fruition. It is judgment on the house of God. Therefore, we must become silent and bow deeply in repentance and humility: "Against Thee only have I sinned and done that which is evil in Thy sight." No, we are not better than our fathers. 'Look down on us, O Lord, with grace; Show us again Thy loving face.'

### **May 22, 1936.**

When Moses was on Mount Sinai and the children of Israel had committed such gross sins before God, the Lord spoke to Moses: "I will destroy them, but from your seed I will choose a people." Then this man of the Old Covenant pleaded for forgiveness for his people and said, "If not, blot me out of Thy book which Thou hast written." (Exodus 32:32) Moses has shown us what a servant of God should be like. The Apostle Paul also says much the same of his people. Had the servants of God and the church taken that attitude, I think many things would be different. But as mentioned earlier, we are not better than our fathers were. Now that we are experiencing God's mercy in such hard terms we can but pray with Asaph in Psalm 80. It is a prayer for the preservation of the church, God's vine. Those who have known God's love and faithfulness will also be concerned about the Christian church.

"I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have drawn you with lovingkindness." This is for you and for me. The Heavenly Father has kept His watchful eye on your path and mine from our childhood on. In good days and in bad, He wants us to bear fruit. Read John 10 and see whether the good Shepherd has not sought you and whether you too are counted among the sheep of His pasture. Also, read in John 15 of Christ the true vine and ask yourself whether you are a fruitful branch on this vine or only a dry useless shoot which can only be burned; whether you have borne fruit; whether you are standing in His love, just as you are. We are all members of our people and bear the guilt of all. So when it says that Israel repented "in sackcloth and ashes", it means that the individual members repented. This is true in our case. You and I want to confess:

In thousand ways the Lord I failed to trust  
Where lovingly His Spirit guided me.  
That gifts of grace I trod beneath the dust,  
This I regret and for His pardon plea.<sup>14</sup>



From this point of view it is easy to pray with Psalm 80. May God, the Lord, be merciful to us and His people, for the sake of Jesus Christ His Son and our loving Lord and Saviour.

**Poem of an anonymous author**

See how on earth in tumult wild  
Mankind is steeped in wickedness.  
And reeling round by lust beguiled,  
They dance and sing in recklessness.  
The golden calf they circle round,  
Their joy in nothing else is found,  
The greatest gain this world can hold—is wealth and gold.

The devil pipes his music there,  
With his deceitfulness and fraud,  
To bind in fetters and ensnare  
Mankind, and turn their hearts from God.  
He seeks from Hades' dark domain,  
With pleasures base to entertain.  
The cup of misery he fills—and mankind reels.

Why do you run, O child of pain?  
Turn back, betrayed one: you have sinned.  
Your wistful yearnings are in vain,  
Like idle chaff blown by the wind.  
Pleasures and gold will never save;  
Their chains will bind you to the grave.  
Salvation comes but through God's Son—Jesus alone.

O Christians, people of the Lord,  
Time's precious hours are passing by.  
Walk with your God, true to His word,  
Live only for Eternity.  
Be vigilant, yes, watch and pray,  
Into the breach go day by day,  
While daylight lingers, toil and fight—soon it is night.

Awake, O Christians, from your sloth!  
You shall be either hot or cold,  
Or I shall spew you from my mouth;  
So heed this warning as of old.  
In dust and ashes now repent,  
Come to me now with garments rent,  
Buy gold from me, buy milk and wine—yet there is Time.

**May 23, 1936.**

Mark 10:29-31. Christians often become a laughing-stock when it is said of them: "They want to earn their way to the Kingdom of Heaven, they expect a reward for their faith and a Heaven at life's end. St. Peter will open heaven's door and reward them." Though this mockery is false, yet there is a bit of truth in it. There cannot be an actual reward; yet it is evident that certain deeds will have certain consequences. A proverb says, "He who touches tar gets stained." It means that our actions turn back on us. As a wise man has said, "The law of nature requires man to bear the consequences of his actions." Dishonest actions leave their mark on most people's consciences, while an act of love creates a feeling of well-being and bliss. Therefore the world's ridicule is without substance, but is born simply out of enmity towards Christ.

Here the Lord is not speaking of a reward as wages, or earned remuneration, but, as Albrecht so fittingly translates, as a recompense, "out of love to me and the Gospel."

A resolute commitment to Christ and His salvation, through faith in Him, His suffering and death, shall be much more to us than wife, child, and household. The meaning of this is shown clearly in the martyr stories of the Anabaptists. Even today many a one could be at home with his wife and child, if he had denied his Lord. The Lord demands nothing impossible or out of the ordinary; just total commitment to Him! Our claims on the Kingdom of God must be based on a profound conviction, a faith for which we are willing to die, to give up everything: land, houses, even wife and child.

As a result of such actions based on faith we receive as recompense already in this world earthly possessions such as mothers, sisters, children, and in the future world, eternal life. Whether we take this literally or not does not matter. We know from the history of the Christian Church that the Lord has never failed His own, and even in the midst of persecution has richly blessed them. The Anabaptist refugees from Switzerland emigrated by way of Hall<sup>15</sup>, where they were supported by their brethren, to Pennsylvania, North America. How much more in the way of land, houses, children, etc. did they receive in exchange. There are many examples like that.

Of course, we are mistaken if we think that in living for Christ we will necessarily live better and have more possessions. Jesus never promised earthly wealth for His followers; on the contrary, He promised privations of all sorts, the cross, scorn and contempt. The servant is not above his master. So when He speaks of recompense, it still means that land, household, wife and child are in His hand. He can give them to us, He can take them away. He expressly states that He will give these things to him who "forsakes" them, who has inwardly let go of them for Christ's sake. Oh, how kind and merciful is our Lord and Saviour! Even to me He has extended some of this loving-kindness, for I know that my wife and children have never belonged to me in

the same way as now. The same is true of a good many friends, brothers and sisters in the faith back home.

“Recompense” — In a special way this also concerns those who bear crosses, who are fellow sufferers, inasmuch as they have accepted their sufferings and crosses from the Lord. The righteousness of God demands compensation. The psalmist cries out (Psalm 73:3): “For I was envious of the arrogant, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.” Surely by this he means the great unrighteousness, humanly speaking, which he finds here on earth.

For some the pennies literally fall from heaven, while others, in spite of hard work and many privations, remain paupers. Some hobble through life on crutches, while others tread lightly along life’s path. There must be a compensation — God’s absolute righteousness demands it, and it will come. Already in this life we see this: many a person, sick for years, is to be envied for his rich inner life. Many a cripple possesses spiritually much more than the healthy one. So wait, dear cross-bearer, you too will one day enjoy what today you must do without. This will be in the life to come, when, as our text says, the Kingdom of Heaven will be established on the new earth and God’s righteousness will reign. O blessed hope! O glorious end! Therefore, be patient, dear reader, for we can say with Paul, “Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Romans 5:1) We as the Christian Church are under the leading of the Holy Spirit and can say with Luther:

Let goods and kindred go,  
This mortal life also,  
Thy body they may kill  
God’s truth abideth still  
His Kingdom is forever.<sup>16</sup>

Let us then firmly grasp the pilgrim’s staff, shoulder our little burdens and know that each day brings us nearer to that glorious time when tears, sorrows and cares will be no more. In the new world there will be compensation a hundredfold for the privations, for the burdens and sorrows which we now bear for Christ’s sake. May God help us to this end. Amen.

**May 27, 1936.**

At a meagre breakfast, influenced by a letter from my dear wife:

With tears I often ate my bread,  
Cried to the Lord in fear and dread.  
O Lord, Thou seest my wife, my son;  
Their souls, dear Lord, are Thine alone.  
To sick and widows Thou art near,  
The deaf and dumb to Thee are dear,  
As where a woman cried to Thee,

Or Bartimaeus begged to see.  
O loving Saviour, dearest God,  
Forget our tears and troubles not.  
Our ardent pleas and prayers attend,  
Thy Holy Spirit to us send;  
And may His presence daily give  
Us comfort, help and strength to live.  
O Jesus, help our cross to bear,  
Keep us from sadness and despair.  
Dear Jesus, we would build on Thee,  
And in Thee trust eternally.

## God and I

*Thoughts through which the Name of God  
has become great to me on a journey over hill and valley*

Under my arm I am carrying the briefcase containing the monthly statement for April. It gives me pleasure to think that I have really done a good job. "That's quite an accomplishment," I think to myself. "Not everybody could do that. You are better at statistics than anyone else"...and so on and on. But suddenly I say, "Stop! What is that? This self-praise, self-satisfaction, self-conceit? It is nothing less than a prayer to the idol 'Self.'" And how gladly he hears such prayers! Especially also if they come from someone else. This makes many a person proud and self-satisfied.

I humble myself and call out, "No, no, no, my friend, it is not your doing, not your ability or knowledge. It is God's grace alone, made strong in weakness. It is He Who prospers and lets me succeed. What I am and hope to be is all God's grace to me." That is the way it is. But wait, before I know it, there comes the old "Self" again, like a serpent, and whispers in my ear: "Yes, that's right, you really have the ability to think things through. You know how to analyze yourself! You think deeply." etc. And I say with Paul, "Wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death?" Romans 7:24.

It is a hard, never-ending struggle which goes on until the soul is freed from its body. It is for all Christians without exception the struggle between body and soul which the Apostle writes about in Galatians 5.

God and Self: these are the great antitheses which can never be combined. As long as mankind has existed, the struggle has raged under the watchword of the Serpent: "I will be like God, knowing good from evil." To be like God is the aspiration of mankind. The "Self" is the idol who has the most servants. This idol is strong, much stronger than you and I can know. Great

heroic deeds have been done to honor this idol "Self". Whom did Napoleon serve? What was the highest motive for his deeds? Ambition! The esteem and admiration of self were the motives of his deeds. The same is true of most heroes. If, to circumvent the truth, one says, "It was done out of love of country, as a sacrifice for the common good," then it is a masked lie. All great deeds, apart from the realization that everything comes from God, serve only the idol "Self". Instead of honoring God, they put the accomplishments of man on the throne. Even the wise Greeks recognized that when they said "Know yourself". Stoicism too may have grown out of this recognition. He who has not understood himself, even in the most rudimentary way, or who has not come to acknowledge the idol "Self" within him, can impossibly know God or Jesus Christ. There are many who never will comprehend themselves; they are like animals: if they have food, clothing and shelter, they are satisfied. Still, most people do ask about God, as a higher intelligence, as Creator, Sustainer of the Universe, even without hearing the Word of God. Even Plato speaks of a higher Being, one higher than the Greek gods.

In prison, too, I met men who were not raised in the Christian faith, who had never heard a sermon or heard the Word of God, yet who sought after God in their hearts. People like that have a very unclear and hazy idea of themselves and God.

The idol "Self" fears God, that is, it fears that to acknowledge God is to put an end to itself. So it puts forth every effort to hinder this knowledge of God. The "Self" wants to be God and to be served. Thousands of good, noble people fight for an ideal or an idea or even give their life for it. They may not believe in God, yet they dedicate their life to this ideal. Humanism too serves "Self". Its god is the propelling force which will yet shake the very foundations of the earth.

"I have dedicated my life to the services of Art, Music, Technology; I work for the good of my people, my nation." These are badges, labels or masks which the self uses. Idealism, materialism, Communism, Nazism, naturalism are not only philosophies but cloaks to disguise the idol "Self". The "Self"-man wants to be on the throne and looks for proofs of his transcendent uniqueness — he alone wants to be God. Thus the struggle to deny the existence of God is the greatest evidence that there is a God; because one does not fight against something that does not exist.

Jesus says that He has come to destroy the works of Satan. The devil's best helper is the idol "Self". "You will be like God." Whenever Christ and the Spirit of God succeed in felling this idol, then Satan's works are destroyed. The Word of God calls this conversion to God, turning away from self-esteem and self-love, and consecration of the "Self" to God.

The process of conversion, no matter how unique and personal, is not nearly always what it is said to be. There is a big difference between being

converted to a system, to a person, to a church, and being converted to God, the Lord and shepherd of our souls. In the biblical sense, the word conversion means to turn away from idols and gods and to turn to God. This implies giving up the “Self” and regarding it as useless, as an idol.

Even a glance at the life of Jesus shows us the truth of this thought. There was no room in the life of Jesus for egoism, self-love or self-honor. He literally “emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant.” He gave up His privilege as God’s Son and became a servant of mankind. As man He left, as it were, His Father’s house, mother, brothers and sisters. Every animal, every kind of bird has a place of rest, but He had no place to lay His head. His “Self” is intrinsically united with the Father. “Thy will be done,” and “I have come down from heaven not to do my own will, but the will of Him who sent me.” (John 6:38) He does nothing of His own accord, but only what He sees the Father do. (John 5:19)

At His arrest in the garden of Gethsemane He says to Peter: “Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father and He will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?” Not His will, but the Father’s will is His highest authority. His self is dissolved in love to God the Father, on the one hand, and to man on the other. He is never too busy to help, heal, feed or teach others. In John 4 we read that He forgets about food and drink when He needs to proclaim the works of Him Who sent Him, namely salvation for sinful mankind.

And what about us? Paul writes: That is why you were chosen, to declare the wonderful deeds of Him Who has loved us. What a call! What a great task! What about it? So often the “I” stands between me and God. Oh yes, the idol has changed his garb. He is well versed in the Scriptures and is so well masked that it is hard to recognize him. When Peter says to the Lord: “God forbid, Lord. This shall never happen to you,” Jesus says to him, “Get behind me, Satan. You are a hindrance to me, for you are not on the side of God but of man.” In the words of Peter there was a temptation for Jesus’ “Self”. Yet how decisively He rejected it. And we? What stand do you and I take, and many, many others who love this Jesus? Alas! The “Self” in us takes precedence so often, almost daily. How rarely do we follow Jesus’ example of “self-emptying”. And why? Because we love our “Selves” more than the Lord or our neighbor. Jesus shows what the hallmark of a disciple is: “...if you have love for one another.”

In word and deed, in all I do

May Jesus Christ alone shine through.<sup>17</sup>

The heathens said of the first Christians, “How they love one another.” In His high-priestly prayer Jesus prays also for us. “May they all be one.” But where is this unity in the Spirit? The “Self” idol has managed to create many churches, sects, confessions and fellowships, which, though they do not exactly fight each other, are far from “united in Spirit”. Why? Because “I”

know best, “I” am a better person, “I” think differently. It is always “myself”. How much better would conditions be in our personal and church life if instead of “I” we would insert the name of Jesus. I am reminded of many devoted Christians who have not recognized the “Self” idol. And many even believe they have rendered a service to God when actually they have sacrificed at the altar of the “Self”.

One could cite thousands of examples to illustrate the point: a few will suffice here.

1. *Church Council meeting.* A house-to-house collection is to be held for a certain purpose. Who will do it? Naturally, N.N. Why? He knows how to approach people so they will give. Someone asks, “And how do you accomplish that, Mr. N.N.?” “Quite simply, a bit of flattery, a few words of praise and the people give.” N.N. is right. In return for a few concessions made to the “Self”, the worshipper of the “Self” idol will willingly donate something. And how many are proud to have given so and so much. O you fools, you did not give for God’s cause but for your own idol; you gave out of love for honor and self.

2. *Harvest festival.* A challenging sermon on Matthew 3:10. A good friend, member of the council, counts the offering. Suddenly he takes out his wallet and says to the other person, “I had almost forgotten”, and with that he adds a large cheque to the offering. Poor idol worshipper. Certainly you did that so we could see how generous you are. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit, but the “Self” wants none of this. This means to empty oneself of the ego, to be humble, to be dissatisfied with oneself, to be repentant, to be committed to God our Lord.

3. A dear friend of mine has borrowed money from another dear friend. The term of the loan has expired; he doesn’t return the money and says nothing. I know about the matter and know that the creditor is short of money. So I approach my friend and admonish him. But what is the result? His “Self” is hurt and offended. “Who, me? Are you reprimanding me?” There is the idol he is serving.

I have met so many Russian clergymen in exile who were convinced that they were suffering for Christ’s sake. But upon closer acquaintance one sees so much blindness and self-love. They do not know the Scriptures, they believe in fortune-telling, divination and card-playing. They take to alcoholic beverages. They demand honour and respect from the people. Oh, these poor, blind leaders of the blind, serving only the “Self” in the name of Christianity. But the Lord says, “Not everyone who says to me ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven.” And they will answer, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?”

Therefore, my beloved: Fight the good fight of faith; always putting to death self-honour and self-love, walking in quietness and humility. Thank

God if someone tells you the truth, and humble yourself.

My prayer:

Take me, Lord, and in me kill  
All pride and all my will.  
Slay the ego in my heart,  
Though in pain it must depart.  
Wood upon the altar lay,  
That it burn my "Self" away.  
Love eternal, Love divine,  
I would keep naught that is mine. (Anonymous)

### June 25, 1936.

While I was in the living room at the Zirskoya No. 2 farm, a courier from the head office brought the message that all the exiles with all their belongings were to come to the Sirski seljsoviet (the local village council); and at 9:00 a.m. appear at the N.K.V.D. in Balachta<sup>18</sup>. A strict command; no delay. I still had in my possessions 3750 rubles from the hay harvest and a lot of accounts for the head clerk which I could not dispose of in a few hours. But nothing could wait. Go! and that was it. My possessions were easily packed. I could impossibly take my fur robe, boots or dishes. I gave the accounts, receipts and money to the superintendent. The head accountant then appeared from Balachta. He was excited and indignant, but could do nothing. He said, "All our efforts to keep you here were in vain." He wrote out my monthly salary plus three days' extra remuneration and told me they had wanted to increase my wages by 40 rubles a month. It was dark when we left the farm. All the workers accompanied me, shook my hand and wished me the best.

It was raining when we arrived at the head office at 12 midnight. After two hours we moved on to Seri<sup>19</sup>, about eight kilometers further. It was still raining. There were seven exiled men on two vehicles. The road was muddy and rough. We had to walk all the way. In the early morning we drove into the wide, deep valley of Seri, beside a stream. In all my life I shall never forget this scene: On the east side of the steep slope were thousands of the most beautiful begonias, meter-high bushes of large violets and blue flowers the like of which I haven't even seen at Ariadna in the Crimea. There were also forget-me-nots, lilies, orchids, "Nasenfärber" (nose painters), as we call them.

At sunrise we arrived at the village council. We drank tea at a farmer's place and bought a few eggs. I got someone to patch my pants. Then we lay down to sleep. At 8 o'clock we moved on to Balachta<sup>20</sup>, where we arrived at 11 o'clock. We were received and treated by the N.K.V.D. as prisoners. It was like a bad dream: free yesterday, today arrested and treated accordingly. We were 104 men and women at the courtyard of the N.K.V.D. We were



told that we had been sent to our former place only temporarily for the winter; now they were sending us to our permanent place in the northern regions. This order had come from Krasnojarsk.<sup>21</sup>

### **June 26, 1936.**

Today the mail came to the yard. It was distributed and stamps and envelopes were sold. I received a remittance of 30 rubles from Isaak Kasdorf<sup>22</sup> which really met my need. We receive nothing more than 750 grams of bread.

### **June 27, 1936.**

They woke us at 2 a.m. We walked on to Daursk<sup>23</sup>, forty kilometers away in the direction of the harbour. Our belongings were put on 23 vehicles. Everything went fine till 10 a.m. Only the old and the sick rode. Soon more became tired or had sore feet and could go no further. I developed a pain in my left knee so could ride for eight kilometers. After resting I could walk again till 4 p.m. There were three kilometers more to the harbour. After a rest near the big watermill we walked on, arriving at our destination at 6 p.m. However, we learned that the ship would arrive only in two or three days' time. So we had to wait. We encamped on the yard of the Sagotserno<sup>24</sup> on the shore of the Yenisei. A large samovar (teakettle) was put up and we drank tea. We received bread for two days. Women from another village brought us eggs and milk. I chose Alexej Valtschkov as my partner and so we kept house together. Two women from Moscow arrived and offered us their services. How little moral sense, how much shamelessness. The whole group except for four or five men and women were morally unclean and unchaste. They feel sorry for themselves. They believe in permissiveness. Their circumstances justify everything. Egoism is the driving force. At the slightest provocation one hears swear words and abusive language. How one pities them.

### **June 29, 1936.**

At 4 p.m. we boarded a freight ship which carried coal and had two barges in tow. We had to sit on the coal. Since it was downstream, the trip went fairly quickly, about 20 km per hour. At 11 p.m. we arrived at Krasnojarsk<sup>25</sup>, but certain maneuvers held us up till 3 a.m. We were able to lie down on the pier. We stayed on these dirty gangways till July 2. Once we received bread (750 grams), but the rest of the time we had to fend for ourselves. Food was expensive. From here I sent a telegram and two cards to my family.

### **July 2, 1936.**

In the evening we boarded the large ship "Lenin". We were placed in the lower deck where there was little room. Each person had to sleep on his belongings. In Krasnojarsk we were allowed to go into town, also to the market place. I had to buy a pair of pants here since mine were completely

torn. I had to pay 117 rubles for good pants. Several of the prisoners drank away their last money.

### **July 3, 1936.**

At 6 p.m. we landed at Strelka<sup>26</sup>, a harbour village, which is situated at the junction of the Angara and Jenisei rivers. This is a very busy harbour, since ships from both the Angara and the Jenisei meet here. Moreover, the log rafts of one kilometer length, which float on the Angara, stop here. The raft and ship crew receive supplies and take off for Ugarka. Here also the free swimming logs are fastened together into rafts. The stores carry everything, especially preserves and winter clothes. Brandy is consumed in great quantities.

### **July 5, 1936.**

On July 4 and 5 we waited in Strelka for a freight ship to take us to Bogutschane<sup>27</sup>, 350 km up the Angara river. At 3 p.m. on July 5 we boarded the ship "Weinbaum". Fifty-six persons took their places in the lower deck. Our long journey began towards evening. The current was strong and the ship had two freighters in tow. We travelled about four to six km an hour. Along the way wood was stacked on the shore at various places. This was used to heat the motor.

On our way to Bogutschane we passed four or five small villages, close to the water. Several passengers embarked. The banks were beautiful — steep, rocky cliffs, 20-30 meters high, then again flats with lovely green meadows. The water was crystal clear — one could see several meters below the surface to the river-bed. There was an abundance of fish.

### **July 8, 1936.**

Finally we arrived at Bogutschane about 10 a.m. After about two hours our belongings were taken to the local N.K.V.D. We were billeted near the prison. We were to receive our papers here as well as to be parcelled out among the villages. The prison was full of bedbugs and lice, which I already had.

We were allowed to walk into the village freely to view our surroundings. Forest, water, stones and sky with dirty little huts all around. I sent a telegram home. There was a restaurant where one could get a good soup for 40 Kopecks. The people were not friendly; yet very curious. Prices were atrocious: milk — two rubles per liter, eggs — six to eight rubles per 10, meat — 7.50 rubles, butter — 14-16 rubles, lodging — 15-20 rubles. It was hard to get lodging. There was much activity at the harbor with loading and unloading wares.

Each of us was being assigned his place. K. Wiese, a Caucasian prince, a Russian couple and I were assigned to Goltjavino.

### **July 11, 1936.**

We left in two small boats which were being drawn by two horses along the riverbank. We travelled 62 km upstream. Valtschkov remained in Bogutshane; and so we parted.

On August 2 we arrived in the village Saimka. It was a difficult trip with so many rocky cliffs and rapids. We had to walk long stretches. I had to walk the last four or five kilometers, but it was dreadful, so many myriads of fleas and towards evening, mosquitoes. Even my net was of no use. I was tired and hungry. I noticed a woman who had bought two sacks of flour. She asked me and Radianov to carry them into her house. We each shouldered a sack and climbed up the steep embankment. She sold us eggs at half price. I paid three rubles and ran to the riverbank to make a fire, cook the eggs and smoke out the mosquitoes. Half a liter of clabbar milk, an egg and a piece of bread was a good supper. But then I was tired and wanted to sleep. But, oh dear! The mosquitoes bit through the shoe-string holes. I wrapped my feet with newspaper and put my shoes on again. Then I tied my pantlegs up, covered my head with a shawl and net and slept for a few hours. Early next morning there was tea again, two eggs and a piece of bread, after which we took to the boat for the last 30 kilometers to Goltjavino.

### **July 12, 1936.**

We arrived at Goltjavino at 4 p.m. on the 12th. This village has 68 residences. We went to the village council which was to give us lodging. The chairman wasn't there. His helper told me that they have no accommodation. "Go and look for yourselves." We were allowed to leave our things there for the time being. Having done this a Russian clergyman beckoned me. He was to go 80 km farther and said to me: "Come with me, Petrovitch." He led me to a room to be shared with another man. I accepted and made arrangements for one month — four rubles each. But the Russian clergyman wanted his reward — some brandy. He was thirsty and since there was no vodka available, he wanted some "spiritus." We found it too expensive. These Russian clergymen are all alike. What the Lord says of the Pharisees in Mark 7:6 and 7 applies also to them.

We moved in with Karl Wiese. The first discovery — bedbugs; the second — lice; the third — filth, filth and more filth. We bathed, changed clothes, went to bed and slept till the sun was high.

### **July 13, 1936.**

On the 13th I cleaned my blankets and belongings, patched my pants and tried to find work. Nothing! It meant wait: "The Father knows."

### **July 17, 1936.**

Psalms 42. "As the hart longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul for Thee, O God." With my whole heart I can join in this psalm. In a strange

land, among strange people, in strange uncultured conditions where there is no appreciation for higher ideals and interests than that of beasts! How my soul cried to God, to the living God! No news from my loved ones, no steady work, no earnings. How empty is life, how meaningless! In addition one hears cursing, swearing and obscene and abusive talk daily.

When I recall the time I was still with my loved ones, the time when we could still go to church, I think of all those wonderful times of blessing; the choir songs, Bible studies, worship services, Harvest Festivals. Then I pray verse 3 of Psalm 42, "My tears have been my food day and night." And yet I know that this all happens according to the will of God, the Father. What He does is good, absolutely good, and therefore I can say with the psalmist (v. 5): "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise Him, my help and my God." (Psalm 50:14, 15, 23) The way in which God shows us His salvation is by thanking Him.

#### **July 20, 1936.**

Today we went out to work, to pound in posts for a granary. Unfortunately, local workers had already taken over. We were offered the work of hauling stones on a boat four or five kilometers downstream, unloading them and taking them by wagon another two or three kilometers farther. We had to make our own shovels from boards. Before breakfast we made two Nosilki<sup>28</sup>(hand barrows) and went home. By hauling stones you don't even earn the salt for your bread.

#### **July 21, 1936.**

We worked with the Basa bespromchosa.<sup>29</sup> We gathered wood on the riverbank and threw it in piles. There were large, heavy pieces. A hard and wearisome task. We don't know how much we earned.

#### **July 22, 1936.**

The same work.

#### **July 23, 1936.**

I didn't go to work today. My shoes needed fixing; then I want to write letters. My friend, Wiese, tells me a good story: "To eat in faith and not to starve in disbelief."

### **Longing for Letters**

A letter from home! What a comfort, what cheer!  
But when there is none—how lonely, how drear.  
Far from my loved ones, from friends so apart,  
A greeting from them—how it blesses my heart.  
What joy as I languish in sorrow and pain;  
This treasure, I'll read it again and again.

And greetings from friends! What courage they give;  
I'll never forget them as long as I live.  
My home and my friends, my loved ones so dear,  
My heart cries for longing for you to be near.  
I yearn for your sympathy, faithfulness, love;  
Forsaken, there's nothing but help from above.

**July 23, 1936.**

Today we received money for two days work; 8 rubles, 40 Kopecks. Of that 44 Kopecks were withheld because there was no change.

**July 24, 1936.**

I couldn't sleep last night because of the bedbugs. This is a result of uncleanliness here. The people do nothing about vermin. I have sent a letter to my dear wife.

**July 25, 1936.**

Psalm 53:6. "O that deliverance for Israel would come from Zion."

**July 27, 1936.**

We sawed and chopped wood today; five cubic meters. A very difficult and unpleasant task, but I am thankful that I can work. We earned one ruble, 93 Kopecks.

**July 28, 29, 30, 1936.**

The same.

**July 31, 1936 and August 1, 1936.**

Hauled cables from the riverbank to the storeroom. Hard and dirty work. They tell us we have earned well: 10 to 12 rubles per day.

**August 2, 1936.**

(Sunday) Two letters from Mary and Oli. Answered them both today.

### **Meditation**

Genesis 8:1. What a marvellous word: "But God remembered Noah!" Had God forgotten Noah for a while? It is unthinkable that God, the omniscient, should overlook anyone and especially Noah, whom He had selected to be the father of a new generation. So it seems that it doesn't mean that God had not thought of Noah for a time and then suddenly remembered him.

How then can we understand this? Let us visualize the situation in which Noah finds himself. We will be amazed to note that the expression "remembered" has a certain connotation of attitude which shows God's relationship to Noah. How tremendous — what a mysterious and frightful moment it

must have been when the animals one by one came creeping up to find refuge in the great ark! God had placed fear in them, a fear of something unknown and terrible about to happen which caused them to seek refuge. They find it in Noah's ark. Though Noah believes God's word, yet as he observes this event he is overcome with a holy awe. It may have taken days — yet all the while Noah watches and remembers God's word. Finally he hears the command for him to enter. He leaves his home with all his family and sets up housekeeping in the ark.

It could have been on an evening, when a soft rain fell; and a heavy fog enveloped the ark. The door was locked. It was the seventh day after God spoke to Noah for the last time. "And God shut him in." (Genesis 7:16) Noah and his family were now sealed off from the world and its troubles; lost mankind was excluded from God's grace and mercy. Noah was sealed off from the world and mankind, excluded from God's judgment, yet included in God's protection and grace.

There is the sound of a mighty downpour of rain. Thunderclouds roll and the lightning flashes against the windows of the ark. The animals have become quiet. Noah and his family sense a dreadful fear, a holy awe, yet a confident assurance that they have been saved. Outside there is a terrible, merciless, annihilating judgment of God.

Have you ever experienced a thunderstorm where peal upon peal resounds, and lightning flashes incessantly? How did you feel? This storm was something more horrendous. Noah knew that sooner or later nothing would be left of the old world. Only he and his family were saved.

One day followed another. Oh, those endless days and nights in the ark! They were safe and secure under God's care; yet how many prayers will Noah longingly have sent up to God's throne! The doves are to bring him a good message. Which message? My beloved, the message that God's judgment has passed over. His grace, mercy and forbearance are awaited everywhere.

At long last, what joy, what bliss. "God remembered Noah," and all the inhabitants of the ark. O blessed remembrance! Noah had heard and accepted the message of judgment on the world. He can now leave the confinement of the ark and cultivate the land. Noah is free.

"God remembered Noah." The time of judgment as well as the time of testing was overcome. Heartfelt praise ascends to the Lord his Redeemer. Noah stands cleansed and refined as the father of a new mankind. "God remembered Noah." This shows special grace and redemption, a condescension of the holy God to Noah. "I will bring you into the wilderness and speak tenderly to you." Hosea 2:14. Wasn't that a special remembrance of God? Israel was led into Babylonian captivity. For many it was a judgment of death, but for "those who allowed themselves to be led into the desert it was God speaking tenderly."

In these times this word concerns us: “Today, when you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts.” So we owe God praise upon praise for the days He gives us. What if you hadn’t lived through this day? Where would you be now? In Eternity! But how would you feel? “God remembered Noah” — as God remembers His children in a special way.

Even today, my beloved, God’s judgment passes over the world and its people. It is a separation of good and evil, of the godly and the ungodly. This is true also in the churches: the lukewarm are separated from the warm, the true from the false. Thus the Lord takes many of us into the wilderness, into the ark, where He speaks tenderly with us, with you and me. Someone experiences illness, another one is sent into exile or into prison. God remembers us. At the right time the dove brings an olive leaf with the message, “God remembers you.” Be still and trust Him; and take note of His deeds and judgments everywhere. See, God remembered Noah in such a special way — He also remembers you. When you go through deep waters, thunderous judgments, and the lightning flashes of God’s righteousness, be still before God and wait on Him. The time is coming when your life will bear the inscription: God remembered you and you will sing psalms of praise to Him Who has turned your sorrows into joy. Lord God and Jesus Christ, remember me. Amen.

### **August 2-9, 1936.**

The third week at Goltjavino. Sawed and chopped wood on the banks of the Angara from early Monday till Saturday noon. It was very difficult and unpleasant work and often I felt discouraged and disheartened. But the Lord gave strength beyond measure. At first we barely finished five cubic meters, but lately we managed six. Our wages were averaged at two rubles, 34 Kopecks per day — not enough for one day’s needs. Saturday we got a five ruble coupon to buy bread. There is no money in the cash account. While chopping and sawing wood my thoughts were centered on an old friend. So today I had to think of Schoenhorst a great deal, of the many dear people there, of the many wonderful blessings I experienced there; of John Penner and family, Jacob Wolf and H. Penner.

**Psalm 79.** A beautiful Psalm of Asaph, the singer and poet. In the first four verses he tells God what has happened and how the people are faring. As if God doesn’t know what His people are going through. Certainly all these things come from Him and are in His plan. But the psalmist pours out his heart before God and must tell Him what his petitions are. Just as a child, whom some evil has befallen, comes to his mother again and again, telling her his problems and asking for help.

Israel has received from God an inheritance; its religion, worship service, the temple in Jerusalem, the city of God. Israel is elected (chosen) before all

peoples, privileged. It is to be a blessing for all nations. In a special way God has accepted it and made it a bearer of these promises for the whole world and its peoples. This inheritance, which was entrusted to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses and Israel, was to be preserved, guarded and proclaimed. And now? "The heathen have broken in," the temple is defiled; Jerusalem, the beautiful city of David, lies in ruins. God's servants have been murdered and haven't even been buried. The heathen neighbors and ungodly have taunted and mocked the children of Israel: "Where is your God? Who will help you?" That is the lament of the psalmist! That is what brings him to God and to his knees. The same holds true for today. O Mennonite people, preserve that which has been entrusted to you!

Similarly, the same sentiments were expressed in 1925 at the 400th anniversary of the founding of the Mennonite movement, in countries and districts in which Mennonites lived. Also in later years, how earnestly have watchmen on the walls of Zion sounded the warning bugles. Yet the shattering demoralization of the church and the people could not be stemmed. Like a devastating avalanche it hurls itself upon people and church. One stone after another crumbled from the "Temple" of the church and today we too have to join the psalmist in the same lament. The heathen and ungodly have broken in; only heaps of stone are left and the servants dispersed. Haven't we also become objects of scorn for our neighbors? They mockingly say: "Where is your God, and your proven steadfastness, piety, honesty; where your loyalty?" When we think of the closed churches, we have to lament with Jeremiah: "O Lord, Thy altars are broken down." Oh, why did this have to happen? Why has the Almighty God allowed His people, His inheritance, His temple to be broken down and demolished? Whose fault is it, and what is the reason for such an event?

The psalmist prays: "Do not remember against us the iniquities of our fathers" (v. 8), and gives the reason for all this. The same psalmist writes in Psalm 74:1: "O God, why dost Thou cast us off forever? Why does Thy anger smoke against the sheep of Thy pastures?" So our iniquities, our transgressions, our sins separate us from God and His holiness; they have evoked God's wrath, the desolation.

We are to blame, not God the Lord. And we too have to confess: our iniquities are the reason, our attitude to the God-given inheritance. Our people have fallen deeply, ethically and morally. Even during the war, or perhaps a decade earlier, this decline already existed. "Land, land" and "money, money" and "business and education" were corrupt catchwords of the time. The old staunch steadfastness gave way to a puffed-up enlightenment. The quiet Mennonite has become a contentious faction-monger and partly a supporter for ideas he doesn't understand; or for money. Our faith in God's defense, which through the centuries has protected our people, our fathers, is replaced by "Self-defense." Our youth spends their leisure time in



dancing and other frivolous parties.

“O Lord, remember not our former iniquities.” Should that not be our confession, the words of our repentance? “Save us and forgive us our sins for Your name’s sake!”

One or the other may ask, “Can we really be helped?” Is it God’s will to ask for something we once had? Have we not arrived at the time of the sixth trumpet? Will it not happen according to the word of the prophet? Has the harvest not become dry and ripe for God’s sickle of judgment?

It is self-evident that the times have changed and we are in the eleventh, if not the twelfth hour. It is just as self-evident that God and Jesus Christ is the same gracious and merciful God. As of old, even so today He sees our sufferings and sorrows; He can and will help us. He will not necessarily restore our former wealth and outward well-being, but rather our spiritual, eternal estate, the spiritual well-being and salvation of our churches. “Remember your churches“ — thus we want to pray in deep humility. “Help us, O God, for Your name’s sake. Save us and forgive us our sins.”

With this I would say: “May God restore our old congregation, our services, instruction classes for youth; our gatherings; so that we could again proclaim God’s Word freely and be edified. Might He also grant that all those imprisoned and exiled could be reunited with their families; that we could again have the opportunity to bring up our children and grandchildren in the fear of the Lord. We must prepare them spiritually for worse times yet to come. May God grant this. “But we, Thy people, and sheep of Thy pasture, will thank Thee eternally and proclaim Thy glory for ever and ever.”

### **August 15, 1936.**

Watchword: Psalm 91:1-2. “He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High, who abides in the shadow of the Almighty, will say to the Lord, ‘My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.’ ”

It is a year today since we left Dniepropetrovsk in a “Stolypin” wagon<sup>30</sup> and began our long journey into exile which we reached on October 17. One year has passed since I looked into the eyes of my dear wife. She stood on the platform, I in the steel-barred wagon.

When, oh when will I see her again; when will I look into her eyes again? And yet, what grace, what wonderful divine providence that she was able to be there on that particular day! She could accompany me to the railway station, though from afar, exchange a few words with me, and say farewell. God be praised! Yes, my refuge and my fortress, my God in Whom I trust. Be Thou my shield and buckler; under the shadow of Thy wings I will find refuge. There my dear wife and children too shall rest securely. Lord, bring us altogether to Thee. Abide in us and let us not turn from Thy love. As Thou hast been with me during this long, hard year, and also with my loved

ones, and hast helped beyond what we can ask or think, mayest Thou so continue to do. Amen.

**August 16, 1936.**

Last night and today we had a slow drizzle, dark sky, dismal outside, dismal inside, as if the sun doesn't want to shine anymore, hopeless and comfortless. How useless is a life that consists only of animal instincts and feelings. That is the way most people live here and we also to a certain degree, are being forced by circumstances to think only of food, drink and clothing. We dream of freedom which can only be described on paper. It can never be realized as long as factional purposes and goals are the highest motives. Where one party rules, or a single individual, it is evident that the result is absolutism which is the greatest enemy to freedom. "If the Son shall make you free, you are free indeed." Without the Son, Jesus Christ, life would not be worth the living, much less the suffering.

**Psalm 4:4, 2 Corinthians 1:8-12.** Both these Scripture passages are characterized by the word "marvelous". (German translation: "Know that the Lord leads the godly marvelously".) Remember Paul was the chosen instrument, the special witness, the Spirit's tool by means of which the church of Christ was to be established among the heathen. This man who endured so many dangers and privations can tell, as perhaps none other, of hindrances and obstacles in his work for the Lord. Not only do people hinder him, but Nature too. Should God not help him in a special way, protect him and strengthen him? Isn't he His servant, His ambassador, His labourer? Why then all this? Yet as he himself says, "that we despaired even of life," and "in hunger and want and many dangers." Moreover, he has asked the Lord to take away the thorn in the flesh which was a great hindrance in his work. But graciously the Lord answers him: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness." Thus he can say of himself, "When I am weak, then I am strong." A list of the men of God who had the same experiences would be long. And naturally the seeking mind asks, "Why is it thus?"

It is good if we ask this question in order to gain clarity and understanding about this matter. Psalm 4 gives us an answer: "But know that the Lord leads the godly marvelously." Not in the usual, but in a special way. He leads to heights and depths, through darkness and troubles, in dangers and trials. Blessed is he who knows that being led "marvelously" is a characteristic of God's children. Think of Job. God, so to speak, exposed him to the will of the devil. What calamities befall this servant of God, as well as Paul, Peter and John. One is led differently than the other, yet always "marvelously". The forces of evil are evident also in the life and experiences of God's children. It isn't always punishment when accidents, suffering and hind-

rances cross our path of life.

Job's friends thought that it was punishment and yet were wrong. Life brings tests and trials to be overcome. Or as Paul says, "To fight the good fight of faith." It is a triumph for hell to be able to rob us of our faith. God knows the strength of your resistance, knows the trial; yet you must be refined. We must pass into the Kingdom of God through many afflictions, must be proven, refined, cleansed, sanctified, grounded and prepared. These are the marvelous ways of God on our pathway which we often do not understand. Have you not had similar experiences and asked: "Why, and for what purpose? What wrong have I committed? Why this accident, this dire fate?" I would encourage you today with the words of the psalmist: "Know that the Lord leads the godly marvelously." If you have acknowledged this, then thank God and say with the Apostle (v. 9), "but that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God Who raises the dead. He has delivered us from death and still delivers us daily."

Oh, how glorious and marvelous this is. The daily difficulties, troubles, sickness, crosses and sufferings about which so many of us complain, are often our redemption. This is the token of love, helping us on to heaven.

Remember, dear Mary and children, that the Lord leads His children marvelously. This is the God-given pathway and is the one that is good for us. Hence, the watchword:

Lord Jesus, lead us day by day,  
Amazingly and blessedly. Amen.

### **Goltjavino, August 23, 1936.**

On the 51st birthday of my friend, Karl Wiese<sup>31</sup>, he writes, Psalm 31:15, "My times are in Thy hands."

Today another year has passed away,  
God's hands have held the present as the past;  
Fifty-one years His hand has carried me  
To unknown places, and lovingly has blessed.

Exiled to this forsaken, distant part,  
Away from all my loved ones; neither word  
Nor letter comes to cheer my lonely heart,  
How long before my fervent prayer is heard?

O Lord, Thou know'st this anguished soul of mine,  
All pain and pleasure, joys and sorrows come from Thee;  
And after storm again the sun will shine,  
O do not tarry, Lord, remember me.

To Thee do I entrust myself, my wife,  
The souls of all my loved ones, they are Thine.

O may our faith be steadfast through this life,  
And at Thy throne as heirs of heaven shine.

I praise Thee, Saviour, for Thy wondrous grace,  
And though Thou leadest us on paths of gloom,  
Yet on the way, the brightness of Thy face  
Dispels the darkness, leads to heav'n and home.

But on our pilgrim way, this is my prayer,  
O grant that here on earth we meet again;  
And at life's end, into Thy loving care,  
We would commend our spirits, Lord divine.

**Goltjavino, September 10, 1936.**

Now autumn leaves are falling  
And heavy fog is rolling  
Over field and stream;  
And though my heart perceive it,  
I scarcely can believe it,  
Summer's but a dream.

E'en in my life that's given  
To me from God in heaven,  
I feel the autumn air.  
My hair now grey, reminds me  
Of summer days behind me,  
Of sepulchre and bier.

For in this pain and sorrow,  
That greets each new tomorrow  
The thought of death is near.  
Yet it shall never shake me,  
For Jesus will awake me,  
My soul shall never fear.

But e'er I cross the river,  
One wish I have, O Saviour,  
O grant me this, I pray;  
"That I with my beloved,  
Who are so far removed,  
Once more united be."

**November 15, 1936.**

Christmas Meditation 1936. Isaiah 9:5, "And His name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace." The wonderful Christmas season is here again. Again the songs of

“On Bethlehem’s peaceful meadows,” “Silent Night” and “O Thou Joyful Day” resound. Again happy children’s eyes glow and their hearts rejoice at all the lovely things which Love has given. Yes, Christmas is a wonderful children’s celebration!

Is it nothing else? That would be a poor kind of Christianity. But we say: God be praised and thanked that there is more to it. We celebrate Christmas not only for all the children, but for all God’s people. Christmas, Holy Night, which has brought us the Saviour, God’s Son, through Whom we have become God’s children. Christmas tells us, the world, and you too were lost; Christ is born. Since that night, since that hour the world and its peoples are redeemed. The “lost” paradise is found again, and Jesus Christ has levelled the pathway to it. “The angel no longer bars the way — to Him be praise and glory.”

How long had Isaiah and the godly people of the Old Covenant waited! And God, the Lord, gave him those precious words: “To us a child is born, a Son is given, and the government shall be upon His shoulder; and His name shall be called: Wonderful, Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.” In these five words we find everything that the Christchild stands for: rather it is His nature, His signature. And whoever celebrates Christmas Day with an upright heart, a sincere longing in spirit and in truth will not be lacking in blessing.

My dear family, my beloved wife, beloved children in Christ! What does Christmas give us? To us as adults? Consider what has happened! This is the third Christmas that I am not in your midst. How many cares and problems lay before us! Remember my journey, Kolya’s illness, the worries about bread and money which loomed before us like an unsolved riddle and steep, impassable mountains. Who was it, my beloved, that stood by mightily with counsel and deed?

When all my efforts are in vain,  
I know not how my goal to win,  
When all my weakness I confess,  
My feeble mind and helplessness:  
Then Christ, Thou art my mighty tower,  
Who giveth counsel, strength and power.  
His name is Counsellor, mighty God,  
Who Christmas now to us has brought.

How often you were sick, especially Kolya; discouraged and weak. I too was often at wit’s end, powerless and depressed. One thinks that one cannot go on. But today is Christmas day, and you and I can participate because His name is the Mighty God. He can and will give us strength again and again.

Though all my inner strength has left,  
My soul of all its sap bereft,  
Though life’s vitality is spent,

And weak and languishing I faint;  
Then do I feel Thy mighty power.  
Fill me with strength this very hour.

Therefore, come to the Christchild with your weakness and your infirmity;  
He is strength, rather, He is your strength.

Bes Chosjain dom sierota (without its manager a house becomes orphaned), says a Russian proverb. Oh, how many such orphans there are! And there are many others who feel alone and forsaken. Christmas is for such as these. You too have often felt: "I need a father." So come to the Christchild with a child-like heart and child-like faith.

His name is Everlasting Father,  
A Father of the fatherless,  
He seeks the erring child to gather,  
To save, to rescue and to bless.  
His Father's heart is full of love,  
Goodness and truth flow from above  
Forever and forever.

Therefore, my dear ones, come to the Christchild, for through Him you have an eternal Father in heaven, who never forsakes His own.

This is the third Christmas of separation from my loved ones. Oh, how restless and disturbed one often becomes! What will the future bring? What will become of us? These questions often fill our hearts. Added to this are the mistakes, the sins we commit: the flaring up of emotions, impatience, dishonesty, indignation, dissatisfaction and many other things which rob us of our peace and cause us to be disturbed. Oh fearful heart, crushed spirit, troubled soul: Look at the Christchild, hear the angel's song: Peace on Earth! Peace to you!

His name is Prince of Peace,  
His peace He leaves with you,  
A table He has spread  
Of pastures green and new,  
He calms your anxious, fearful soul,  
In love enfolds and makes you whole,  
There you will rest in peace.

Beloved, Christmas brings us all this. And so let us enter the Christmas season again and receive Counsel, Strength, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace; and the most glorious name of all is Wonderful.

Whatever I cannot comprehend with my mind, I want to believe, for His name is Wonderful. Therefore my sincerest prayer is:

"Lord Jesus, lead us day by day  
On unknown ways, yet blessedly." Amen.

**New Year's Eve. Psalm 139:16.** "In Thy book were written every one of

them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.” David wrote these words and one naturally asks the reason why he wrote them. That is, what may have prompted David to think of the days before he was born. David examines himself: he places the days of his life in the light of the omniscient God. It is a sincere self-examination in which he investigates his day by day activities. Doing this he goes back to the days before he was born. It means that God, the Lord, the Almighty, not only sees and knows all that man does in his life, but to the all-knowing eye of God nothing is hidden, and he knows from the beginning what will become of the unborn child. The omniscience of God knows and sees in advance what he will do in future years. So everything is known to Him — my whole life, day and night, with all its minute details. Man need not cover up or hide anything. God, the Lord, knows precisely how it was and will be. And, of course, David doesn’t want to hide anything; he wants God’s all-knowing light to shine through him!

Let us place ourselves, our lives, our days and hours into the light of this all-knowing God. Let us examine our deeds and works to see whether they will bear up against the all-knowing eye of God.

Remember, my dear, all your days, yesterday and today were recorded in God’s book long ago. They are a gift of God which we are to use to His glory. It is by His grace that today we are in the land of the living, in the time of grace. This word is meant for us: “Today, when you hear His voice, harden not your hearts.” We need to receive these days of grace with gratitude.

What if you hadn’t lived to see this day? Where would you be now? In eternity? But how would you feel, and how would you regard your past life? Therefore, my beloved, thank the Lord, for He is good and His mercy endures forever! But remember your past days still remain in the Book of Life. There is a record of how you spent each day; how many have passed by like an idle gossip; whether you have gambled away eternity or obtained it. Examine yourself and reflect. Again the Almighty God has left open the door of grace a whole year. Have I gone through this door, or am I still standing outside? Are you happy or regretful? How many hours of the past year bring you joy? Who can honestly stand before Jesus this New Year’s Eve saying:

When I number all my sinful days,

With fear and dread my soul regrets its ways.

Who can differentiate between one day and the next? With whom has the day of redemption begun so that he can thenceforth count his days as times of grace?

Were I to number all my days of grace,

No words can utter all my thanks and praise.

How blessed is he who knows that even those days are recorded in the Book of Life. Everyone among us has experienced days of grace in the past year.

But you know how it is: It is so easy to let them pass by unheeded. However, if we can begin with these long days of grace and say: "From here on I have changed, I seek the way of life — this is blessedness." Whoever has experienced this in the past year can thank the Lord and say: "Thy mercy is so great."

However, our future days are also written in God's Book of Life. We know nothing of these, nor do we know how many God will grant us. No, they are not ours, they belong to Him, Who has our life and breath in His hands. May He teach us to be faithful in the coming days; and may this be our deepest desire: "Lord, let me make use of my time for eternity. Grant me anew, for the time I have here on earth, to be a witness of your power."

*New Year's Eve 1936*

**Fragments of Thought**

The year is gone and will not come again,  
And all the days of grace have passed away.  
Now hushed are all the songs of joy and pain,  
Naught will bring back the things of yesterday.  
Yet there is One above who changes not;  
The mark left on your heart by misery,  
The folds upon your face that sorrow wrought,  
Are scars of this year's pain and agony.

Yet One is, and will be forevermore;  
To me His lovingkindness He has shown,  
Has numbered even all my greying hair,  
And all my days to Him are ever known.  
Though hours go by, though days are fleeting fast,  
Time's changing scenes are gone—return no more.  
Yet I shall find my place of quiet rest,  
When I shall enter Heaven's open door.

Then I will know the Father's boundless love.  
The Saviour's kindness and His tender care,  
And feel the Spirit's comfort from above.  
This is my blessed hope; this is my prayer.

Psalm 39:4 "Lord, let me know my end, and what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting my life is."

Psalm 90:12 "So teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom."



When evening shadows pale the sky,  
Life's sun is setting in the west,  
When time begins to fade away,  
And pain and suffering are past,  
Then I will lay me down to rest,  
And in my heart make this request:

“Dear Lord and Saviour, God's own Son,  
Who in my sorrow led the way;  
To whom my burdens all were known,  
And lifted them from day to day;

When this my pilgrimage is o'er,  
With joy I enter heaven's home,  
The sepulchre I shall not fear,  
When in this world I cease to roam.  
And though my earthly eyes grow dim,  
No darkness dims my faith in Him.

### January 1, 1937.

On New Year's Eve, when the old year passes and the new begins, the world seeks pleasure in drink and revelry, as was customary among the heathen thousands of years ago. But faithful Christians gather on this evening, this night around the Word of God. They meet to observe the Lord's supper and also for fellowship. The Lutheran Brethren have the custom of drawing lots with verses from the Bible which are regarded as a special message from God for those for whom they are designated.

My friend, Karl Wiese, suggested that we draw lots of Bible verses and songs for our loved ones and friends this New Year's Eve. I heartily agreed. I cut pieces of paper on which I wrote a Bible verse and the verse of a song. Then I wrote the names of 16 persons — my family and several friends, who have refreshed me with their letters while in exile here. After a sincere prayer I drew the lots: one of a Bible verse and one with a name. On New Year's Day I read the following results of the draw in succession:

1. *For me:* Exodus 23:25 “You shall serve the Lord, your God, and I will bless your bread and your water, and I will take sickness away from the midst of you.”

Hymn no. 442, v. 3

Oh that every soul would know  
What a blessedness is his,  
Who with Christians here below,  
Member of Christ's body is!  
Joyfully he presses on  
To the goal 'til set of sun.

As he walks along life's path  
God gives grace to keep the faith.

2. *Mrs. J. Kasdorf, Rosengart.* Deuteronomy 33:27 "The eternal God is your dwelling place and underneath are the everlasting arms. And He thrust out the enemy before you, and said, 'Destroy.' "

Hymn no. 384, v. 3  
I will trust Him evermore,  
E'en in times of deep distress,  
He, my helper, goes before,  
Grief He turns to happiness.  
His ways for me are best,  
My body, heart and soul  
I leave in His control,  
Thus I am truly blest.

3. *Peter Friesen, Nieder Chortitza.* Job 2:10 "Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?"

Hymn no. 467, vv. 3 and 4  
I yield my life to Thee,  
To love Thee fervently,  
More than all else beside.  
I trust Thee, God, forever,  
Naught shall from Thee me sever,  
For Thou art by my side.  
Sufficient is Thy grace,  
My sins on Thee I place,  
Forgive me, O my Saviour.

4. *Mrs. Peter Friesen.* Psalm 4:3 "But know that the Lord has set apart the godly for Himself. The Lord hears when I call to Him."

Hymn no. 18, v. 1  
My God, how hidden is Thy power,  
Thy counsel, oh how wonderful!  
My cares surround me every hour,  
Your love and care surround my soul.  
Lord Jesus lead us day by day  
Through unknown ways, yet blessedly.

5. *Oli's husband, Jake.* Psalm 37:5 "Commit your way to the Lord; trust in Him and He will act."

Hymn no. 1, v. 1  
Commit thou all thy ways,  
Whate'er thy heart may grieve,  
To Him Who cares and knows,  
Who rules the wind and wave.  
Who gives the heav'ns their border,

The clouds at His command.  
Thy footsteps He shall order  
With His Almighty Hand.

6. *Mary, my youngest*. Psalm 37:37 “Mark the blameless man, and behold the upright; for there is posterity for the man of peace.”

Hymn no. 348, v. 1  
Create in me a heart, O God,  
Cleansed from its guilt and sin.  
My burdened soul in vain has sought  
Repentance from within.  
The wayward paths that I have gone,  
The wilful deeds that I have done:  
Forgive and make me whole.

7. *Johann Wiebe, Rosengart*. Psalm 62:1 “For God alone my soul waits in silence.”

Hymn no. 428, v. 1  
O God, so full of goodness,  
Of mercy and of grace,  
How great Thy lovingkindness  
To those who seek Thy face.  
My soul in silence waits  
O Father, Spirit, Son,  
Thy holy will be done.

8. *Miss Tina Epp, Rosental*. Psalm 86:11 “Teach me Thy way, O Lord, that I may walk in Thy truth; unite my heart, that I may fear Thy name.”

Hymn no. 533, v. 1  
Jesus lead Thou me, ever steadfastly,  
A thousand evils to arraign,  
A thousand virtues to retain:  
This my holy creed, this my daily deed.

9. *Kolya, my dear son*. Psalm 103:13 “As a father pities his children, so the Lord pities those who fear Him.”

Hymn no. 447, v. 1  
My name in heaven’s book is written,  
His tender love has chosen me  
To be His child, His very own  
Before all time, eternally.  
I rest within His loving arms,  
His eyes are ever on His child,  
I know not how to please my Lord,  
But by His mercy, Oh so mild.

10. *Albertine Martens, Rosental*. Psalm 126:5 “May those who sow in tears, reap with shouts of joy.”

Hymn no. 475, v. 3

When with tears and pain we sow,  
We shall reap with shouts of joy.  
Fruits of sorrow ripen now  
Into palms of victory.  
God is still upon the throne,  
He is our reward alone.  
Living, dying for our King,  
Joyously our sheaves we bring.

11. *Natascha's husband, Jake*. Isaiah 38:17 "Lo, it was for my welfare that I had great bitterness, but Thou hast held back my life from the pit of destruction, for Thou hast cast all my sins behind Thy back."

Hymn no. 445, v. 1

Jesus, Saviour, I am Thine,  
And forever Thou art mine.  
This I truly say!  
Thy possession evermore,  
Lord and King, Thee I adore,  
Serve Thee faithfully.  
Happy are those and blest,  
Who will find in Thee their rest,  
Give their life to Thee.

12. *Mary, my dear beloved wife*. Isaiah 41:10 "Fear not, for I am with you, be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand."

Hymn no. 359, v. 1

Lord, I believe, but help me now  
To know that Thou art great;  
That all Thy foes before Thee bow,  
The faithful Thee await.  
O touch my heart that I may be,  
Strong in my faith and love to Thee.

13. *Mrs. Johann Wiebe, Rosengart*. Isaiah 43:1 "Fear not for I have redeemed you, I have called you by my name, you are mine."

Hymn no. 457, v. 1

How wonderful to be a lamb of Jesus,  
The shepherd's gracious favor to enjoy.  
There is no higher place on earth than daily  
To follow in His footsteps trustingly.  
What all the world cannot bestow,  
The shepherd's love His sheep will know.

14. *Oli*. Isaiah 49:15 "Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget,

yet I will not forget you.”

Hymn no. 210, v. 6

My eyes are ever on you,  
And at my bosom you can rest,  
As children who were singing,  
My faithfulness to you is great.  
Neither time, sorrow or war,  
Suff'ring or strife, or Satan's pow'r  
Shall separate my child from me,  
If you but follow faithfully.

15. *Natascha, my oldest*. Psalm 50:23 “He who brings thanksgiving as his sacrifice honors me; to him who orders his way aright, I will show the salvation of God.”

Hymn no. 505, v. 1

Praise the Lord, for He is Love,  
He will ne'er forsake His own;  
Though our hearts are sad with grief,  
Yet with kindness He looks down.

16. *Mrs. Hoepfner, Rosengart*. Matthew 24:13 “But he who endures to the end will be saved.”

Hymn no. 412, v. 1

Not the beginning, but the end  
Crowns the Christian's pilgrimage,  
O Thou faithful God, now send  
Grace for my remaining days.  
As I once received Thee, Lord,  
Keep me through Thy holy word,  
That with faith and hope and love,  
I shall reach my home above.

### To My Children

When I shall depart from here,  
When in the grave I shall be placed,  
When this dark earth shall cover me,  
And in my shepherd's arms I rest;  
Then I shall have one last request  
Of my beloved, whom the Lord  
Has giv'n to me, whom He has blessed  
And who have kept His holy word:

That when joys and happiness,  
And sunshine comes along your way,  
When the Lord shall richly bless  
With success your every day;  
Then may your joy and gladness be  
Pure and undefiled and clean;  
That pride and shallow thoughts may flee,  
Do not forget, that on this earth  
Luck and misfortune ne'er agree,  
And joys and happiness are yours  
Not that you have successful been,  
But God has given graciously.  
When pain and sorrow cloud your way,  
When tears of anguish flow,  
When worry darkens all your day,  
No rays of sunshine glow,  
Then you shall nevermore despair,  
Or be ungrateful, nor complain,  
That circumstances were not fair,  
That life was misery and pain.  
Remember that your suffering  
Your days of hardship and distress  
Are known to God, who has control,  
Can turn the shadows into bliss.  
And what misfortune you have called,  
Is but a cloud hiding the sun.  
Take heart and humbly give Him thanks,  
For shadows that have come and gone.  
Thank Him for good and evil days,  
And for His tender love and care,  
For He is worthy of our praise,  
Our blest Redeemer evermore!

#### **To My Benefactors**

Your gifts of love have touched my heart,  
Renewed my hope, become a part  
Of your deep love and care for me.  
May God reward you graciously.  
As children happily rejoice  
At Christmastime, so have my joys  
Been made complete, your thoughtfulness  
Reached out my lonely heart to bless.

Was können befehlen?

So pernecht die Welt, was ich in Gericht den  
Zorn nicht ist. nicht in der Zeit der Gericht.

Gott erfährt dies für alle der Vorkathol  
für höhere Forderungen; seine Gnade haben sie  
verloren, auch Mitleiden zu sein kann  
verfügt ist. so sind sie wie Töchter aus  
ihrem Joch vertrieben ist. Reue nur  
Licht ist. Verzeihen was ich zu sein  
kann. -

Es ist die alte Welt in Fabelgarden



Goldschweine

d. 17. I. 57. -

Was kann ich nicht mehr machen?

Ich hätte nicht mehr Glück zu haben,  
Nur nur ein Lied, das ich nicht mehr;  
Ich habe kein Lied, das ich nicht mehr;  
Ich habe kein Lied, das ich nicht mehr;  
Nur in der Welt, die ich nicht mehr;  
Nur in der Welt, die ich nicht mehr;  
Nur in der Welt, die ich nicht mehr;  
Nur in der Welt, die ich nicht mehr.

A sample of Father's handwriting.

## January 6, 1937

Epiphany, or the Festival of the Three Kings. Matthew 2:1-12, especially verse 11. "...and they fell down and worshipped Him. Then opening their treasures, they offered Him gifts, gold, frankincense and myrrh."

The festival of the three Kings, or the Wise Men of the East, also called Epiphany in Latin, has already become no more than an "addition" to the Christmas celebrations, and has been regarded as of little importance. It is natural that, after celebrating several days of Christmas, New Year's Eve and New Year's Day, and having heard God's Word many times, one becomes tired of all the festivities. And yet this festival has its place among the Christian holidays; moreover, it is unique. All the holidays of Christmas and New Year's bear a message of praise and thanks to God for His "unspeakable gift." Epiphany brings us the first heathen worshippers. Since we also belong to a heathen background, it should be important to us that the Bible mentions these representatives from heathen lands. So for this reason we would in a special way draw attention to the first of these heathen Christian worshippers. We want to try to answer two questions: Who were they? Why did they come?

1) Who were these honorable men from distant lands? Luther calls them wise men from the east. In a commentary (Albrecht) we read "Magi." That is what the Babylonians called their priests and learned men who had special knowledge in astronomy and astrology. In old Babylon, east of Palestine, lived many Jews through whom some of the heathen certainly must have heard of the messianic hope of Israel.

We know that in bygone days the three Jewish men, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were of great influence in Babylon. Also there was one who became a great prophet in Israel, and at the same time was a leader in the Babylonian government. So it is clear that an indelible imprint remained among the peoples of Babylon, especially those of higher learning, through the influence of these men of God. So we can also understand that in old Babylon there were those men who found no satisfaction in their heathen religion and looked for something better. They diligently searched the skies and looked for signs of the "newborn" king among the stars. And they were not disappointed, for they say: "We have seen His Star."

When we ask other scholars of the Babylonian era what they say about the story of the Wise Men, we read: "The tablets that have been preserved from Babylonian astrology indicate that men have looked to the Palestinian region westward. Expressions like: 'If this and that occurs, then a great King will arise in the West; then justice and righteousness, peace and joy will reign in all the lands and the peoples will rejoice.'" (Jh. Zahn: The Gospel of Matthew.) We might add that numerous scholars maintain that in the years 1-4 A.D. a great new star actually appeared in the east. So we humbly say, "Do we need further evidence?" God, Who is so great in goodness,



grace and mercy, has done everything to give clarity to mankind, Jews and heathen, about salvation through His Son to all peoples.

To us these men shall be a model and example not to neglect to “look to the stars.” To us too they can be pointers and signs of the times. But we don’t need astrology; we have a calendar in the precious word of God, the Bible. There we find the signs of the times, especially that of the appearance of the heavenly King. We do well to heed these.

Let us then not be like the scribes in Jerusalem who, though they knew a great deal, did not recognize the moment. Jesus passed by them. Let us follow the advice of Herod and diligently search the Scriptures. Beloved, take note of the signs of the times. The new year of 1937, which we recently entered, will bring us signs which we can recognize as “stars” of the second coming of Christ. Woe to him who will stand aside. And woe to them who will be unprepared when the King appears. Thus our prayer:

Grant me eyes that see,  
Touch my eyes aright;  
For there’s great dismay,  
When at height of day  
One cannot see the light.

2) Why did they come from distant lands? The wise men themselves tell Herod: “We have come to worship.” Another translation says: “We have come to do homage.” So worship and homage were the incentives which took these men over the long wearisome journey. Evidently it was their desire to worship the “new King.” It wasn’t enough to have seen His star; they wanted to see Him personally, and bow down before Him in adoration. Why?

Let us remember: These men from heathen lands are the forerunners of pagan Christian worshippers. They were representatives of the heathen world and as such are also their spiritual representatives. At the manger of the Christchild they symbolize all the misery, emptiness and uselessness of the heathen idols and religions, which cannot satisfy the longing of the human heart for eternal, unperishable possessions of the soul. They came because the world with its wiles, philosophies and idol religions could not satisfy them. The heart remains empty, it longs for more. “It thirsts for God, for the living God.” They came to worship the newborn King of Love and Peace. They saw in the child the King who brings justice and righteousness to the nations, who brings salvation for which people of all time have searched.

And they found what they were looking for: a newborn King! An innocent child in the manger on hay. They found a simple Jewish man, Joseph, with his betrothed, Mary, the parents of the child, who was a King. How wonderful: The wise men do not allow outward circumstances to deter them; they fall down and worship Him; they give Him gold, frankincense and myrrh. Let me repeat, the wise men from the east came as first worshippers

from the heathen world, as example for us.

Today, beloved, on the first festival of the year, where shall we go? What shall we do? We shall imitate the wise men by putting aside all that hinders us from devoted worship, not listening to the scorn and derision of the world, by worshipping Him in Spirit and in Truth.

Dear Christian, you too shall bring King Jesus the gold of faith. Believe without a doubt, humbly worship and you will walk through the New Year safely and securely.

Frankincense is the symbol of prayer. Oh, how much frankincense we should bring Him! In our time when the churches are closed, worship services no longer attended, prayer is yet open to us. Oh, that we might speak with Teerstegen:

In years gone by I chose the place  
And times for life and loneliness,  
But now with heart and soul I pray,  
And yet am lonely all the day.

Myrrh is the symbol of confession. Do you have nothing to regret? You are to be pitied:

A heart confessing all its sin,  
Receives the cleansing blood,  
To him the Lord Christ enters in.

As the Magi laid the bitter myrrh at the feet of the Saviour, so shall we lay the burden of our sins, our transgressions and unrighteousness at His feet. He lifts our burdens and gives us peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Therefore, beloved, let us come and fall down and worship. Amen.

### **At Last, At Last.**

At last all troubles will be o'er,  
All pain and misery.  
At last the burdens press no more,  
All care and anguish flee.  
At last the stones in sorrow's mold,  
Will change to gems of purest gold.

At last with roses bright and fair  
The desert path shall bloom.  
At last the pilgrim's staff we bear  
Shall lead to heav'n and home.  
What we have sown in tears, at last,  
With fruits of joy we shall be blest.

At last we see our Canaan,  
And Egypt's bonds retreat.  
At last Mount Tabor lies beyond  
Where trod our weary feet.  
We reach with Jacob journey's end,  
With Esau's army left behind.

At last! Oh wondrous sweet refrain!  
Transformed the bitter cross;  
And from the rock of grief and pain  
Sweet water gushes forth.  
Rejoice my heart, and do not fear,  
"At last" shall come; be of good cheer!

(Anonymous)

According to what I have been told the following persons have passed away during the year 1935-36:

**In Rosental:**

1. Mrs. Johann Klassen
2. Mrs. Jacob Kasdorf
3. Isaak Is. Hildebrand
4. Mrs. Isaac Is. Hildebrand
5. Liese Thissen
6. Isaac Thissen
7. Gerhard Sawatzky
8. Peter G. Epp
9. Abram Friesen
10. Johann Friesen
11. Jacob Ketler (Grigorjevka)

**In Chortitza:**

1. Tante Regier
2. Abram Loewen
3. Mrs. B. Loewen
4. Tante "Busch" Braun
5. Peter Koop
6. Tante A. Wallman
7. Mrs. P. Hamm (Lauvtje)
8. Miss Janzen
9. Gerhard Klassen
10. Mrs. P. Peters
11. Schapansky

Mrs. Johann Wiebe, Rosengart, sent me the following verse:

Lord, when my faith is hard to find,  
When doubts have robbed my peace of mind,  
Then be Thou near!

When foes surround my frightened soul,  
Temptations like the billows roll,  
Then be Thou near!

And when life's sun begins to set,  
When troubles, grief and pain I've met,  
Then be Thou near!

And when life's final hour has come,  
Earth's pleasures fade; I reach my home,  
Lord, be Thou near!

Received at Goltjavino, February 1937

Softly the old year now is passing  
Into eternity.  
Gently goes with it bane and blessing  
In all tranquility.  
With whitest, softest linen covered  
Is countryside and town;  
But in earth's darkened bosom lowered  
The seed still slumbers on,  
Waiting for Spring's reviving morrow,  
And sunshine warm and bright.  
It fears no care, nor pain, nor sorrow,  
Nor shadows of the night.  
My heart, you too must wait with patience  
In this New Year of Grace;  
Though many trials and afflictions  
Your troubled soul embrace.  
Then put your hope in God's great power,  
His help is very near.  
Thus shall you praise Him every hour  
Throughout the coming year.

Received from Mr. & Mrs. Johann Wiebe, Rosengart.  
February, 1937, at Goltjavino.

## Be Still my Soul

Be still my soul, before the Lord,  
Still to His discipline,  
Still to His love, His tender care,  
Which saved my soul from sin.  
Yes, dear Lord, though suff'rings fill  
All my heart, I would be still.

Be still my soul, without complaint,  
Or murmur or ill-will;  
Though all the world deride and taunt,  
I'll mock its ridicule.  
I'll remember all the good,  
And forget the things I should.

So often I would go my way,  
Without your help, O Lord;  
My drooping wings of faith no more,  
To heights of glory soared.  
But when all my struggles cease,  
'Neath me were your winds of peace.

And though my pathway was unclear,  
And darkness dimmed my view,  
Yet in the valley you were near,  
The light of courage grew.  
All the good from God's dear Hand,  
Were better far than I had planned.

So I would bid my soul, be still,  
Through days and years untold.  
Though sorrow comes my house to fill  
New things must change from old.  
I shall know, these God has sent,  
So my soul, be Thou content.

O Lord, from you my strength I draw,  
Though I am poor and weak:  
Your Spirit's gentle breezes blow  
With strength, yet strangely meek.  
Thus, where'er I go or stay,  
You will guide me day by day.

Above the ocean depths so still,  
A waveless surface smooth,

The Lord revealed to me His will,  
As mirrored in its truth.  
There I felt God's breath alone,  
Where no storms e'er toss and moan.

As masts are carried on the seas,  
On waters still and clear,  
So may with courage all my days  
I bear God's burdens here.  
Come my longings to fulfill,  
That my heart, O Lord, be still.

I received this poem on the 12th of February, 1937, from my dear young friend, Peter Korn. Heinrichs of Rosental. This poem has a very deep meaning for me. I knew a few verses by memory for some time, but couldn't ever recall all of it.

**Goltjavino, February 14, 1937.**

From my dear son, Klaus, for my 50th birthday. Received on February 12, 1937.

Fifty years have passed away,  
The Lord, your God, has guided you.  
You have experienced day by day,  
That Jesus keeps His promise true.

Your steps He'll lead as He knows best,  
Though where and how you cannot tell;  
Will lead you to your Home at last,  
The Father doeth all things well.

So I would wish with all my heart,  
Much courage and a joyful mind;  
May pain and suffering depart,  
That all things well may end.

**Goltjavino, February 22, 1937.**

Too Late! (Matthew 25:1-12, Albrecht Translation.) "Then the kingdom of heaven shall be compared to ten maidens who took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. For when the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. As the bridegroom was delayed, they all slumbered and slept. But at midnight there was a cry, 'Behold, the bridegroom! Come out to meet him.' Then all those maidens rose and trimmed their lamps. And the foolish said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.' But the wise replied, 'Perhaps there will not be

enough for us and for you; go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves.’ And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast; and the door was shut. Afterward the other maidens came also, saying, ‘Lord, Lord, open to us.’ But he replied, ‘Truly I say to you, I do not know you.’ Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.”

Too late! Too late! This is a solemn word. Who hasn’t experienced this bitter word. Too late! Awake too late, and the hour has passed and will never come again. Too late to catch the train, and one has to wait for another and will not get to the appointed place in time. Oh, how often in your life and mine it has been “too late”. We missed and lost the opportunities, what we strove for, what we thought we needed urgently. How terrible to hear from a doctor, “You have come too late, it is too late to operate. You must die.”

How terrible for a young man or woman to realize that through a life of evil habits they have fallen prey to an incurable disease, and it is too late to bring back their health. But it will be even more terrible if a soul arrives at the gates of Eternity hearing the words: “Too late; you have come too late; you have missed the hour of grace; you overslept, didn’t hear the call of love; disdained the loving Father’s longsuffering and patience and now it is too late; your life’s thread is broken. When it was time you didn’t want to come, and now it is too late!

Many will return for oil  
When the bridegroom shuts the gate;  
And before the door, the soul  
Will be standing, ah, too late!  
So be ready and prepare,  
Fill the lamps with oil to spare,  
Lest the Master at the door  
Says, “Too late forevermore!”

That is the terrible thing: Too late! This is the theme of the parable of Jesus. He speaks of the end times. In Matthew 24:50 we read: “The Master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he does not know.” That is the hour of the second coming of Christ in power and glory with myriads of His angels and, “Then the Kingdom of Heaven shall be compared...”

It is clear that this “Then” refers to the end times where the Kingdom of God, the Church of Christ as the harvest of God is ripe and shall be gathered in, that is to say, when we shall be gathered as the Bride of Christ. 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17.

There are ten virgins, five and five, who prepare to meet the Bridegroom. Five is the number of completion; so we must think of the virgins as the completed church. All ten of them believe in the return of Christ, and want

to be united with Him. And yet at the end of the parable, we hear the sober and hard word: "Truly, I say to you, I do not know you."

How could it be that the five virgins must hear this hard word? How did they happen to be late? The Saviour warns His disciples and listeners by saying: "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour." It is evident, then, that the five virgins have not been watchful enough; and therefore were late for the wedding supper. But we know from the parable that all they needed was more oil. The difference then between the wise and the foolish was that the former had extra oil in case of need, whereas the foolish carried only enough for their lamps. This seemingly insignificant difference was decisive for both: the wise could attend the marriage feast but the foolish came too late. Let us consider this.

This passage refers to the last period of the Kingdom of God on this earth. This is indicated by the "hour of midnight". Furthermore, all fell asleep, the wise as well as the foolish. The Church of Christ waited and waited (as the virgins) for the glorious return of Christ and its gathering to Him. And, as the bridegroom in the parable, so His return is also delayed. (2 Peter 3) The events in the world are becoming more serious; it is evening and the night follows, "where no one can work". The Church becomes silent and more silent; no services, no worship, no mission, no fellowship or teaching. The church slowly becomes sleepy.

Perhaps soon all will sleep till midnight; till the trumpet calls: "Wake up, wake up, you who sleep, the Bridegroom is coming, He is coming; prepare to meet your God and Saviour." Then it will be evident whether there is oil in the lamp and also some to spare. Woe to him who does not even have a smouldering wick. The light and wick is a symbol of faith, and the oil, that of Spirit and knowledge which feeds and keeps the light burning. We see clearly that the foolish virgins do not possess the Spirit, knowledge and wisdom. They are content to think that their lamp of faith has once been lit, for a short while; but they lacked the Spirit, Truth, Wisdom and Power and spiritual experience. These they could not obtain in the last hour of midnight; not in a measure sufficient to arrive in time for the marriage feast.

Looking at the Church today we see the resemblance to the foolish virgins clearly. Indeed, they still believe (and of course, through time and circumstances we all lack the oil of faith), but in a special sense there is a dearth of oil; yet they neither bring nor gather provisions. Oh, how loudly one would want to shout: "Buy oil!" Make use of your time, we still have God's Word; read it diligently and study today, tomorrow, and every day! Dear reader, gather these eternal treasures, and do not forget to supply your children with this oil of faith. Read what God commanded His people (Deuteronomy 5:6-7). We are yet living in the time of grace. We can still read and study God's Word, can gather what is most important. The hour of midnight comes closer with every passing day; and with it the hour of decision.



Dear children, wake up, read and study God's Word diligently and pray that the Lord may enlighten your minds, strengthen your faith, brighten your light of faith that it may glow and burn, and that when it seems to burn low you may still have the oil of faith reserved in your heart to be able to light up anew at the hour of midnight.

Consider, beloved, how solemn and serious to hear the words: "Too late, too late, I know you not." Hear the warning of Jesus in this parable: "Therefore be alert, on your guard, for you know not at what hour the bridegroom will come." The light of faith must be nourished, or it will die. The Lord will not extinguish a dimly burning wick, but it must glow and have a supply of oil.

For many years this nourishment was given every Sunday, on holidays, and Bible studies, in Sunday Schools, and Bible Conferences. Today all is quiet — only in small family circles does one seek spiritual food in the Book of books. The time will come when even this can and will disappear (read Amos 8:11-12), and then it is too late. But today the door is still not shut; therefore take your Bible, read, study and pray. "Search the Scriptures," says the Lord, and we would do well to heed and follow this call. It is enough to have neglected so many hours of grace; so let us make use of our time, so that we shall not hear the words: "Too late."

May you begin each day anew  
With a word from God's Holy Book,  
And let the seed thus find in you  
Its roots; your heart its temple make.  
Its blessing you will daily gain,  
Its comfort cheers you on your ways,  
No better balm for grief and pain,  
No better way to live at peace.  
More quickly sin will flee from you,  
More inner quietude you'll find.  
Not only you, but others too  
Will feel your peace of heart and mind.  
You will have courage, strength and joy,  
The duties of the day seem light.  
A word, though brief, from God each day  
Will make your pathway clear and bright.

(This poem, by an unknown author, which Wiese knew by memory and dictated to me, belongs to the above meditation.) This meditation was written by candlelight and is thus barely legible. You will no doubt have a hard time deciphering it. The word became very important to me when I awoke one night, and if I had written it immediately, it could have been more complete and worthwhile. God be with you.                      Your Arndt.

**March 8, 1937.**

**Meditation**

*(For a sermon on John 11:28-37)*

Lazarus of Bethany, a friend of Jesus, has died. Jesus knew of his serious illness, and of his death. He also told His disciples why He had not visited him (v. 15,16) "so that you may believe."

So the purpose of the illness, death and resurrection of Lazarus was that Jesus' disciples and other people should believe in Him. For that reason too, Jesus had not gone to see Lazarus in his illness; for that reason too he went only to raise him. The sisters, Mary and Martha, Jesus' friends, are grieving deeply.

Ever busy Martha waits impatiently for Jesus, who is her Messiah (v. 7). Thoughtful Mary, who reflects and feels more deeply, has withdrawn in her grief to the inner house where she is hostess to the many visitors from Jerusalem and vicinity, who came to express their sympathy and condolence. She will observe the customary seven days of mourning very strictly.

Meanwhile, Martha has hurried to meet the Master and has poured out her grief to him. After a gentle accusation (v. 21) she nevertheless confesses freely that He is Jesus, sent from God, the Messiah. And quickly she is concerned about Mary who should also know that their friend, the Master, has come, and she hurries to bring her the joyful news. She finds Mary and whispers the words in her ear: "The Master is there and calls you."

A ray of hope lights up in Mary's heart. She rises and without excusing herself to the guests, she leaves to meet Jesus, the higher guest, to fall at His feet and receive His help. The astonished guests follow, thinking that she is on her way to the grave of Lazarus to weep and grieve. Mary too, in a gentle accusation, says to the Master: "Had you been here, my brother had not died." These words, or her humble adoration, have a tremendous effect on Jesus. We read in v. 3: "...He was deeply moved in Spirit..." Why was He disturbed? Because of the power of death? or the mere outward sympathy of their friends?

At any rate, a deep inner experience was the reason for this emotion which culminated in tears. All Christians should do what Mary did — she hurries to Jesus' feet. He alone gives comfort and strength. And all who grieve should not overlook the fact that in such circumstances a voice calls: "The Master is there and calls you."

Hymn no. 135, v. 1

And this shall be my watchword:

The Hand that leadeth me,

Will hold me now and ever,

Until His face I see.  
Yes, till my eyes in death grow dim,  
I shall remember Him.

**Goltjavino, March 13, 1937.**

My friend, Severin, Sergi Danilovitsch, gave me a book called *Smotritie na sviesde* (Look at the Stars). I have forgotten who the author was, but the content of the book became very important to me. I read the book during a trip from Nikopol to Zaporozhe. Then I gave it to a passenger. Today, whenever I look at the stars at night, I think of that book.

What majesty, what glory, what godly quietude and splendor, what calmness and tranquility, what magnificence! The starry sky is surely much more beautiful here up north than in the south.

Yesterday between 8 and 10 o'clock I saw a wonderful light in the north. Above the horizon a bright half-circle rose up, criss-crossed by innumerable rays of various hues beaming up from the horizon into the heavenly dome. These lights flickered, once brighter, then dimmer. Finally, around the first semi-circle appeared a second, and gradually both vanished. I have never seen the like and cannot explain it. Was it the so-called "Severnoie siianie", the Northern Lights, or was it something else? Nevertheless, it was a spectacular sight which demanded worship. Then I thought of the book "Look at the Stars"!

Exalt Him ever, O my soul,  
His Holy Name laud and extol.  
Praise God, the Father, o'er again,  
Let all the world repeat, Amen.  
Let all the world sing thanks and praise,  
And trust and serve the Lord always,  
For He is worthy to be served!

**Goltjavino, March 30, 1937.**

Beloved Marusja: I wanted to fill the notebook, but not with just anything. Now it is time to send this package, and I cannot think of anything else to write, so I will close. Sorry about the empty pages. Pretend that they are filled with things one cannot express: with love and thanks to you and to God, the heavenly Father, and our Lord and Saviour. Later, God willing, I shall write more.

Regarding the content of the notebooks, I cannot say much, except that you will realize that it is done with coarse, unrefined stone, as I took it out of the stone quarry.

Very often I wrote by candlelight. Whenever my passionate yearnings grew too strong, my hand trembled so much that I couldn't control it. There is really nothing valuable in it, but it contains threads of thought and my

reflections, what was important to me; here and there perhaps also expressions of what moved me deeply.

Much has been left unsaid of that which I would like to have said, but could not for reasons beyond my control.

If you all will receive as many blessings reading this as I have had in writing it, then: God be thanked and praised. The Lord bless you all!

I remain in unchanging love and faithfulness,  
Your old Arndt.



**A family picnic at Alexeevka. On the photo are Jakob Sudermann (with hat on right), Maria Sudermann, Katherina Sudermann, Maria Sudermann, nee Heese, Heinrich Sudermann, Kolja Sudermann, Anna Sudermann, and two guests.**



**Delegates at the Mennonite conference of Moscow in 1925. Father is standing at the extreme right, third row from the back.**

## Part III

### Appendix of letters, sketches, treatises and children's fables

Written or received by A.P. Toews  
before and during his exile, 1925-1938

#### My Recollections of Rev. Aron Toews

*by Mrs. Justina Dyck (née Friesen), Coaldale, Alberta*

How wonderful that our memories cannot be taken from us! Today my thoughts go back to Rosental-Chortitz in times long past. I remember the year 1925 when I attended the baptismal instruction class.

This class began right after Christmas. Since it was too expensive to heat the large church, the class was held at the home of Elder P.P. Neufeld. Those of us from Rosental had a long way to go, but none of us thought that it was too far. How well Aron Petrovitsch could explain the catechism to us. How many songs we memorized from our songbook! We especially enjoyed the comments of the song: "Wenn ich, o Schöpfer, deine Macht..." (If I perceive Thy power, O Creator). That song will always be my very own, and I also know the whole catechism by memory.

After the baptismal service we decided to go for an outing, naturally to our beloved "Ziegelscheun" valley. We decided to travel by hayrack (Leiterwagen). But that year those of us from Rosental were all girls. Someone suggested that Aron Petrowitsch be invited to come along. Another girl and I had undertaken to ask him personally. When he listened to our request, he answered in a friendly manner: "My dear children, this is really something! Naturally I will come along."

It was a glorious morning on June 30, 1925, when we from Rosental met at Agatha Gronau's corner. At 8 o'clock the Chortitz young men and women came along on their hayracks. The wagons were filled with straw, covered with a tent awning. Soon we were comfortably seated and driving toward the beautiful valley of "Zigelscheun". There was much chatter and naturally it didn't take too long before someone began a song, which soon rang across hill and vale. We sang songs like, "Die linden Lüfte sind erwacht" (The Gentle Breezes are Awake), "Schön ist die Jugendzeit" (Beautiful is the Time of Youth), "Befiehl du deine Wege" (Commit Thou All Thy Ways), etc.

Soon we arrived at our destination. The men took care of the horses, some hurried to the spring for clear, cold water. Nature was so beautiful. We all sat down on blankets under shade trees. Looking up we saw the Rosengarter baptismal group coming down from high up on the hilltop. We called to each other and soon all were happily gathered together.

First we held a worship service, followed by singing. Suddenly we heard nightengales. It seemed as if they were competing with us in praising the Creator. Later, a samovar (teamaker) was put up; someone else had brought an iron kettle. We called it a "Grohpen" (pot), since one pail of water wasn't enough for all of us. Several tablecloths were spread on the grass; everyone put his or her food on them and we all sat around. There wasn't much choice: potato salad, cold turkey or other meat. For dessert there were all kinds of fruit pastries or "Piroschki". After the meal we sang again and played games like "Hasch, hasch", races and others.

Aron Petrovitsch was constantly present. He could really run. In the evening there was to be a service, so we left for home at 5 o'clock.

How often these melodies resound in my ears. For a closing song we often sang: "So scheiden wir mit Sang und Klang" (Thus We Part With Singing and Sound).

A letter from A.P. Toews to his brother, Peter, in the U.S.A.

### **American Mennonite Relief**

Dear Brother!

I have received your letter of August 3. I am surprised that you write us so little: either you have no more to say to us, or you do not have the time to write long detailed letters. You mention in your letter that you have gone to work and have been earning three dollars a day. I can't understand that; surely you have work in your shop, or don't you? I'm also very interested to know how your business is going: do you earn a lot, and when do you hope to have bought it? Furthermore, I would like to know what Aron Toews is doing. Do you ever meet him? And what do you do in your spare time? Have you learned the language yet? ("I do learn English reading and written, but I can only very little.") Soon after three or four months I hope to be able to write you an English letter. At present I spend all my spare time learning English, because if one is dependent on church work it is better to know the English language.

You are mistaken to think that Mother and the children will soon come to America. It will likely not happen this year, since things are being drawn out. It would be best if we had a free ticket and affidavit, then we could proceed more independently and surely. How many have had to stay here because of their sick eyes. They had already sold everything and now they sit

here without bread, and many have no roof over their heads. Well, the Russian émigres will tell you if you visit them. Those from Chortitza, Rosental and Schoenwiese all know me. Pet. Pet. Thiessen of Rosental was my neighbor. He will tell you a lot about us.

God be with you. Maria and the children send greetings.  
Alexandrovsk  
12/IX 1923

Greetings and Love, your  
A. Toews

### Letters to Emigrants or Overseas

**Rosental, May 29, 1925** — To Nikolai Kroeker, Chortitza.

So you want to leave Russia and make your new home beyond the great ocean! With all my heart I wish you well and hope that you and your mother will find what you are looking for. God bless your undertaking. I would like to leave you something on life's journey; and I hope it will give you strength and joy for your daily task, courage and comfort when things go hard. I would wish that you might never forget the baptismal instruction class; that the times your loving Saviour was so near and dear to you may never be erased from your memory. As a remembrance of those classes, I would like to leave with you this poem, written by the godly poet, Immanuel Geibel:

#### Prayer

O Lord, who in my heart abides,  
Through joys and sorrows safely guides,  
Be ever near.

Through summer's scorching heat and burdened toil,  
In rosy spring of youth where pleasures smile,  
Be ever near.

Keep me from wantonness and pride,  
When I despair, be at my side,  
And very near.

Your gracious blessing falls as morning dew,  
Though helpless, I would dare the best for you.  
Be ever near.

My comforter, my strength, my guiding sun,  
O Lord, at journey's end, when day is done  
Be ever near.

With heartfelt greetings to you and your mother,  
Your minister, Aron Toews.



## Father's letter to Dietrich Heinrichovitsch Epp

1925

Dear Dietrich Heinrichovitsch!

I received your welcome letter of August 21 on September 16. Your dear brother, Heinr. Heinr., delivered your greeting to me some time ago, and I often intended to write to you, however "the Spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." Believe me, we Russians are very "busy", but we accomplish less than the Americans with their jobs. Moreover, I knew that Peter Petrovitsch<sup>1</sup> had sent you quite a full account of our church affairs. In this letter I do not want to repeat what he has said. I will begin with the time when I received the commission from God and the congregation to serve as minister of the Gospel. At that time I could only accept the call if I resigned from my position as bookkeeper. But I could not do this, since this was our livelihood. On December 2, 1924, however, I was elected as secretary and bookkeeper for the Chortitza Church, by the combined church councils, with a monthly salary of 30 rubles. I recognized this as God's leading, accepted the position and was also ordained as minister. Between January 1, 1925 and July 1 of last year I held the position as secretary of the Church Council. There was plenty of work, especially in matters related to the young service men, and the registrations of the church constitution. You may have heard about the experiences with our young men from P.P.'s letter. According to our laws all religious institutions are considered equal to "other" organizations with one difference: "kak nje presledujushtie korestnoj zeli" (they do not pursue recognized goals).

Otherwise there are basically no differences. Already in 1923 our church, according to government legal requirements, drew up and sent in a set of regulations for registration. At that time the matter was not taken seriously enough and so there was no progress. In the spring of 1924 the K.f.K. worked out a constitution, sending it to all churches. The government had meanwhile worked out a "normative constitution" and sent it to the churches (also Russian) as a model constitution ("tipovoi ustav").

In late November of 1924 our church council received an order to present a constitution for registration and confirmation by December 19; failing to do so they would be regarded as disbanded ("rapushtina"), and our church building could not be rented. Each constitution, the original and two copies, had to have fifty notarized signatures. In addition, there was a registration tax, and each kind of tax had an additional increase of 100% for the local budget ("na mestnij"). At the aforementioned church council meeting of December 2, 1924, a constitution was prepared, based on the directives from the K.f.K. This was expanded and modified in order to meet with the requirements of the "normative constitution"; and on December 23, 1924 sent in for registration and acceptance. This became quite expen-

sive — a total of 273 rubles had to be paid.

The decree for the registration of the churches (“o registratzi Obschchin”) had given assurance that every church which had sent in a constitution and received no reply within one month could regard itself as registered and confirmed. Since the time had soon expired and we received no word, we were happy that we were finally a legitimate organization. How wrong we were. At the end of April all the documents were returned with the notice (in red) that our constitution did not comply with the normative constitution. Within one month a new one must be sent in and must agree word for word with the normative constitution. We tried to work out something, but to no avail; we had to accept the normative constitution. Each village must have its own constitution and be registered. They allowed only the villages which belonged to the same parish (Kirchspiel) to have a common constitution. This is what we did, but we had to pay another 300 rubles. The Government regards each parish as a separate congregation and officially recognizes it as an independent church. This second registration was sent in May and the constitution is now registered. In Ekaterinoslav the government representative asked whether we wouldn't combine the separate parishes. Thus the representatives of the congregations could elect an administration which could be centered in the county town. This seemed to us a partial solution to the problem of preserving church unity. For this purpose a church council meeting was called and we decided to organize a union of the parishes. The representatives of the Kronsweider and Nikolai-pol churches requested that they also be included in this union; as well as the Mennonite group from Orechov. A constitution was prepared for this union and after the government representative had thoroughly revised it, the church council adopted it. It cost only ten rubles. This then is the bond which ties our churches outwardly. Since July 1 of last year I am working in the administration of this alliance. This organization is the means of representing our churches outwardly and is responsible to the government. Otherwise we have not experienced any disagreements; on the contrary, the government has met us halfway in every respect.

Recently, on October 12, 13, 14 and 15, we held a large Ministers' Conference here in Chortitza with permission from the government. We have had wonderful days with no disturbances. We heard very good meditations and papers concerning the early church, Christian nurture, Galatians 2, the personality of the Mennonite Minister, and other themes. We believe that these days will be a great blessing to our ministers and churches.

We are greatly pleased to hear that the first edition of a Mennonite religious paper called “Unser Blatt” (Our Paper)<sup>2</sup> has been printed and will soon be sent out. This paper is published by the K.f.K. and shall serve the purpose of uniting the Mennonites of Russia; depict their moral and religious life and in a special way promote their spiritual life in thought and

deed according to 1 Peter 2.

This then is the report I am sending you, Dietrich Heinrichovitsch. I am pleased to know that even over there you are interested in our spiritual well-being. Through my involvement in this work I have come to the conviction that it is the spiritual motive that has brought our people to where they are. Only by firmly holding on to this heritage and the Eternal can we safely weather the turbulent waters and angry storms.

Otherwise everything is more or less the same over here. Since October 10th we have had frosts at night from -3 to -5; but the days are sunny. I believe all your friends and acquaintances are well.

Please greet all our acquaintances, especially P. Thiessens, Joh. Klassens and others. My wife sends greetings.

Your request regarding the money shall be taken care of tomorrow. Together with this I am sending several minutes in a separate envelope.

With brotherly love to you and your family,

Your A. Toews

### **Letters from Church Members received in Exile**

Dear friend, Aron Petrovitsch!

At last I am sending you the poem you requested: I would add that I too am fond of it. Author unknown. Marusja and I are really alone. The children are attending the school in Schoenwiese. We wanted to move to Schoenwiese but it didn't materialize. However, I am thankful that we are more or less healthy. I wish you a blessed, happy New Year, and hope that we shall meet again.

Chortitza, 15/12/1936

Your friend, M. Wallmann

### **I have been with you Everywhere**

#### **Genesis 35:3 and Isaiah 41:10**

1. I was with you on all your many ways,  
With blessing have attended all your days.  
My eyes were on you day and night.  
I measured every step you took,  
Your name was written in my book,  
With shepherd's staff I led aright.
2. I was with you in days of doubt and cares,  
Answered your supplications and your prayers.  
Your destiny was in my hand.  
I calmed the storm, the billows high,

Which were the paths upon your way  
Leading you to the heav'nly land.

3. I was with you, when in life's bustling throng  
The skies were blue and all the world a song,  
Pleasure and joys you met along the way.  
Then I remembered you and led  
Your steps to higher paths ahead;  
That on those heights my glory you might see.
4. I was with you in times of grief and pain,  
Which strengthened you to face each day again,  
As gold is cleansed in the refiner's fire.  
In every trouble I was near,  
That nothing was too hard to bear,  
Your soul made strong and pure.
5. I was with you when friends became untrue,  
Your stars grew dim, no guiding light shone through,  
Then I was near, so very near to you.  
Have I not ever faithful been?  
My love not constant, though unseen?  
My help not present when your struggles grew?
6. O Jesus! How can I but praise Thee?  
How can I show my love most fervently?  
Thy faithfulness I ever would extol!  
Oh be Thou near until I soar,  
And sing at heaven's door.  
Where in Thy presence I shall rest my soul.

\* \* \*

### **In the fiery Crucible**

Once more into the scorching heat,  
O Master, Thy pity I now entreat.  
O Father, I fear the flames of fire,  
No longer the pain I can endure.

The heav'nly smelter in calm repose  
Is watching the fire, its heat He knows.  
He blinks not an eye, and steady His hand,  
As He fixes His gaze on the smelting-stand.

He tests the silver against the light,  
It seems so pure, without a blight,  
Yet still He sees impurities and dross,  
Which cloud the mirror and dull its gloss.

Again it is bathed in the fiery brine,  
In seething billows its sheen to refine,  
'Til the Master's reflection at last is seen  
In the shining silver so pure and clean.

Then soon from the smeltingpot He takes  
The silver; an elegant form He makes,  
A beautiful vessel, to give with joy  
To the heavenly Father to use and employ.

O Saviour, though life's fiery trials I face,  
When courage grows dim, sufficient your grace.  
O heavenly smelter, refined in Thy love,  
Present me thus pure to the Father above.

**Chortitza, March 16, 1936.**

Beloved brother in Christ, Aron P. Toews!

The peace of God, this most precious treasure for the soul, be with you and fill your heart and mind. May He renew your spirit in your seclusion and loneliness; in your dire circumstances and dark hours. The Lord Jesus has specifically promised this peace in John 14: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I give not as the world gives. Do not let your heart be afraid."

Dear brother, you will see clearly the Lord's hand in your circumstances. Yet I cannot help but impart to you my brotherly love through this letter, since you are so far removed from your loved ones and friends. "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil, for Thou art with me, Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me." You are with me, Almighty God, who can be against me? You are with me, dear Saviour, what can befall me? You are with me, heavenly Comforter, why should I despair? You are with me in the lonely prison cell and behold, it is no longer dark and bare. You are with my poor beating heart, and behold, it no longer beats with fear and timidity. Lord, if you are present with the light of your word, with your grace and comfort even in the dark valley, we shall be filled with courage. He, the ever faithful, gives strength and power to the faint; hope and patience to the weak.

You will no doubt have heard through other reports of the changes which have taken place in the old church. To our great sorrow we can no longer attend there. Our dear old house of worship preaches a mighty sermon. May

we take it to heart. Off and on I attend a worship service in a private dwelling in Rosental, on Sunday morning or on a weekday evening. This is like an oasis in the desert, as Elim was for the children of Israel, with its twelve wells of water and seventy palm trees. There they rested and felt at peace.

I thank the Lord, for He is good, and I experience His mercy and grace in my old age. I am well, and have my daily bread, have strength of body and spirit. His good Spirit leads me on the right path. (Psalm 23).

May our dear Lord, so rich in love, not leave you wanting in any good thing.

With brotherly love I give you my heartfelt greetings. Yours in the Lord and soon to be with the Lord,

David Nickel.

### Letters to Church Members written from Exile

**December 31, 1936.**

Dear friends in the faith, Jacob and Albertine Martens!

Grace and peace from God and our Lord Jesus to you and your loved ones!

As you see, today is the last day of the year! Oh, how much I would like to tell you many good and wonderful things, and personally wish you God's blessing, comfort and grace for the New Year! Just now I have read Mary's letter, and my thoughts are with you, my dear ones!

Oh, how much I would like to visit you, shake your hands, look into your eyes, and say with the songwriter:

Whate'er the day may bring,  
I trust in His precious word,  
But to His cross I cling,  
My star of hope, my Lord.

On this my pilgrim way,  
I daily seek His face,  
Though thorny be the path,  
Sufficient is His grace.

Many a path in your life was gloomy and dark, and in the past year your tears have not ceased to fall. To the old sorrows have been added new tribulations. How often your weary heart may ask, When is the cup of grief finally full to overflowing?

Do you ask, when the hour will come?  
Then, dear heart, when it's good for you.  
Trust the Word, it will lead you home,  
In His hour, He will take you through.

Hope, have faith, and struggle on,  
'Til at last the journey's done.

How well we know the story of Job! But we often forget the ending of the account, which closes with the wonderful words: "I know that my Redeemer lives." And even though today you must say with Jeremiah (chapter 10): "Woe is me for my hurt;" then you can also say: "This is my grief and I must bear it." Then in quiet humility and submission we must pray, "O Lord, correct me, but with judgment, not in Thine anger, lest Thou bring me to nothing." I believe that this humility and submission, receiving all from the hand of a loving and forgiving Father, is the best warranty for comfort and strength in suffering. The surgeons assure us that the positive outcome of a difficult operation depends on a relaxed and confident attitude of the patient. This is similar to the "operation" which the heavenly Father performs on His children. They are those "children" whom He has not abandoned, but whom He loves and wishes to count among those mentioned in Revelation 7:14-17.

I have written in a notebook to Natascha and Oli how important the prayers of a godly mother are. They will gladly let you read it, dear Albertine! And I believe I can assure you that, according to the holy Scriptures, your prayers, your tears and supplication is no fading echo; here on earth and up in heaven, you will find an eternal reward! — And, dear friends, you are not alone:

Many through the years have gone  
On the path of grief and pain;  
And they all have daily seen,  
How God leads His children on.  
Each left a silent, heartfelt prayer,  
For help and strength along the path;  
For all who trusted in His care,  
In their suffering kept the faith.

At the moment I think of the day when we remembered the death of your son, Kolya. I don't know whether you still have the poem I recited for your comfort. I will enclose it in this letter.

Fear not the way that you must go,  
God's promises are ever sure.  
By the prayers of the elect,  
You are strengthened and secure.

Fellow pilgrims walked before you  
Paths of suffering day by day.  
They too have seen God's wondrous guidance  
And His blessings on the way.

Their trodden footsteps left behind  
Prayers of God's love and care,  
For those who follow in their steps,  
The cross of suffering share.

Oh, how bare and empty is human comfort. I feel it all the more when I read this letter. I am comforted with the thought that you know that I sincerely love you, feel deeply for you and remember you before the Throne of Grace.

Please convey my heartiest greetings to all your children, especially also Mrs. Dyck and your son Heinz and his wife. Also I greet the friends in your house, Miss A. Klassen, Mrs. A. Schmidt and your neighbours, Mrs. Klassen, Mrs. Janzen, and the Hooges.

I have little to report about my life; I have no income. We have real winter outside, -40 Celsius. May God the Lord protect you, comfort you with His help and grant you a joyful spirit! Greetings from your humble,

A. Toews

**Goltjavino, June 20, 1937.**

Beloved friends and brother and sister Regier,

First of all I wish you and your household the peace of God, health and wellbeing in body and soul! Thanks to God I am feeling better again. Some time ago I had a cold and had to cough quite a bit. The weather is very changeable here: hot during the day, and cool at night, sometimes even frost. Also we have strong east and west winds because of the mountains and the great woods. Seldom do we have north winds. The mosquitos and flies are a real plague. For instance, now all the workers have nets over their heads and wear mittens. It stays this way till winter.

But that isn't what I was going to write about. For some time I intended to write to you, but I kept thinking that you would no doubt read the letters which I write to your and our married children. But for this very reason I should have written to you (and there will be another couple soon). A proverb says, "The parents' blessing builds the children's homes." Well, I am sure that you as well as we wish our children God's blessing. I haven't seen Jake yet since he has become our son-in-law, and yet he has become dear to me through his childlike letters. I hope that you have come to love my dear Oli too. If we, who are older, carry them and their offspring on wings of prayer, and support them with help and counsel, then surely the heavenly Father will grant His blessing. The main thing of course is to remind the children of that which is most important. Our concern for the undying soul should take priority. Thank God, the children know this!

Furthermore, I want to thank you most sincerely that you have done so much for me and have always helped Oli to send me something good and



useful. May God reward you!

Oli wrote me about your illness, dear friend! Through that you have also experienced the truth of 2 Corinthians 5:4: "For we are still in this tent, we sigh with anxiety, not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life."

And yet what the prophet Isaiah writes (26:16) is true. We must draw nearer to God, become more firm and certain in our faith, love and hope! Nothing happens by chance; the heavenly Father has His special purpose for each one of us. (Psalm 63:10, 1 Corinthians 10:13) May God the Lord keep you all in His care. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit!

Greetings to the children and the little lad, as well as to neighbors and friends!

With brotherly love I remain,  
Your grateful  
A. Toews.

### Letters from Exile to the Family

**January 14, 1938.**

My dearest Oli!

Grace and peace! Your letter with the sad note is before me. You would like to hear words of comfort. I believe I gave you those in the letters I sent you, with the lots I drew for New Year's! Those are truly tremendous words of comfort for both of you. Oh, how well I understand you, dearest Oli. But "patience is a virtue": to know God's will, and then act accordingly. Then pray without ceasing, sincerely and continuously as the prophets in the Old Testament. It is certainly a harsh blow for me too, and I walk around all day like a drunk man. I am so fond of Jake, and deep down I kept thinking that "If things go hard materially, I will write to Jake, and when all else fails, he will know what to do." Also I respected him so highly, the way he cared for Mother. And your parcels, how much they have meant to me! Yet we do not want to murmur or complain, but set our hopes on God the Lord; He will do all things well.

Firmly believe that you will receive

The best the Lord has meant for you.

Perhaps they will soon come home. I believe so. You have written the letter on the 24th and 27th, but mailed it on the 30th or 31st, which I can't understand. I wrote my last letter to you on January 1. It was the letter with the New Year's wishes. I hope that you have already received it. Have more young men from the village been sent to Saper- or Dneprovsk? Where are the uncles? Do you know anything about Joh. Wiebe, Rosengart? I haven't had a letter from him for over half a year.

Oh, how often I pray Psalm 90:15. Sometimes I am suddenly overcome with fear and suspicion, and I do not know where to go — till I find rest in

prayer. Yet,

Let the billows roll,  
Jesus keeps our soul!

“Jesus is my rock and fortress; my God in Whom I trust!”

I have not received a letter from Mother since the beginning of December and cannot understand this. I cannot believe that she has not written, not even whether she has received my parcels and how she has distributed the gifts. That seems incredible!

Because of that I cannot enjoy writing, since it seems that my cards and letters too do not arrive. Oh, how I would like to have been with you for the holidays. But I guess this cannot be until 1940, God willing.

My life goes on as usual. I saw and split some wood, take a walk in the woods when it isn't too cold, read or write. But when the days grow longer, I will, no doubt, have to work in the woods; i.e., if there is any work. There are strong, young men here who do nothing, because there is no work; yet they always seem to have something to sell, and also receive things. However, I do not complain, since I have enough to live on, and your gifts will keep me till February. I do not need to be pitied, yet, “my weak faith goes up and down.”

Excuse my scribbling, but when I am excited, my hand trembles so much that I cannot control it! May God take care of you, my dear Oli! In my mind I caress your soft hair and give you a goodnight kiss: sleep well! 1 Peter 1:6-9. Have you received the lots in the letter?

Kiss Mother, the children and grandchildren. Also greet your parents-in-law and Abram, also neighbors and friends.

With a warm hug and kiss for both of you and the lad,

Your grateful father

Dear Marusja, my dearest wife, and children!

How dearly I would like to tell you all this personally — but it must be better thus, or else things would be different. On the evening of the 24th, God willing, I will have a little tree with seven candles, according to the number of the seven lampstands in Revelation 1:12. I have invited a beggar and an exile, such as I am also.

In my spirit I will be with you, give you each a hearty kiss and say: “Seek thou Jesus and His light; for all else is darkest night.” On New Year's Eve I will draw lots again for me and all of you. The big storm, “Purga”, lasted two days and now there are hard frosts at -38 to -40 and more!

Many thanks for your Christmas presents for me! I will open them on the 24th. May God, the Lord, protect you! Yes, the Lord bless and keep you, and let His face shine upon you, and be gracious unto you, and give you peace! Amen.

With a loving hug and kiss,  
Your grateful father.

*The last letter from Father to Mother and us*

**February 6, 1938.**

Beloved wife and children!

Grace, mercy and peace be with you richly! God's words, which held deep meaning for me this morning, I would like to give you, Mary and Oli: John 14:1; "Let not your hearts be troubled, believe in God and believe in me"! John 14:27; "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid." Lamentations 3:26; "It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord." Luke 21:19; "By your endurance you will gain your lives."

I believe I wrote Oli about not forgetting to be thankful. The word in Psalm 50:20 is special: "He who brings thanksgiving as a sacrifice honors me; to him who orders his way aright, I will show the salvation of God." Therefore, there must be a very calming strength in thanksgiving! Be thankful and I will show him the salvation of God. Yes, even in sorrow and affliction there is hidden a good bit of salvation; sad to say, we do not always recognize or find it.

What you have written about "lots" is reality. It is truly God's word, so read carefully what Isaiah 34:16 and 17 says about that and the lot. In the Jubilee Bible you will find a further explanation. If not then there may be one in Lange's Bible commentary on Isaiah. Look up the reference and tell me what you find. I understand this in the sense that God's word contains all that is important and necessary for us; even about our destiny and God's divine ordinance. And if we read: "Shall not a nation ask their God?", then this expresses the idea that God will also answer, and He does this through His word. This seems clear to me also from the verse in Psalm 119, "Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path."

We have read here about an amnesty for those in the Red Army and that is like grist for our mill. "The wish is father of the thought."

If you write to my brother, H.P. Toews, then please mention the fact that the news about mission work among the heathen has filled me with deep gratefulness to God. Here all prophesy is silenced and there seems to be no hunger or longing for God's word!

Wednesday is my birthday, then I shall write again. May God protect you! Please kiss the children and grandchildren.

Greet the relatives, friends and neighbors, especially Sonya, Anna Schmidt, Albertine Martens, etc.

I enfold you in my undying love,  
Your Arndt

## **A Sermon by A.P. Toews from the time of his ministry**

*A wedding message for the bridal couple,*

*Abram G. Pries and Louise P. Regier; Rosental, September 27, 1925.*

Honored bride and groom and guests!

We have gathered here for a marriage ceremony. This bridal couple before us would like to solemnize their marriage bonds before God and the church. It is an important family event, one of very great significance for the bridal couple, their families, society, our church and the Church of Christ. A wedding means a festive time! Truly the day is important, a festive day for you. It is a day which you wish to celebrate because it shall be the highlight of your life, a day which you have anticipated with joy, that it may bring you the fulfilment of your hopes and dreams. Today you stand in a holy place before God to experience the light of His face shining upon you. The events of this day with their indelible impressions will be unforgettable.

All the goodness and love which you have received from God, your family and friends, and which they have shown to make this day beautiful and festive, even to the smallest detail, all will be impressed in your memory, in your innermost being. This is the first day of a new era in your life. Those of us who are married feel that besides the usual calendar we have a special one that begins with the wedding day.

You have come to a turn in your life, and it shall be a bright turning point. As the wanderer looks back to see the high peaks bright with the sun's rays shining on them so shall this day remain like a glowing light on your future path, in memory of what it meant to you. It will accompany you with a warm glow into the distant future. So I would like to engrave in your hearts a word of Holy Scripture, to make this hour one of solemn dedication. Hold forth this word as a banner for the pathway of your life, so that it may reach to the heavens, and which may be your guide in good and evil days. This is the declaration which Joshua made, just before he died, to a large congregation: Joshua 24:15; "But for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

I would like to present to you this word as the motto for your marriage. Through God's amazing guidance of the children of Israel, Joshua had experienced that He is the greatest God and to serve Him is the greatest boon in life. He had recognized this Lord in the gracious expressions of His goodness, and as such also presents Him to the elders of Israel. All the great and wonderful things that happened in the history of Israel were possible only through God's guiding hand.

However, that was only one side of the coin. On the other side Joshua also saw a stiff-necked, disobedient, changeable, rebellious people. Through deep awareness of God and sincere self-appraisal, Joshua had come to the conviction: God is all; I am nothing. As for me and my house! My dear

friends, similarly, we must speak with Joshua: “As for me and my house.” Notice, beloved, how in so many ways God has drawn near to us; has been gracious to us, and lifted us above the tides of sin: “In grief and pain, You have again and again, Under God’s wings safely rested.” You, dear bride, have experienced in a very real way that God the Lord sustains you even in deepest sorrow; the sorrow of losing parents and loved ones. And though you were alone, there were those compassionate souls who stood by you and helped you when you didn’t know which way to turn. To this day the Lord has shown you His love and grace.

In this respect, you, dear bridegroom, are in a favorable situation — your parents are still with you. This shows God’s goodness, which always leads you to repentance. And truly it is the Lord who granted you your love for each other, gave you this beautiful day and the prospect of beginning a home with your parents there to support you.

Yes, it is the Lord, dear bride, who is bringing you into a home where you can say: Here I am at home, here I can rest. It is the Lord, dear bridegroom, who gave you this bride to bring to your parents’ house, where they have given you a room of which you can say:

My quiet room, so filled with light,  
So filled with peace and rest;  
Where after toil and heat of day,  
My soul is truly blest.

You have received these many blessings from God in the past, and where do you stand now? Has all this guidance and these blessings been necessary in your life and ours? Yes, dear friends, more than necessary, for in looking back to our past life and history, how often have we like Israel at Mara contended with God, served other gods in good and bad times? Do we, like Joshua, acknowledge God, confess our sinfulness, and say with him: “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord!” We acknowledge His work of grace in us, experience answers to prayer. In times of blessed fellowship, deep inner peace enters our heart and we praise Him for wonderfully preserving us in danger and distress. If you have come to his awareness of God and man, it seems to us that your marriage already travels under the banner: “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”

But we would further consider the content of this word. Joshua says, “will,” thereby expressing his sincere desire to serve the Lord. He had decided to renounce his sin and consecrate himself to the service of the Lord. Today, as we hang this verse above the portals of your marriage, it has the same meaning for you as for Joshua. It means that your will to serve the Lord Jesus Christ activates all the strivings of mind, body and soul. Actually, through this Christian ceremony you are already obligating yourselves to this decision. Sad to say, this is often taken too lightly; as soon as the minister

says Amen, the matter is closed. Friends, this is a much more solemn occasion, and with deep humility and concern I perform my official duty. Two persons solemnize their vows to begin a Christian home. That is to say, it is a holy vow before God and the church, which must be demonstrated also in everyday life. A Christian marriage presumes that "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." This means to lead a life according to Christ's word, which is not always easy! It demands humility, and self-sacrifice to the extent that "One bears the other's burden."

Furthermore: "Sharing your burden lessens it, sharing your joy increases it." However, this can only happen if there is a fervent love for the Lord and for each other. This love must be pure, forgiving, and to which you must sacrifice your willfulness and selfishness. Strength grows through struggle, and there is no doubt that struggles will come; for there are struggles in every marriage. There is the fight against the many worries that may come to you; the battle with selfishness which vies for a place in married life; the struggle with the greatest evil — covetousness; and the battle with jealousy. In all these struggles with worldly evils and sin your faith shall stand as a rock in a turbulent stream; a strong faith in the Lord that He may give you strength to persevere and serve Him faithfully to the end. When in spite of this dark clouds hang low over your home and misfortune crosses your pathway; even when misunderstandings and hurt feelings occur; do not let the sun go down upon them. Rather, speak to each other with love, eye to eye, and looking back on the highlights of this day, bow before the Lord and say with Joshua: "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

## **Meditations and Reflections from Exile**

### *A Legend*

It was a beautiful Sunday morning! Reverend B. had risen early to work on his Sunday sermon. After that he had gone into the garden to preach the sermon to himself. He then returned to the house, where the family was waiting for him at the breakfast table. The lady of the house was not in a good mood, because the daughter had not made a good job of cleaning the house on Saturday.

After breakfast the minister began to dress. But the collar didn't fit; another one didn't have its button in the right place, a third one wasn't pressed. "These collars are never in order, there's always something missing," he grumbled to his wife. Seemingly she had been waiting for just such an opportunity to fling an accusation against her husband. She told him he was proud, obstinate, etc. The solemn Sunday morning mood was gone! He went to church disturbed and irritated.

The beauty of the morning was a real incentive for people to come to

church. So L.F., who had looked forward to this Sunday morning, was also on her way. Many people knew her as a clairvoyant person who saw things which others didn't notice. Today, just as she started along the street, she saw Satan, dressed in a Sunday suit, among the churchgoers. Upon her question where he might be going, he answered, "To church, to the worship service." "But what do you want in church?" asked the astonished L.F.

"Oh, there is much work today. I have been at the preacher's house already, early this morning."

In the church L.F. noticed that Satan placed himself at the door with a big roll of paper and pencil in his hand. Soon all the seats were filled in the church. The young songleader began the first song too low. The singing wavered, resulting in grins and ridicule about the songleader. Finally the minister walked in. At the same time the daughter of the richest farmer, A.M., entered. She wore a beautiful dress and was proud of it, hoping that everyone would see it. Oh, how many of the other girls were jealous of her dress. Mrs. E. had forgotten to put the matches away into the cupboard, so was worried by the thought that her children might start a fire. Many in the congregation were sleeping. Others were thinking of the picnic which was to take place in the afternoon.

The minister had to glance at his paper frequently and couldn't quite get into the right mood. And Satan busily wrote the names of the people on his roll of paper. He wanted to accuse them before God, which is his mission. L.F. noticed that he had almost filled the page. All names had been included, but she couldn't see hers there. Suddenly she saw Satan turning and thereby hit his head on the door, at which she began to laugh. Thereupon Satan also added her name to the others. She saw the initials L.F. very clearly. All had been included in the list. And Satan left joyfully and triumphantly, but God's angels, sadly grieved, returned to heaven.

"May we all take care that no one robs himself of the blessing at worship."

Goltjavino, February 22, 1937

### **Why Have Funerals?**

Why have funerals? That is, Christian funerals? The deceased person no longer needs this service. Jesus Himself said: "Let the dead bury the dead."

Truly, only "the dead" in this sense need the ceremony, the funeral procession and sympathy etc. The Christian, the believer, has a deeper longing which should be fulfilled through a Christian burial or the so-called funeral oration. The Christian funeral is not only a solemn procession with a splendid cortege, wreaths and mourning attire. Not even the fellowship meal adds to the importance of a funeral.

A Christian funeral should be:

1) A witness to Jesus, the resurrected and heaven-ascended Lord, who has said: "I am the Resurrection and the Life," who will raise unto eternal life all who believe in Him. Whoever has faith in this Saviour will wish to perform this last service of love for the dear departed ones, committing their bodies to the grave with prayerful eyes uplifted to the "hills from whence help comes."

2) Separation from a loved one, especially a family member — father, mother, daughter, son — is painful; some people cannot find comfort, and hardly know how to cope with their grief. A Christian funeral should help to comfort, lift and sustain. Therefore it is inconceivable to have a Christian funeral without God's word. I repeat, the deceased does not need this, but to the bereaved it is important.

3) A Christian funeral should show the bereaved where to find true comfort and strength, to replace the loss.

How fitting it would be if the relatives and friends would bring the sorrowing a condolence card with a Scripture verse, rather than flowers and wreaths. Later, in everyday life, after moss and grasses cover the mound, these words of comfort would be like dear friends and a great blessing to the bereaved.

I cannot help pointing out that I feel very guilty of often having acted so formally at a funeral. So often real depth was lacking, and I should have spoken more urgently and forcefully. The truth — not what people might wish to hear.

Goltjavino, March 8, 1937

### **Another Christmas Meditation**

**written by Father on December 22, 1937**

*Meditation under the Christmas Tree*

The time of year called winter solstice, when the day is shortest and the night longest, was expectantly awaited by all pagan peoples. On these occasions many joyful folk festivals took place with dances and games, with beautifully decorated and gilded evergreen trees. It was natural for pagans to welcome the time of year when the sun began to climb higher, spreading more light and warmth.

However, we as Christians celebrate Christmas, the birthday of our Saviour, Jesus Christ, at about the same time. For this reason the world assumes that the Christmas celebrations are a "heathen" festival with a Christian name. It is not surprising that unbelievers do not understand the meaning and importance of Christmas. Sad to say, many Christians do not



know the real meaning of this happy Christian festival, which ranks above all other festivals.

Briefly we would like to discuss what the Christmas tree means and should mean to us. The first Christian missionaries knew how to utilize the pagan festival of the winter solstice, in order to give it a Christian spiritual character.

Our gift giving and mutual greetings have a biblical basis found in Esther 9:19-22. The festival of Purim was instituted as a celebrating of “turning pain into joy; suffering into days of happiness,” during the afflictions of the Babylonian captivity. About the institution of this festival we read: “...that they should keep them as days of feasting and gladness, days for sending choice portions to one another and gifts to the poor.” This custom of the Old Testament congregation has been adopted by the New Testament Christians and carried over to the Christmas festival, for this festival is a joyous one, where the heavenly tidings of salvation from sin and death are proclaimed to all people by the angelic choir “Glory to God in the Highest and peace on earth, goodwill towards men.”

Furthermore, presents at Christmastime are a symbol, a token of the greatest heavenly gift, which God, the Father, gives to the world in His Son, Jesus Christ. So we sing that beautiful song:

O praise the Lord ye Christians all,  
Praise the Eternal One,  
Who opens heav'n to great and small,  
And gives us His own Son.

Therefore, my beloved, Christmas presents have a special meaning:

1) They are an expression of special joy and love to a friend and brother, including the joy of redemption from sin and death.

2) They are symbols of the heavenly gift of God in Christ to all people.

Much more could be written about this, but let it suffice. Only this: Easter gifts can similarly convey an expression of joy and praise for the gift of Eternal Life.

Let us come back to the evergreen tree. “Green” is the symbol of life; so we can also say “Tree of Life.” This is true because our Christmas tree is above all a symbol of the Tree of Life. It takes us back to the beginning of Time, the time of Paradise and the Tree of Life. What a deep impression this Tree of Life must have made on the first parents, Adam and Eve! But it was lost and the Tree of Life was no longer there, yet the longing remained, expressed by Eve and all the devout in the words: “Root of Jesse.”

“The expectancy of the devout will turn to joy.” This happened in the holy night. The Tree of Life was again planted in our midst. In Jesus we have the Tree of Life which is eternal. Even sin, death and hell couldn't destroy it. In Jesus, the Saviour, the Tree of Life appeared through which all people

should be healed. Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled at Christmas: Isaiah 11:1; "There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots." Micah 5:4 has been fulfilled: "And He shall be our peace." Even as our evergreen tree is not only a dream but reality, so Jesus Christ has also come into our lives. He has found for us the lost Paradise with the Tree of Life.

Yes, the Christmas tree is the finest and best tree because it is a symbol of the Tree of Life, Jesus Christ. If we have understood this, we will also welcome the angels above the Christmas Tree as symbols of the angelic host at Bethlehem's fields. Then we will also perceive the dove with the note in its beak as a symbol of the joyous message of salvation. Also the symbols of faith, hope and love should not be wanting. But above all, the picture of the Good Shepherd, for He is our life, light and bliss.

Our Saviour is the Tree of Life, which is sent for healing and Eternal Life for everyone. Today He invites all who are weary and burdened. He comforts and strengthens His own.

So let Him in, 'tis not a dream,  
He chose your heart a garden fair;  
Will plant within its narrow room  
The Tree of Life to grow and bloom,  
Attend to it with love and care.

Finally, the Christmas Tree is for us a symbol of the Tree of Life on the new earth, in the paradise for which we wait. The poet says of this: "Paradise, Paradise, Oh how tender is thy fruit; Underneath the Trees of Life, We shall wander free from strife. Bring us, Lord, to Paradise."

There the Tree of Life has become a grove of fruitful trees growing by the Stream of Life. Who would not want to walk underneath their shade and taste of their fruit? If we celebrate Christmas in spirit and in truth, if the Christmas tree means more to us than only a decorated tree, if we understand the deep meaning of Christmas, we will bow in adoration and praise to the Giver of all gifts. We will see the gifts and Christmas Tree as:

- 1) The symbol of the first Tree of Life,
- 2) The symbol of the real Tree of Life, Jesus Christ, and
- 3) Reference to the Trees of Life in the New Paradise.

Beloved, take note of all the poetry and symbols found in the Christmas festival. I could continue to mention also the symbol of lights on the tree, but will leave this for some other time. I believe this is sufficient to convince you that we do not celebrate a heathen festival, but one of the most important and beautiful Christian festivals, whose central figure is Jesus Christ. Amen.

## Short Stories from Exile

### *The Story of Longbeak (Langschnohvel), the saucy Magpie*

What's that above my window? A regular row — the sparrows dance and screech! They rejoice that after the long, cold winter the sun is finally shining and the guests have returned from the south: the starlings and ducks. Even a hoopoe appeared, inspecting his guesthouse of last summer, on the roof under the ridge, where he had found a hole. I must go and find out which of the sparrows has been the noisiest, yelling and screaming!

There, I see him, the others hurried away. He twists his head this way and that, looking at me first with one eye, then the other. I tell him: "You are a cheeky rascal, you old rogue of a sparrow!"

"Chirrup, chirrup. My dear man, I can see you will not harm me as the bad boys who always throw stones at me, or the old cowherd who killed one of my children with the broom yesterday."

Amazed, I look at the sparrow. I can see that he will be able to tell me something, perhaps from his life. "Listen, you old rascal, can't you tell me something: Why do you always fly after the cows and peck around on their backs — that must hurt them?" "Jepp, jepp, you don't know anything. We only pick up the loose hair off the cows' backs, which fall off anyway. We use them to make our houses soft and warm. Now, the magpies, they torment the poor animals terribly and mercilessly, especially the old Longbeak (Langschnohvel)."

"Is that so, my little sparrow? But who is Longbeak, and what do you know about him? Please tell me!" The old sparrow whets his beak, prunes his wings, hops on one leg and contemptingly grinning, he begins his story:

"So you really do not know the story of Longbeak, that very clever and sly Mr. Magpie? We are all afraid of him, for he is saucy and cruel. But I will tell you a story about him: You recognize him by his long, strong beak, and he usually limps on one leg. He has a grain of shot lodged in the left foot where a hunter has shot him years ago. The wound healed but the grain is still there. Often his legs hurts him, and then he limps. He really knows how to steal. A certain farmer had a beautiful but angry dog, who had to be tied up and fed daily with bread and meat. So often Longbeak with his children has nastily stolen many a piece of meat from him. And how does he do it? Oh, he knows the time when the farmer's wife brings food to the dog, and in no time Longbeak with two or three buddies is there. Now take note of what happens: The lady just sets down the dish with bread and meat and goes inside. The dog, named Furious, hungrily ties into his food. Now Longbeak commands his gang. Three of his children jump at the dog with screams and provoke him. He gets angry, barks and runs after them, trying to catch them, but they are gone, and in seconds Longbeak gets at the dish, snatches a piece of meat, and flies away, followed by his children. Sometimes when he is in a

good mood, he will tease the dog and one of his children steals the food. Also at the big bakery, where some big dogs always lie in wait for dried or spoiled dough to be thrown out; he uses the same tactics: the dog runs after the teasing little magpies and in that moment Longbeak steals the best morsel. But he is even worse with the cattle. In the huge corral are the calves, often sick ones with ulcers. Here comes Longbeak with his company, sits down on a little calf and digs around in his ulcer mercilessly until the calf bawls with pain. The cowherd comes to chase him away, but he flies to a birch tree and whets his bloody beak, laughing and mocking. Here's a horse whose back is scraped by the saddle, causing a huge swollen boil. Longbeak tried it again and luckily got away, but one of his children had to die. And do you know, if he schemes this kind of evil, he flies low and hides. On one occasion the magpies attacked a sick horse lying on the road and hacked away almost half of it, before someone came to get it. They pick out his eyes, and where there is a wound, they find it, these horrible robbers! In spring the cows get larvae under their skin from big flies. These are easy to detect, since they look like a big wart. Longbeak knows where to find them, and picks them out together with a bit of blood and flesh. This is very painful to the cow, and the herdsman has to watch so that the magpies don't get too bold.

A happy little rabbit (white as they all are in winter) had been shot by a hunter, but survived, except that the hind legs were hurt so that he couldn't run anymore. Before the hunter could get it, Longbeak with his wife and children had already pecked out his eyes and bored through his head for marrow.

Longbeak is a dangerous, cruel robber. He should be shot or chased away, so he can't torment the animals so horribly. He has also stolen three children from my nest and greedily devoured them. Please excuse me — I have to weep when I think of my poor, dear children!"

Mr. Sparrow weeps — he can't continue his story. He cannot forgive Longbeak for having stolen and eaten his darling little children. The old saucy sparrow flies away. He doesn't want to talk anymore. If I ever meet him again, I will ask him to tell me another story.

### **The Story of Mr. Sparrow, the old Rascal**

On a beautiful spring morning I was standing at the granary, enjoying the sunshine. Thereupon my landlady, the farmer's wife, came out with a pail and a blanket. She lifted her pail and threw the wheat into the wind, allowing it to fall down on the blanket. The wind blew away the chaff and straw.

Mr. Sparrow, the old rascal, sat on the windowsill and watched. The kernels of wheat were very tempting and he said to his old wife: "Look, the table is spread before us again."

After the landlady had poured the wheat into the pail again, she went inside. Like a flash Mr. Sparrow with his wife and a gang of children were right there to pick up the scattered kernels of wheat. What a feast! This had been a very prosperous week. For three days wagons were standing on the yard where the horses were fed. And those dear horses were not frugal, but chewed their oats in huge mouthfuls, so that the grain flew to all sides. The sparrows evenly picked it up and filled their little crops. Whenever their little feet got cold from the snow, they flew up to the roof to warm them on the chimney bricks. Mr. Sparrow had eaten well and pruned his feathers with his bill. He was very vain and proudly laid them in order one on the other. He looked at me, then cocked his head from side to side. "Well, what are you so curious about, you old rascal?" I asked him. Mr. Sparrow cocked his head and said: "Tiwitt, tiwitt, it's a nice day today, my craw is full, now I'll pick up some snow instead of water, and then I'll retire into my warm nest."

"Ah," I asked, "where is your nest, and where do you come from?" He answered, "Over there from the windowsill where you always sit and write so long. That's where I was born and grew up. But last fall my father said, 'Now, my children, go your own ways. There's no more room for you in the nest. Get going, look out for yourselves.' So we flew away with many other sparrows to the threshingfloor where there were many mounds of oats, wheat and barley. We stayed there until harvest was over. Some sparrows came from the neighbors inviting us to come with them where there was still more grain. And so I came here. In spring I found a nice wife and we built a nest here behind the windowsill.

"My dear old wife lined it so well with feathers and soft cowhair — it was lovely! Then she laid four eggs into it which we kept nice and warm. I myself spent only an hour a day on the nest, while my wife, 'Little Grey One', as I call her, flew away to look for food. I sat and watched, so none of those scamps, called starlings, came near our nest. Once we were terrified when a cat came prowling along the gable end. Quickly I called together a crowd of other sparrows and we made so much noise that the cat ran away.

"After two weeks four cute little sparrows with such nice little yellow beaks were hatched from the eggs. But no sooner were they hatched than they screamed for food. Oh, what mountains of food we brought them: butterflies, thick fat worms, flies, bottle flies, and little stones. Soon the children grew and peeped out of their nest.

"It will not be long before they fly short distances with us old ones. But you won't understand this, since you people fly around in such monstrous things which make an awful racket. We have above us the lovely white clouds which drift peacefully along. Often we fly a race with them. The earth looks so small beneath us; the woods look like a dark wall at the horizon. Underneath us flows the Yenesei. The long tugboats, laden with wood, go

downstream. We fly faster than they. Do you believe me?"

"Yes, I believe you, you old rascal, and you don't know how much I would like to join your party."

The old sparrow looked at me with his clever little eyes and said, "Yes, yes, you people and we have this in common: We have a longing in our hearts for our loved ones, our home, isn't that right? Tiwitt, tiwitt," and away he flew. Meanwhile evening had come; the sun sank in the west.

### **The Spruce Tree**

A place in the taiga where the big forest fire had raged, where only burnt and charred tree stumps stood — 120 years ago in the spring, at the end of May, thousands of tiny spruce trees had come to life. They rejoiced in their new life as they stretched their little green heads towards the sun. Soon they began to compete with each other, striving to be the tallest.

The years went by as the constant struggle for light and nourishment became more intense. Many of the weakest succumbed early: some were trampled by the frolicking of the young bears, some were crushed where the big elk lay down, others languished in the shade of their companions.

Yet many stood firm, growing taller and taller, reaching towards heaven and the sun. Even in the wake of blustery snowstorms which broke many a spruce tree, there were those who endured and grew tall and slender. In the quiet nights their rustling branches sang the eternal melody of the woods, about power and creation, green life, splendour and glory.

More years came and went. The little spruce tree grew to be tall, great and stout — a giant of a forest. The moose rubbed his antlers on its trunk, the mother bear whetted her claws on its bark, and the squirrel leaped happily among its green branches.

One glorious day the sun shone warmly while the spotted woodpecker with his mate were so happy with their brood that they didn't notice a butterfly settling at the bottom of the tree, laying its tiny eggs in the crevices of the bark. The butterfly sat there a long time, and when it tried to fly away it was too weak, and so tired and faint that it fell to the ground. Quickly the ants came and carried it to their nest. However, the following spring, the worms which were bred from the butterfly's eggs bored into the great spruce tree.

The spruce tree became ill. From year to year it became weaker as one green branch after another threw off its green robe. Finally the sap dried up: life and blood ceased to throb. And when the northeast wind raged, the spruce, like an invalid, creaked in all its joints. Its branches broke and fell away. And so it stands and waits until axe and saw come to make an honourable end to its dead body.

It had consecrated its life to God, and presented its dead body to the Lord of Creation.

Here lies the old spruce tree before me, 26 meters long and 90 cm. thick at its lower end. As I make one cut after another, it seems to me that I hear, in the melody of the saw, the old spruce tree's last song.

One hundred years God praising,  
My crown to heaven raising  
Was my delight and joy.  
But then the worm assailed me  
And all my marrow failed me,  
And did my strength destroy.

In years my leafy dresses  
Withered, and mossy tresses  
Bedecked my naked rind.  
And as my years were ending,  
My barren branches rending  
Raged the northeast wind.

He tossed the branches thither  
To others dead and withered  
Beneath the Taiga moon:  
And left me naught possessing,  
But said to me in passing  
Your time is coming soon.

Then soon you came to claim me,  
With axe and saw to maim me:  
You cut me down.  
The wounds have left in pieces  
My trunk: my body ceases,  
Its wholeness gone.

My life which I was given  
I gave to God in heaven  
To honour and to praise.  
And e'en though death shall sever,  
I'll laud his name forever,  
Mankind I'll serve always.

Gaily the fire crackles in my little stove. The wood of the spruce tree burns and sends the smoke winding up into the cold winter air, like offerings of incense. That is its last praise to God the Creator. It is warm in my room. This warmth comes from the fireglow of the spruce tree, which is a gift of love to mankind.

Goltjavino, January 30, 1937

## End-Notes

### Author's Preface

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago* (Paris, YMCA Press, 1975), Russian edition, p. 263.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 238

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Mark 10:43.

<sup>4</sup> Letter of Aron Toews to Diedrich H. Epp, dated October 6, 1925.

<sup>5</sup> Solzhenitsyn, *op. cit.*, p. 336.

### Chapter 1

<sup>1</sup> A dessiatine was equal to 2.7 acres. The 32½ dessiatines owned by Toews would have been called a "half farm" (*Halbwirtschaft*). A "full farm" or *Wirtschaft* consisted of 65 dessiatines.

<sup>2</sup> The name and incident referred to here are fictitious.

<sup>3</sup> The village of Muntau in the Molotschna colony had a midwifery training school.

### Chapter 2

<sup>1</sup> A verst was about 2/3 of a mile.

<sup>2</sup> While paging through Dr. Walter Quiring's book, *Als ihre Zeit erfüllet war*, I came across a section entitled "Aristocracy on the Estates". In my mind, there was no such thing. One can speak of noble attitudes which even the poorest and most unpretentious person can express. Wealth never elevates anyone into the ranks of the aristocracy. It is certainly not my purpose to prove this more fully here. Nor do I want to pass judgment on whether it was the desire for more land, money or other possessions which caused many Mennonites to settle away from the village communities. O.R.

<sup>3</sup> This word refers to oxcart drivers on the public road that led through the Molotschna colony to the salt flats on the Black Sea.

<sup>4</sup> From a personal letter to the author.

### Chapter 3

<sup>1</sup> Cf. J.J. Hildebrand. *Chronologische Zeittafel*, p.283.

<sup>2</sup> The amendment of Article 157 in the 1874 Universal Military Conscription decree had provided alternative service (military exemption) for Men-



nonites in Russia. Such exemptions were upheld as long as the tsars were in power, and for a time given by the Soviet government also.

<sup>3</sup>The All-Russian Union of Zemstvos provided hospital and medical services to the soldiers at the front. It was one of several such organizations set up in World War I. Most Mennonites in the medical service served under this Union.

<sup>4</sup>From the notes of Anna Sudermann, Winnipeg, Man.

## Chapter 4

<sup>1</sup>The *Selbstschutz* ("self-defense", i.e. Home Guard) was set up in the colonies during the time of the German occupation from April to November 1918. It tried to protect the villages from the attacks of Nestor Makhno's army (Ukrainian partisans really). Its last battle was fought in early March of 1919.

## Chapter 5

<sup>1</sup>The *Kleine Gemeinde* organized its first congregation in Russia in 1812. A number of villages in the Borosenko settlement were inhabited by families of this church.

<sup>2</sup>A letter from Aron Toews to his brother Peter mailed via Constantinople finally got to the USA.

<sup>3</sup>From a 1922 report in the *Mennonitische Rundschau*.

<sup>4</sup>A *puđ* was 40 Russian or 36 Canadian pounds.

## Chapter 6

<sup>1</sup>The beginnings of the Chortitz settlement are described in Nick Kroeker, *First Mennonite Villages in Russia* (Vancouver, B.C., 1981), pp. 21 ff.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Victor Peters, *Zwei Dokumente* (Winnipeg, Man., 1965), p. 35.

<sup>3</sup>Mr. Dyck is also mentioned in Diedrich Neufeld, *A Russian Dance of Death* (Winnipeg, Man., 1977), pp. 8, 12, 13.

<sup>4</sup>Bartsch and Jakob Hoepfner had explored the areas of the first Mennonite settlements in Russia during a tour and inspection in 1787-1788.

<sup>5</sup>The New Economic Policy was established by Lenin during the period 1922-24 to help the country recover from the Civil War. It was terminated around 1928 by Stalin.

<sup>6</sup>These relief supplies were brought in by the Mennonite Central Committee which had been set up in the USA in the summer of 1920.

<sup>7</sup>This group had managed to leave Russia late in 1920 at the time when General Wrangel's army was evacuated from the Crimea to Turkey and the Balkans.

<sup>8</sup>B.B. Janz was helped to organize the emigration at this time.

<sup>9</sup> The story of this emigration group and the later ones in the 1920s is told in F.H. Epp, *Mennonite Exodus* (Altona, Man., 1962), pp. 139 ff.

## Chapter 7

<sup>1</sup> From a report to *Der Bote* in 1924.

<sup>2</sup> The Union of Citizens of Dutch Ancestry was formed by the Russian Mennonites in 1921, and operated till 1926. Its purpose was to help in economic reconstruction and to deal with matters like emigration.

<sup>3</sup> The K.F.K. had actually been organized already before WWI. Its task was to represent Mennonites to the government in all matters important to the community where state relations might be involved.

<sup>4</sup> “Experts” like Aron Toews had the important, though at times risky, responsibility to help young recruits present their appeals to the Soviet courts in a persuasive manner so that they could obtain CO status.

## Chapter 8

<sup>1</sup> A local name given to the valley running from the end of Rosenthal down to the Dnieper River.

<sup>2</sup> Taken from a report to *Der Bote* during this period.

<sup>3</sup> Ministers and other workers employed or appointed by the church (literally “servers in the cult”) had no voting privileges in the Soviet system, and their rights of citizenship were also restricted in other ways.

<sup>4</sup> A “troika” consisted of three persons who were given special juridical and other administrative leadership responsibilities in local communities.

<sup>5</sup> From a *Bote* report of January 18, 1928.

## Chapter 9

<sup>1</sup> The first five-year plan, which aimed at the collectivization of farm operations throughout the Soviet Union, was carried out in 1928-1932 in less than five years.

<sup>2</sup> “Kulak” meant “fist”, and was a name given by the Soviet authorities to anyone whom they regarded as “rich” and therefore an enemy of the proletariat state.

<sup>3</sup> These were the households of those who, like the church workers, had no voting privileges.

<sup>4</sup> Georg Gerschensteiner, 1854-1932, pedagogue, town school councillor, and high school teacher in Munich, Germany.

<sup>5</sup> From a letter to Peter Toews.

<sup>6</sup> From *Der Bote*, February 26, 1930.

<sup>7</sup> As told by Peter Kroeger. This writer, formerly of Rosenthal, has lived in Winnipeg since 1949. He is a technical artist by profession. His poems

have appeared in *Der Bote* from time to time.

<sup>8</sup> Part of a personal letter.

<sup>9</sup> From a report to *Der Bote*.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> From a personal letter to H.P. Toews.

<sup>12</sup> From a personal letter.

<sup>13</sup> Personal communication with the author (O.R.).

## Chapter 10

<sup>1</sup>The first Soviet secret security organization known as the Cheka became the State Political Administration (GPU) in 1922. Soon after this the bureau was renamed OGPU to extend its coverage to the whole Soviet Union, and in 1934 it was renamed again, now to be known as NKVD. Further re-organization occurred in 1953 under Beria when the body became the MVD and very soon after that, in 1954, it was given the present name, KGB, or Committee for State Security.

## Diary Notes

<sup>1</sup>J. Wiebe of Rosengart was a good friend of Aron Toews, and also a member of his congregation.

<sup>2</sup>English translations are from the Revised Standard version. Original citations were probably from a German-language Luther translation. Albrecht also did a German translation.

<sup>3</sup>A “wanderbird”. Woodhopper—from the Old High German.

<sup>4</sup>Listvennia, a small town on the upper Jenesei River.

<sup>5</sup>G.P.U. designated the Soviet secret police.

<sup>6</sup>The oldest daughter of the diarist.

<sup>7</sup>A church member back home.

<sup>8</sup>Also a church member back home.

<sup>9</sup>Cossacks had inhabited the Mennonite area for centuries. They were a fiercely independent people who lived a semi-nomadic agricultural life in Ukraine and the area of the Don River.

<sup>10</sup>A Mennonite congregation in Russia, also known as Evangelical Mennonite Church. They practised the immersion form of baptism but also accepted as members those who were baptized by other forms, and did not insist on rebaptism.

<sup>11</sup>Toews was always a stout defender of non-resistance as a way of life, and did not countenance the arming of the colonies as a Christian way to deal with violence around them.

<sup>12</sup>The roving bands of Makhno ravaged the Mennonite settlements from time to time for the entire period of the civil war, 1918-1920.

<sup>13</sup>Schiller: "The Three Words of Faith" (Die drei Worte des Glaubens).

<sup>14</sup>From Karl Gerok, „Es reut mich nicht“ ("This I Don't Regret).

<sup>15</sup>A city in the Lower Inn Valley of Tirol, Austria. Cf. *Mennonite Encyclopedia, II*, pp. 264-265.

<sup>16</sup>From Martin Luther, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God".

<sup>17</sup>Tersteegen: "O Power of Love".

<sup>18</sup>Balachta is a small town on a tributary flowing into the Jenesei, somewhat south of the regional city of Krasnojarsk.

<sup>19</sup>A small place near Balachta.

<sup>20</sup>See note 18.

<sup>21</sup>Krasnojarsk was the capital city of the region of Krasnojarsk. It had a population of about 650,000.

<sup>22</sup>Church member of the diarist.

<sup>23</sup>Daursk—small town near the source of the Jenesei.

<sup>24</sup>Shortened from two words meaning a grain cleaning plant.

<sup>25</sup>See note 20.

<sup>26</sup>A river harbor town at the junction of the Jenesei and Angara Rivers.

<sup>27</sup>A town in the lower section of the Angara.

<sup>28</sup>A nosilki was a carrying board for two people.

<sup>29</sup>Probably a quota of work.

<sup>30</sup>A Stolypin wagon referred to a latticed wagon on which prisoners were transported. It probably got its name from its origin or extended use during the time of Stolypin.

<sup>31</sup>Karl Wiese, a non-Mennonite, also exiled Christian friend of the diarist.

## Appendices

Letter to D.H. Epp, 1925.

<sup>1</sup>Peter Petrovich—brother of the writer.

<sup>2</sup>*Unser Blatt* began to appear in 1925 and was discontinued in 1928. Ältester Jacob Rempel was one of the first editors.

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### Other credits:

- Cover and map designs: George Loewen, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario, and Gerald Loewen, Winnipeg, Manitoba.
- For sharing childhood experiences: Mrs. Natalie Fast, passed away November 13, 1983, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario.
- For typing the German manuscript in 1978: Mrs. Louise Sudermann Dyck, Winnipeg, Manitoba.
- The map on Friedensfeld: Peter von Kampen, Winnipeg, Manitoba.
- Painting on p. viii: Jacob Sudermann.
- Typesetting and paste-up: Heidi M. Harms and Shirley Thiessen.
- The printers: Friesen Printers, Altona, Manitoba, Canada.

### The Author

Olga (Regier) Rempel (née Toews) was born in 1913 as the second daughter of Aron and Maria (née Sudermann) Toews. In her childhood and youth she lived in various villages in the Mennonite settlements of Ukraine. In 1934 her father was arrested. She married Jacob Regier in 1935. A son, Heinrich Regier, was born to this marriage in 1936. In 1937 her husband was arrested and exiled. Many years later she heard that he had died.

In 1943 Olga came to Germany. Through the help of her uncle, Henry P. Toews, of Arnaud, Manitoba, she emigrated to Canada in 1947. It was here that she learned of the death of her husband (through her brother-in-law, Abram Regier). In 1957 she was married to Nick Rempel, who passed away in 1969. After the passing of her husband she studied at the Bienenberg Bible School in Switzerland from 1969-70. From 1974-76 she worked for MCC (Manitoba) as a housemother for released offenders at Lenore Place in Winnipeg, Manitoba. During that time she also published a drama *Wer nimmt uns auf?* depicting the Mennonite "trek" from Soviet Russia to Germany in 1943.

She now is at home at Pleasant Manor, in Virgil, Ontario. Olga is active in congregational work, and writing remains her favorite hobby.



