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“SADLY THERE ARE NO DIARIES OF THE GRANDMOTHERS”  
HEALING ANCESTRAL WOUNDS ~AN EXPLORATION OF TWO  
GRANDFATHERS' PERSONAL MENNONITE TEXTS, 1852 ~ 1945

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“SADLY THERE ARE NO DIARIES OF THE GRANDMOTHERS”  
HEALING ANCESTRAL WOUNDS~AN EXPLORATION OF TWO  
GRANDFATHERS' PERSONAL MENNONITE TEXTS, 1852 ~ 1945

by

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## **DEDICATION**

I dedicate this work to the ancestors I have studied,  
to both their told and their untold stories. I also dedicate it to my family of today,  
especially to my husband Rudy and my sister Evelyn,  
who encouraged and supported me through this work.

## ABSTRACT

“SADLY THERE ARE NO DIARIES OF THE GRANDMOTHERS”  
HEALING ANCESTRAL WOUNDS~AN EXPLORATION OF TWO GRANDFATHERS’  
PERSONAL MENNONITE TEXTS, 1852 ~ 1945

By Eleanore Margaret Koop

Before I began my studies at St. Stephen’s College, I had observed that I felt weary and trapped by traditional descriptions of God. As early as my first few classes I began to see the parallel myth of the Divine Feminine, something I had never been taught in my religious background. It ignited a spark within me and fueled a desire to understand. In the midst of this unrest I saw my own wounds, wounds that had manifested into both rational and irrational fears of harm coming to my children, risks of loss of property or finances, as well as a need to be pure and perfect.

The longing to heal myself and explore the unspoken gap of the Divine Feminine led me to a study of my Mennonite ancestors, ancestry that can be traced back to 1584, when Mennonites were still a fledgling religion. In that study I learned about their traumas, their wounds, as well as the strengths that carried them through their lives. A trip to Ukraine in 2008 took me back to their homeland to learn more about the paradigm of their times in what was then Czarist Russia (1800s and early 1900s).

There are three themes I observed as I have spent the last few years researching my ancestral history, their struggles, and some of their unanswered questions. These themes are the ones that weave their way into my present life and connect deeply with my own heart.

The first theme is the births and deaths of babies and mothers, both before and during the revolution. Without birth control, many mothers birthed and buried child after

child and eventually “they themselves were bled empty of all strength to nurture” and they lay in their own graves. Thus the initial statement of my title, “Sadly there are no diaries of the Grandmothers,” remains unexplored. These still quiet tombs are yet to come to life.

The second theme is my ancestors’ response to the loss of property, finances, violence and hunger, as they watched everything they had worked to acquire and create, swallowed up in the anger and destruction of the powerful wave of revolution and anarchy. Their doctrines, theologies and beliefs often created conflicts and questions, the principle of Mennonite pacifism during periods of lawlessness being one of those dilemmas.

The third theme relates to a sense of unworthiness that is especially prevalent in the diary of Great-Grandfather Epp. There seems to be a big chasm between the perfection of God and the sinful sinner. Amidst the emphasis on grace and forgiveness the words sinfulness and unworthiness are frequent throughout his writings.

Two texts/journals of great-grandfathers, as well as attention to my night time dreams and experiential reflections, have been my road map to explore their paradoxical lives as Mennonites in Russia at the turn of the century. I have been enriched, enraged, and horrified by this journey and have felt both the gentle touch and overwhelming confusion of drops of shifting and healing deep within my ancient and present day wounds. My intense fears have lifted. I have experienced more passion and inner freedom to be true to that which is within me. My son, whose health challenges have kept me in a constant state of vigilance, tells me I have changed. I have been able to loosen my grip, and in small steps, open my hands, my arms, and my heart.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This kind of work is never done alone. Much birthing and nurturing is required. Dr. Evangeline Rand has served as my thesis advisor, my mentor and friend, and has provided endless hours of support. I am deeply grateful for her direction and encouragement, as well as her challenges to ever increasing levels of deep honesty.

I am also appreciative of the gift of a financial inheritance from my parents, Henry and Nettie Janzen nee Zacharias, as well as the generosity of my stepmother Sarah Janzen nee Wiens. She was an encourager of the development of my writing skills at a time when I lacked confidence. As they were always supportive of further education it seemed appropriate to use part of my inheritance in this manner.

The work of this thesis is possible and enriched by ancestors who wrote their stories down. For this passageway into the past I express my gratitude. For the following generations who preserved, translated and printed these resources and made them available to family to explore and learn of their family histories, I express my gratitude.

For the treasures of the oral history that has been passed through the generations as stories and memories, I say thank you. Even the stories kept secret add the unknown dimension of mystery. These are all gifts that keep on giving as they shape and mold us.

I express my gratitude to my daughter-in-law, Michelle Koop, who completed the technical aspects of inserting maps, photography and formatting. Thank you to Helen Pauls who became my birthing buddy in creating the many finishing touches, Ruth Friesen for editing, and Icon Experience Photography for printing the thesis. Thank you also to the many friends and family members who provided resources, support and interest in my work.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### **The Research Question**

What are the threads that weave through the ages and connect the wounding and questions of my ancestors to my own agonies and questions? Can this process heal ancestral wounds in multiple generations?

#### **Personal Interest and History of Texts**

I explored the lives of my ancestors to better know my own. I have used the diaries of two maternal great-grandfathers, Isaak Isaak Zacharias and Johann Johann Epp. The first text is Isaak Isaak's writings, which consist of 840 pages which he called, *Meine Lebensgeschichte*, (*My Life's Story*) covering the years 1868 – 1945. The text was written primarily in German Gothic script with some Russian phrases interspersed. Family members Nick and Agnes Peters, Trudy and Peter Epp of Telsec Business Center in Regina Saskatchewan, the University of Saskatchewan German Department, and youngest son George Zacharias, worked together to have it printed and distributed to family members. The first four journals of this German document were translated into English in 1995 by Ruth Heinrichs and Heinz Bergen. These translated pages covered Isaak Isaak's early life and included the turbulent years from 1914 to 1923, when he and his family were able to escape to Canada. It is these fifty pages that create one of the central themes for this thesis.

The second text is the personal diary of Johann Johann Epp who began writing on August 1<sup>st</sup> 1880, the day after his 28<sup>th</sup> birthday. His last entry was on December 17<sup>th</sup> 1919, three days before his death on December 20<sup>th</sup> 1919. On November 10<sup>th</sup> 1919, he made reference to a blue notebook which he said contained his writings between 1909 and November 1919. This notebook has never been found. Thankfully his sons were able to describe some of their memories of those years in the attachments that follow at the end of their father's diary.

The full text of Johann Johann's writing was left behind in Chortitza, South Russia, when the two Epp sons and their families fled to Canada. It was found by family member Hans Epp when he returned to the Epp home and saw this document amidst other books that had been strewn onto the floor. This relative was diligent in his rescue and preservation of this text and it travelled with him into his exile to Siberia, then to Germany and later to Canada until its final arrival into the hands of the immediate family. It was translated from the German into English with the help of family members Erika Koop and Lawrence Klippenstein, at the Heritage Centre in Winnipeg. This diary contains 170 pages of the writings of Johann Johann Epp, and about 30 pages of additional attachments written by son Johannes Epp, son Jacob Epp, daughter-in-law Katie Epp, and granddaughter Erika Koop.

My research has focused primarily, but not exclusively, on the years from 1914 to 1924 in South Russia. I have also reflected and taken note of certain night time dreams, as well as remembered experiences and stories told. Even without written records, the

voices of the grandmothers have been heard. I am telling these stories of loss, survival, life and death, while observing how their lives might be interwoven with my own.

This work has laid claim on me. Robert D. Romanyshyn quotes Jung's words written in Jung's own autobiography about retreating to the Tower of Bollingen:

“In the Tower at Bollingen it is as if one lived in many centuries simultaneously. The place will outlive me, and in its location and style it points backwards to things of long ago.” A little further on he adds “There is nothing here to disturb the dead,” indicating that in this place of souls, his ancestors are sustained as he goes about the work of answering “for them the questions that their lives once left behind.” For Jung it is the ancestors for whom the work is done. It is the dead of long ago, stretching down the long hallway of time, who ask us to linger in the moment and who solicit from us this turning.<sup>1</sup>

Romanyshyn says, “In every present moment, we live in the light and the shadow of the past, which we re-member in the context of a future we imagine and dream.”<sup>2</sup>

This work then is about attending to the unanswered questions of the ancestors and the importance of the backward glance which returns us to what still calls out to be done. As in the Orphic myth this is about the “recollection of what has been forgotten, left behind, neglected, marginalized, and unfinished.”<sup>3</sup>

This thesis is that backward glance as a type of homecoming to something that is perhaps known, but not known until remembered, remembering as alchemy for transformation and the healing of our wounds.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert D. Romanyshyn, *The Wounded Researcher* (New Orleans: Spring Journal Books, 2007), 63.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

## Choice of Methodology

“Research with soul in mind is re-search, a process of re-turning to and remembering what has already made its claim upon the researcher through his or her complex relations to the topic. Research as re-search is a searching again for what one has already felt as a call, perhaps long ago and now only dimly recalled...”<sup>4</sup>

The methodology that guided this study was historical research that included both personal stories set in a larger story of war and conflict. Ruth Meyers in *Clio’s Circle* encourages the exploration of the historical imagination, interwoven with past and current experiences of the unconscious. I invited the archetype of history, the muse of historical research, to help me bridge the gap between past and present.

I have used the word *archetype* as it is understood in Jungian psychology. In *Man and His Symbols*, Jung clarifies the relationship between instincts and archetypes:

What we properly call instincts are physiological urges, and are perceived by the senses. But at the same time, they also manifest themselves in fantasies and often reveal their presence only by symbolic images. These manifestations are what I call the archetypes. They are without known origins; and they reproduce themselves in any time or in any part of the world...<sup>5</sup>

The work of Robert Romanyshyn as described in *The Wounded Researcher, Research with Soul in Mind*, helped me embrace what it meant to do research with guidance from soul. Soul is described in the dictionary as, “The animating and vital principle in humans, credited with the faculties of thought, action, emotion and often

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., xi.

<sup>5</sup> Carl G.Jung, *Man and His Symbols* (New York: Doubleday & Company Inc.,1964), 69.

conceived as an immaterial entity; the spiritual nature of humans...”<sup>6</sup> The root word for soul is *sol* which means *whole*. I perceived that writing with the guidance of soul means that one writes from a place deep within and beyond. The realm of soul is timeless. The image that sometimes comes to my mind is the sense of a river of energy flowing in and through me.

The description on the back cover of Romanyshyn’s *The Wounded Researcher*, speaks to the process of how he informs his readers:

“Romanyshyn re-imagines depth psychology as a praxis of *research that keeps soul in mind*, in several ways at once: as a practice of mourning what has been lost in one’s experience; as an alchemical hermeneutics that consists in transference dialogues with one’s unconscious psyche; and as an ethics of self-examination by the researcher that acknowledges his or her wounded state in the complexes that underlie perception and judgment.”<sup>7</sup>

These and other writings provided support and direction on this journey. Dreams became invaluable in guiding me through this work.

Heuristic research provided another description of my process. Clark Moustakas wrote: “The heuristic inquiry begins with the internal search to discover, with an encompassing puzzlement, a passionate desire to know, a devotion and commitment to pursue a question that is strongly connected to one’s own identity and selfhood.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language 4<sup>th</sup> edition (Boston New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> Casey, Edward S. paragraph back cover, Romanyshyn, Robert D., *The Wounded Researcher* (New Orleans: Spring Journal Books, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> Clarke Moustakas, *Heuristic Research: Information Design Methodology and Application* (London: Sage Publications Inc., 1990),40.

There was a developing heuristic relationship that I experienced as I engaged myself in a type of therapy for the soul. My reflections, journals and the creation of a piece of art work became integral parts of my pathways of discovery and transformation as I let myself weave in and out and through the muse of ancestral history.

### **Overview of Early Anabaptist/Mennonite History**

Mennonite history dates back to the time of the Reformation when many reformers were attempting to implement reforms into what they perceived as corruption in the Roman Catholic Church. James Urry described the early beginnings of the Mennonites:

Mennonites are heirs to the Anabaptist movement of the Reformation and are named after a major Anabaptist leader, Menno Simons (ca.1496-1561). Anabaptists were so named because they rejected infant baptism, and rebaptized adults who indicated that they had accepted to live new lives of faith... In spite of severe persecution of its followers, Anabaptism spread rapidly across Europe and was particularly influential in areas of Switzerland, Austria, Germany and the Netherlands... Michael Sattler in 1527, at Schleithem Switzerland, helped crystallize many of the central principles of the movement. These included the stress on adult baptism as a sign of faith, the formation of separate communities, rejection of the oath and peaceful non-resistance.<sup>9</sup>

In *A People Apart*, Kathleen Keena writes:

Mennonite children through the decades have been told the story of Dirk Willems, who died demonstrating the Anabaptist ideals of pacifism and care of others. Anabaptist hunters were chasing him across a frozen river when one fell through the thin ice. Willems ran back and rescued the man who immediately arrested him. This act of mercy cost Dirk Willems his life. He was burned at the stake in

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<sup>9</sup> James Urry, *None But Saints* (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 2007), 47.

1569.<sup>10</sup>

Even as Anabaptists were only one of several fragmentations which were characteristic of the reformation, they became known as the most separate and most radical of the Protestant Reformation, resulting in major persecution that took the lives of many. (See Appendix B regarding permission to use maps by William Schroeder.)

Menno Simons was born in 1496 in Friesland, a province in the north of the Netherlands. He had spent his early youth in a Franciscan monastery. He took on his priestly



duties in the Roman Catholic Church at age twenty-eight and laid them down twelve years later. In 1536, he renounced his Roman ordination and became a preacher, teacher and leader in the Anabaptist movement. He was deeply loved and managed to gather and

<sup>10</sup> Kathleen Keena, *A People Apart* (Toronto: Somerville House Publishing, 1995), 10.

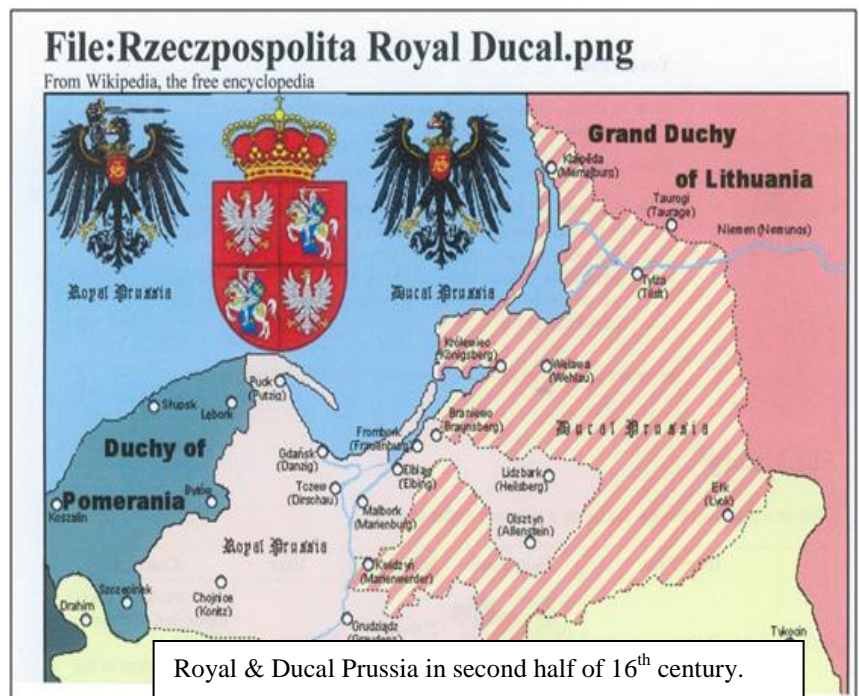


strengthen the various groups from Flanders to Friesland and Prussia. His followers became known as Menists or Mennonites.

Most Anabaptists were pacifists. Refusing to defend themselves they simply took their punishments, claiming that as Christ had died for them so they would give their lives for their belief in how they felt He was calling them to live. However in 1534 in Northern Germany and the Netherlands, some Anabaptists rejected non-resistance and attempted to take over the city of Munster by force in an effort to establish the kingdom of God here on earth. They were eventually destroyed, but this action reinforced the already popular belief that the Anabaptists were a dangerous group of people and persecution intensified. It is estimated that up to 2,500 Anabaptists were killed during the period from 1530 to 1575.

Frank Epp wrote:

The followers of the movement, as it had been refashioned by Menno Simons, were totally peaceful, shunning the sword even in self-defense. They were generally obedient to the overlords, holding back only when an oath or other acts of ultimate loyalty



were demanded,... however the Anabaptists, and especially the peaceful Menists had unleashed an ideological force that frightened the establishment...through their non-resistance they confounded their enemies.<sup>11</sup>

Persecution continued particularly in the region of Flanders, Belgium, (see map page 7). Charles the V placed a generous bounty on Menno Simon's head and so he spent the rest of his life in hiding, moving from place to place in secret. Many Mennonite families found some refuge in the port city of Danzig and regions of Royal Prussia which was later part of the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth, (see map page 8).

Rudy Friesen, in his book *Building on the Past*, calls this area the "melting pot of various Anabaptist groups."<sup>12</sup> It was here that they established their ethnic identity. They spoke the Low German language in their work and the Dutch language in their churches. The descendents of these Mennonites later became the colonists who migrated to South Russia in the seventeen hundreds. My ancestors were among these colonists.

### **Theology of the Early Anabaptists/Mennonites**

The doctrines of the early Anabaptists were similar to other Protestant Christian theologies and centered on the belief in a God who was omnipotent, (all powerful), omniscient, (all knowing), omnipresent, (everywhere present) and called, *God the Father*. He was considered to be infinite, just, and characterized pure agape love, manifested in his only begotten son Jesus Christ. Jesus was a model and example of how to live and

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<sup>11</sup> Frank Epp, *Mennonites in Canada* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1974), 34-35.

<sup>12</sup> Rudy Friesen, *Building on the Past* (Printed in Canada by the Friesen family, 2004), 21.

the Saviour of all humankind. They believed that without Jesus there could be no salvation.

Retired Mennonite Pastor Rudy Daniels states that the four pillars of the Mennonite religion are: believer's baptism (on confession of faith), pacifism/non-resistance (refusal to bear arms), priesthood of all believers (none hierarchical), and service to one another.

Walter Klaassen from Conrad Grebel College in Waterloo Ontario compiled a collection of Primary Source writings from the time of the reformation into a book called, *Anabaptism in Outline*. In his introduction he wrote that even on basic principles of Anabaptism such as non-resistance, there was not unanimity. There were writings of scholars, artisans and peasants with varying perceptions and understandings. Many different sects were formulating their own expressions of what they believed to be the true doctrine. The constant however was the solid belief that the Bible was the true, literal, word of God, though interpretations varied.

Klaassen writes further:

Anabaptists saw reality in terms of two distinct worlds, sharply separated and clearly distinguishable from each other. Like other Christian groups in the sixteenth century, they believed that they had the truth and all others were in error. Not only that, but the sixteenth-century mentality held that one could not be slightly in error. If one was in error, one was totally in error. Anabaptists conceived of only two realms of being, the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. Truth was on God's side; error on Satan's.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Walter Klaassen, ed., *Anabaptism in Outline* (Kitchener: Herald Press, 1981), 302.

There did not seem to be a continuum or shades or degrees of good and evil. This often manifested into a type of piety and judgment of others. The perception that only ones' own truths were accurate clearly affected their relationships with other Christians. Klaassen expressed compassion for this attitude for he acknowledged that it must have been very difficult to have good relations with people who were using coercion and violence to squelch the beliefs that challenged the traditional. The Roman Catholic Church was facing major confusion with the changes and upheavals caused by the reformation.

The experience of persecution and suppression impacted Anabaptist theology creating an emphasis on eschatology. The burnings and tortures of the Anabaptists were interpreted by many as a sign of the end times, producing much emphasis on the future kingdom of God and the return of Christ. The present was difficult but the future kingdom held their hope. It is not uncommon for people to tire of the complexities that seem to make life a battlefield, thereby creating a belief in a type of beginning and end. Christianity began with the birth of Christ and much eschatological thinking equated the end as the judgment day when the redeemed would be taken to an eternal place of joy. Mennonites carried a strong belief that if they endured today, there would be the reward of eventual release from all trials and tribulations.

Their response to persecution was to be completely passive. Menno Simons wrote passionately in a paper called "Foundations" in 1539:

Our weapons are not weapons with which cities and countries may be destroyed, walls and gates broken down, and human blood, shed in torrents like water. But they are weapons with which the spiritual kingdom of the devil is destroyed and the wicked principle in man's soul is broken down, flinty hearts broken, hearts that have never been sprinkled with the heavenly dew of the Holy Word. We have and know no other weapons besides this, the Lord knows, even if we should be torn into a thousand pieces, and if as many false witnesses rose up against us as are spears of grass in the fields, and grains of sand upon the seashore. Once again, Christ is our fortress; patience our weapon of defense; the Word of God our sword; and our victory a courageous, firm, unfeigned faith in Jesus Christ.<sup>14</sup>

These are strong poetic words written and spoken by the reformer who inspired many to follow the paths being blazed by Anabaptists in those early days. My own genealogy goes back to this time in history; research done by Allan Peters for our trip to Ukraine in 2008 traces my Mennonite ancestry back to 1584, which is only approximately 20 years after the death of Menno Simons. Our families were Mennonites from the beginning of a fledgling religion. These relatives might very well have been carrying the embodied memory of persecutions and burnings that were prevalent during that time, as well as having fire in their bellies in regards to the passion for what they believed.

### **The Mennonite Trek from Prussia/Netherlands to South Russia**

Travelling to Ukraine in 2008 and studying my Mennonite Heritage became my opportunity to better understand the trek our ancestors had made from Prussia and the Netherlands to what was then South Russia. This was the land where they had lived for

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 276.

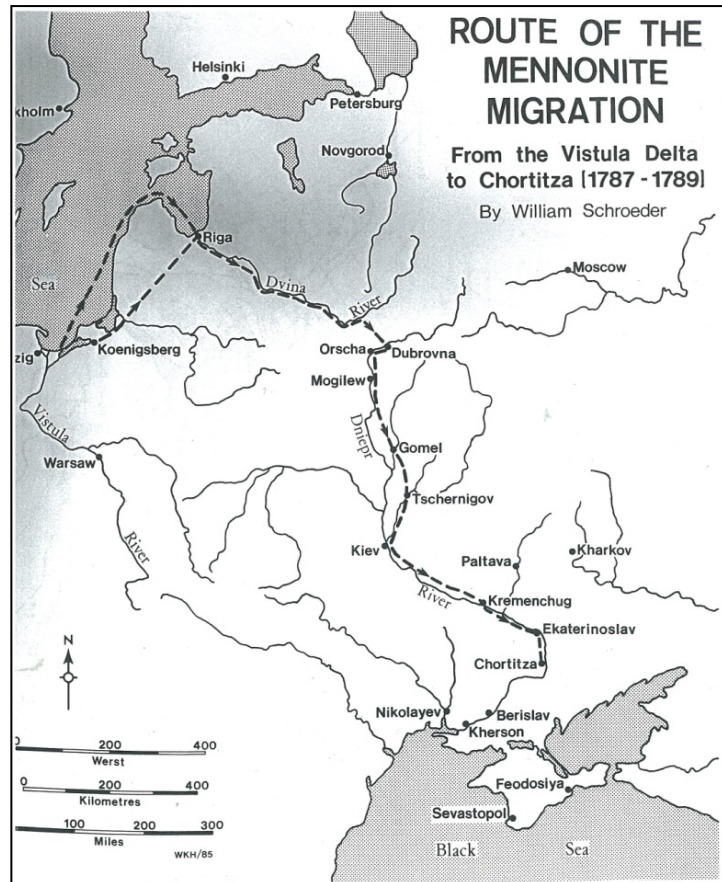
about 150 years. Waves of Mennonites began to come to this area in response to invitations from Catherine the Great, the Czarina of Russia, in the late 1700s. Although they enjoyed considerable economic success in the Netherlands, there were still some major restrictions put on them. They were barred from citizenship, they were not allowed to build churches, and after 1786 they were also restricted from buying any new land. Without citizenship, churches, and land, they again began to feel the sense of persecution and restriction. Without land they were unable to feed their families and so began their search for a new home.

In 1763 and again in 1780, Catherine the Great issued a decree to European colonists to settle in Russia. She had also become aware of the dissatisfaction among the Prussian Mennonites and in 1786 she dispatched her special envoy George Von Trappe, in hope of enticing the Mennonites with promises of free land and tax exemptions for ten years. Rudy Friesen in his book *Building on the Past* said: “Catherine looked for prospective settlers, reliable people, preferably those of Germanic stock like herself.”<sup>15</sup> She wanted agrarian people who would cultivate and settle the undeveloped lands of South Russia. These disciplined hard working people from Prussia fit her criteria. For many Mennonites it seemed like an answer to their prayers for a new home and they excitedly sent two delegates, Hoepfner and Bartsch to examine this invitation. After surveying the land and negotiating with the Czarina’s delegation, they returned with glowing recommendations to respond affirmatively.

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<sup>15</sup> Friesen, *Building On The Past*, 22.

My ancestors were part of both the first wave of colonists in 1788 and the second wave four years later. Not all was as promised and there was much disillusionment and anger in those early years of the first settlement. It was somewhat like the biblical story of Moses, who struggled to lead his people into the land of milk and honey and they were often angry and discouraged and blamed Moses. The first Mennonites in South Russia turned on the delegates who had encouraged them to come to this land and accused them of betraying them and using this as an opportunity to advance themselves. It became apparent much later that more guilt lay at the feet of Potemkin, Czarina's General, who reneged on the original promise. However the Colonists turned on their fellow Mennonites. Bartsch, even though he felt he had done nothing wrong, asked for forgiveness, but Hoepfner clung to statements of innocence and consequently landed in



jail for a period of time. This is yet another story that calls into question their pacifism in the day to day encounters that they had with one another.

Rudy Friesen in his book *Building on the Past* wrote: “Although Mennonites were outwardly non-resistant, they were not adverse to conflicts within their communities.”<sup>16</sup> There were religious conflicts arising between two sects of Mennonites from Prussia, the Flemish and the Friesian, one much more conservative than the other. There were struggles between the landowners and the landless, the poor and the rich. The landless were particularly powerless in the Mennonite Commonwealth as they were not given the right to vote. There were also varying opinions on the principle of pacifism. All of this is not surprising for any group of people living closely in community and small villages. Conflicts, power struggles, varying perceptions of life can hardly be avoided. The important piece of community living is about finding ways to honor one another and build relationships. Relationship building, while both wonderful and challenging, is what this group of Mennonites attempted to do, something at which they both succeeded and failed in varying proportions.

Another characteristic of this group of people was their work ethic. Most Mennonites were excessively hard working and when the rich fertile soils of Kherson were not given as promised, they began the complex work of breaking up the soils of the steppes in the Chortiza area along the Dnieper River. The land had deep, wooded ravines cutting through it and across the river there were wild open steppes. It was an ominous

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 23.



task to develop this land. The first wave of settlers suffered many losses but they persevered and as the years passed, little villages that were full of activity began to spring up along the beautiful wide Dnieper River. Soon another large wave of Mennonites left Prussia and settled in the area of Molotschna. This area was much more user friendly and its wide-open terrain with two meters of topsoil invited cultivation. My father used to say “Russia could feed the whole planet with its incredible soil. The breadbasket of the world,” he called it. In the coming years the population of Mennonites in South Russia grew to 100,000.

It was a time of building and growing into a way of life that spanned over a century. By the middle of the 1800s, in spite of all the struggles, it had come to be the land of milk and honey for many of my ancestors. It became a wonderful place where there were resources to feed their families, freedom of religion, with opportunity for alternate service to the military and the privilege of self-government.

The main focus of this paper is not the glory years, although aspects of that time are included, but rather those years when the walls of freedom, success, and prosperity came crumbling down, leaving a country with rich resources in ruins and its people starving and dying.

The agonies of my ancestors took place primarily between the years 1914 to 1924, with 1923 and 1924 being the years of their escape to Canada. Many family members perished during these years, but others were among the approximately 20,000 Mennonite refugees who were fortunate enough, and chose to flee the country and travel to North

America in the early 1920s. By 1929 the Iron Curtain had come down and all doors out of Russia were closed. The purges and suffering intensified during Stalin's reign when most of the other 80,000 Mennonites were among the millions who perished. Estimates of the number of deaths that were inflicted by the cold brutality of Stalin range from at least 15 to 20 million, with some estimates going as high as 45 to 60 million. People were needlessly starved to death, many were executed for pale political offences and millions more deported to labour camps in the frozen north of Siberia known as the Russian Gulag, never to be seen again. There was an intentional plan to eliminate the *kulak* class of people. Kulaks were people who had owned land, had employees, or held any leadership roles. They were labeled *exploiters*. Large numbers of Mennonites fell under that umbrella and perished. There were however some who escaped with the defeated, retreating German army at the end of World War II, many simply walking and walking and walking, until they reached Poland or Germany. For the most part my familial ancestors were spared these purges, however they suffered through the horrors of the 1<sup>st</sup> World War, the Bolshevik Revolution and anarchy, yet another form of revolution where bandits, disgruntled peasants and the angry poor began to pour out their wrath on any form of authority, be that the government of the time, the police force, or the *kulaks*. An epidemic of typhus crept into the chaos and confusion and took thousands of lives.

Travelling to Ukraine in 2008, to what had been the home of my ancestors, enlivened my longing to connect with their experiences and filled me with passion to know and understand their lives. We received guidance, direction, and access to a full

range of resources from our tour guides who had been researching and facilitating this Mennonite Heritage Cruise for 20 years. We had already delved deeply into all the recommended reading and pictures of the experiences of my ancestors were beginning to come into some measure of focus and clarity. Resources that were not on their list included the writings of my own family members, texts which have already been referred to and described. These writings were central to this work. Sadly there were no diaries written by my grandmothers. Knowledge of their lives came to me filtered through the words of the great-grandfathers, my own memories, night time dreams and my own experience of being a woman.

## **Chapter II**

### **MY EXPERIENCE OF THE LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **Introduction**

I have written a selective and personalized literature review, which is in keeping with my style of research, a style that honors my inner longing to understand my own experiences, as well as those of others. The literature was an interface of both the external and internal. Therefore I am describing my journey and some of my responses to certain aspects of my research. I have chosen seven categories that are as follows:

1. The Familial Oral Tradition
2. The Life Stories
3. Anabaptist/Mennonite Theology Resources
4. Further Theological Engagement
5. Mennonite History in Russia
6. The Archetype of War
7. Summary

#### **The Familial Oral Tradition**

From an early age I knew that my ancestors had survived some terrible things. The Revolution, Makhno (the Ukrainian anarchist) and his brutal bandits, who terrorized the Mennonites immediately following the Revolution, pacifism, escaping to Canada - these were phrases I was familiar with, but I had never really allowed myself to enter into the depths of what really happened to them. My father only remembered the horror and

fear and preferred not to talk about it. My mother was only two years old when they travelled to Canada. My father's mother never spoke of Russia; she just looked sad. My father's brother spoke only of the evils of Makhno. If I asked about his experience of staying behind in Russia, his eyes glassed over and then he quickly flipped back to the exploits of Makhno.

But my maternal grandfather Dietrich Zacharias, second eldest son of Isaak Isaak and Katherina, told endless stories of history, the beautiful estate of Zachariasfeld, the horrors of the Revolution, and the anarchy that followed, but I didn't listen. He knew both the glory days and the days of horror. At that time the arrogance of my youth had not yet learned the value of all that had gone before me and its impact on my own being. My regrets are massive and I would give much to have even an hour with this grandfather who knew so much about these times. Now all these years after his death, I have searched literature to help me learn much that my grandfather could have told me, had I listened.

### **The Life Stories**

In all the reading and studying, I was repeatedly drawn to the human experience in the bigger historic picture. The literature told the story that propelled me into the lives of those I was researching. Even the infamous Nestor Makhno became a study of the person, as I explored how the events of his life might have shaped him into the murderous role of being a revolutionary anarchist. While studying Czar Nicholas the II, it was his life, his family, his fragile son, his successes, his failures, the tragic murder of

the family that drew my interest. Similarly, the personal texts of the great-grandfathers provided vast scopes of history, but also gave me a picture of how they lived, their personalities, and how they responded to the events of their lives.

Another resource was a diary of my husband's grandfather, which also related to this period of history and provided insights into Mennonite traditions and theology. He clearly expressed his opinions and beliefs around pacifism, self-defense, etc. in his writings. Both this grandfather and my great-grandfather Epp were pastors/teachers and their diaries have much to inform me of their theology. Both expressed strong feelings about things that were acceptable and unacceptable. It was interesting to explore how these often rigid beliefs have influenced my life, perhaps becoming part of numerous psychological complexes that transferred themselves into compulsions of a need to be perfect and to live a completely pure life - a challenging, impossible task!

The individual life stories, like *Hard Passages* by Arthur Kroeger, *A Family Torn Apart* by Justina D. Neufeld, and many others, tell the heart traumas of families separated and murdered. These were the stories that helped me expand my understanding beyond my own ancestors into the experiences of other families. This literature pulled my heart and my mind into alignment.

### **Anabaptist/Mennonite Theology Resources**

Access to a book called *Anabaptism in Outline*, a collection of original writings of many reformers of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, was invaluable. It was a privilege to be able to go back to that turbulent time and get a sense of how the theology of my history developed

amidst the radical reformation. Especially meaningful for me were the actual words of Menno Simons. His writings were full of conviction and passion and it is easy to see how people would have followed after him and been willing to die for their new found belief. I could also see how easily their theology became polarized, where things were either black or white and that helped me understand why we might often be threatened by another's belief, because in that polarity there is no room for variations.

This literature also provided information on the long-standing debate on pacifism/non-resistance, a principle that has had difficulty finding a peaceful resting place. These writings provided a picture of how the principle of pacifism grew and developed to become an important aspect of the Mennonite tradition. It was not part of the early beginnings of the movement. *Anabaptism in Outline* portrays the variety and color of the many aspects of the Anabaptist movement.

Moving into the 20<sup>th</sup> century and researching Mennonite Theology in more recent years, I was directed to a book called *The Limits of Perfection*, which is a conversation with J. Lawrence Burkholder, a Mennonite theologian/pastor, who clearly supported pacifism, but struggled with its many complexities. In 1947 he went to China and became part of the United Nations offices in Shanghai. He returned to the United States to continue his studies. His world experiences and life in China had challenged some of his theological perceptions and he chose to write his thesis on some of these ambiguities. It was rejected in 1950. 'Inadmissible' was stamped on the front of his writings.

Burkholder was critical of the frequent polarization and piety of the Mennonite tradition. His challenges centered on the need to dwell with the ambiguities of life, complexities that he felt could not be dealt with from the point of sin and guilt. Ambiguous situations juxtapose a combination of conflicting realities and have many layers of complexities. He felt that often “Mennonites used power while exalting weakness.”<sup>17</sup> He wrote that truth was a mixture of contributory claims and felt that a closed system could not work. He expressed how easily we can slip into moral perfectionism as a way of avoiding ambiguity. His challenge to the Mennonite people was to realize that we are part of a world system and that we share the guilt and responsibility for corporate evil.<sup>18</sup> We cannot isolate ourselves with the illusion that we can somehow make ourselves pure.

He passed away on June 24<sup>th</sup> 2010, leaving behind a legacy of contributions to theological perspectives, to peace and justice, continually building bridges into the world.

### **Further Theological Engagement**

The American Heritage Dictionary describes theology firstly as: “The study of the nature of God and religious truth; rational inquiry into religious questions.”<sup>19</sup>

Dr. Earle Sharam, the Dean at St. Stephen’s College wrote in the Course Outline for students enrolled in his *Introduction to Theology Class SSC511* in May, 2010: “When

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<sup>17</sup> Rodney J. Sawatsky and Scott Holland, ed., *The Limits of Perfection, a Conversation with J. Lawrence Burkholder* (Newton: Institute of Anabaptist and Mennonite Studies and Pandora Press, 1993), 37.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 58 paraphrased.

<sup>19</sup> *The American Heritage Dictionary*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition (Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006).



it comes to God, we literally do not know what we are talking about. The trick is saying something meaningful about that in respect of which we really ought to remain silent.”<sup>20</sup>

And yet the task of the theologian is to speak of God.

The experience of this class journey with Dr. Sharam and the many theologians of both past and present, enriched me and helped prepare me for this work. At the same time it also triggered again my sadness around the small presence of the feminine. While reading our first resource text, I reacted in frustration to 376 pages written by and about male theologians and only 13 pages, *The Epilogue*, where I heard a woman’s voice. I felt the same sting of exclusion that I have so often felt and sadness whelmed up in me as I thought of the first line in the title of this thesis, *Sadly There Are No Diaries Of The Grandmothers*. Where are the voices of the grandmothers? I thought of Mary Magdalene, whose important role in the life of Jesus continues to be minimized. Even after the Gospel of Mary Magdalene has been translated, printed, published, made available for all, her absence in theological discussions and Sunday morning worship services screams out at me.

Miroslav Volf, Director of the Yale Center for Faith and Culture, author of many books, explored our identity, otherness and reconciliation in his book, *Exclusion and Embrace*. “Clearly, when half of the human race (women) is consistently deemed

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<sup>20</sup> Earle Sharam, *Introduction to Theology Course Outline* (May 3-7, 2010).

inferior and frequently mistreated, we have a problem of major proportion.”<sup>21</sup> He also addressed other forms of exclusion; ethnic otherness, ethnic cleansing, violence, deception, oppression.

Volf wrote of feeling caught between two betrayals: “...divided between the God who delivers the needy and the God who abandons the crucified, between the demand to bring about justice for the victims and the call to embrace the perpetrator.”<sup>22</sup> His writings reflect his ability to struggle with the complex ambiguities described earlier in reference to the work of Lawrence Burkholder.

Miroslav Volf experienced oppression in his own life. *The End of Memory – Remembering Rightly in a Violent World*, described much of his journey with the abuse he experienced when he was forced into the military of then-Communist Yugoslavia. He was subjected to long hours, days, months, (a year in total) of interrogation and threats. *The End of Memory* explored his journey with the challenges of remembering truthfully and finding pathways to redemption and forgiveness.

He wrote of how easily hate and revenge can take hold of us and create distortions in our remembering. At the same time he agreed with Elie Wiesel (writer and holocaust survivor) who spoke of the redeeming power of memory. Freud also advocated the necessity of returning to painful memories. Volf however wrote that merely repeating the memory could not solve it, adding that remembering must also be interpreted and

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<sup>21</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace, A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 167.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 9

integrated into our lives. He further cautioned his readers to avoid becoming frozen in the traumatic memory thereby allowing it to become interwoven into our identity where it can create bitterness. In his postscript he described his imagined reconciliation with the Captain who persecuted him and how this process helped him experience a type of redemptive release.

Miroslav also edited a collection of essays that honor respected theologian Jurgen Moltmann in a book called, *The Future of Theology*. Born and raised in Germany, Moltmann, as a member of the German army was captured in 1945 and became a prisoner of war. It was during those years that he became aware of the horrors of the German death camps. He feared for his country as he felt that all would pay dearly for committing these atrocities. He became deeply depressed. Although his childhood was void of any religious teachings, those years of inhumane suffering planted agonizing questions in his heart and triggered an intense search for God and the meaning of life. After his release he began to study theology. Karl Barth, Martin Luther, Bonhoeffer and especially Hegel influenced Moltmann's theology of hope and the subsequent book he wrote with that title.

He became a theologian who gave much of his life to preserving human dignity and wrote that it was the duty of Christianity to stand for and protect the dignity of human beings. His suffering and watching others being mistreated framed his theology. Both his book *On Human Dignity* and *The Power of the Powerless* address this very important issue. Studying his writings in the book *The Power of the Powerless*, I was

particularly drawn to the chapter/sermon related to maintaining the human dignity of the disabled. Always an important topic to me, especially because of my intense love for our own disabled sons, I simply inhaled his words and found myself repeatedly saying “Yes” at the end of each paragraph that I read.

I believe that *liberation of oneself* comes before mutual acceptance. We can only accept other people if we have first found ourselves. We can only accept other people if we have freed ourselves from everything that oppresses and estranges us, and from everything that makes us small and ugly and worthless in our own eyes.<sup>23</sup>

He further expanded on the commandment to love others as ourselves and wrote that self-love must come first and love of neighbor second. He wrote that self-love was not selfishness; rather selfishness was another form of self-hate. He saw self-hate as pure destruction and self-love as the “power of heaven,” inviting us to “search for our own hidden value.”<sup>24</sup>

He wrote that liberation of the handicapped must come from both the handicapped and the non handicapped and described the great burden that the prejudices of the strong and capable convey to the disabled when they judge them to be inferior. Sadly the disabled come to believe this falsehood.

This principle is at work in multiple situations when we believe that our religion is superior to another, when we feel superior or inferior because of the color of our skin, the country we call home, our gender, our sexual orientation, our economic status, our

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<sup>23</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Power of the Powerless* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1983), 137.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, paraphrased 138

educational status. The list is long. I thought about my ancestors who experienced both pride and humiliation throughout their years in South Russia. Pride in their many accomplishments, sometimes feeling superior to other ethnic groups, and humiliation as they were robbed and beaten and as they watched everything they had attained and built disappear into the flames of destruction and hate.

### **Mennonite History in Russia**

In 2007, I was preparing myself to take the Mennonite Heritage Cruise to Ukraine, the home of my ancestors during the time when this area was part of Russia. The recommended literature covered a major span of information about the history of Mennonites in Russia. On the top of the resource list was a book called *None But Saints* by James Urry. Beside this title was written “strongly recommended.” James Urry is a non-Mennonite Professor of Social Anthropology who wrote his initial doctoral thesis on the history of Mennonites in Russia. After doing research of available literature at that time, he stated that most Mennonite scholars focused heavily on their theology and their Anabaptist roots. He found very little information that helped him unravel the complexities of nineteenth-century life in Russia. In 2007 in the second printing of the 1989 version of *None But Saints*, he described his book as being written about “Mennonite society and culture, about social transformation, the changing nature of

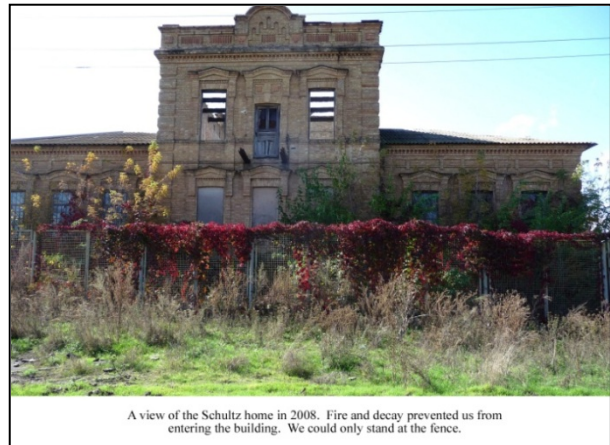
religion, and the material life of a vibrant and fascinating people.”<sup>25</sup> This book provided valuable information about Mennonite Life in Russia for the 100 years from 1789 – 1889 and the development of the *Mennonite Commonwealth*. Urry did not cover the years when things began to crumble, which was the primary focus of this thesis, however the background and history of these earlier times were important to expand my understanding of their lives.

Rudy Friesen, a Winnipeg architect, has summarized the dramatic journey of my agrarian ancestors from modest means to a prosperous society and then its collapse. He researched and compiled over 700 pages of the architecture of Mennonite buildings and factories. He has helped countless people find the homes and villages of their ancestors.

*Building on the Past* explored the landscape of what remains of Mennonite villages, estates, cities, colonies, forestry camps. Of special importance to me was his assistance

with finding the once beautiful Schultz home, the place where the Zacharias family found refuge during the turbulence of late 1918, when they fled their home searching for a place to hide.

His description was like a virtual tour of



A view of the Schultz home in 2008. Fire and decay prevented us from entering the building. We could only stand at the fence.

this expansive house. In 2008 we could only stand at the high fence and view the outside as the decay of this once lavish home made it unsafe to enter.

<sup>25</sup> James Urry, *None But Saints* (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 2007), 19.

David Rempel and his daughter Cornelia Rempel Carlson share authorship of a valuable resource book called *A Mennonite Family in Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union, 1789 – 1923*. They present both family history and scholarly research on the story of the Mennonites in Russia. The details and stages of the Russian Revolution were of great assistance for me as I was piecing the stories in my own family personal texts with the historic events. David Rempel presents clarity of the many fighting factions, layers and stages of both the revolution and the period of anarchy that followed. He addressed the principle of pacifism in turbulent, lawless times and presents his own struggle with how to respond to the violence of their time.

These resources, plus an unpublished study called *Mennonites, A Mystical People*, written by Edmonton lawyer Walter Braul, helped me to frame the Mennonite story into the larger picture of the history of those times. The internet was also an important part of gathering information and filling in the puzzle pieces that the personal texts/diaries did not cover.

### **The Archetype of War**

*A Terrible Love of War* by James Hillman, shook my being. I grappled with the question of the power of the incredible magnet that sucks society into a *terrible love of war*. I experienced huge resistance as I studied this book. The first chapter title made me cringe. “War is Normal!” My naive, pacifist, Mennonite self screamed out that it cannot possibly be normal. It cannot possibly be our eternal life sentence to be forever killing one another. I wanted to have much more hope for humanity than an everlasting destiny

of murder and death. My resistance grew bigger as I studied Hillman's chapter entitled "Religion is War." Walking through my inner conflicts and upon reflection, I had to acknowledge that many wars have been triggered by our intolerance of other religions. Hillman explained that a monotheistic psychology is dedicated to unity which often denies room for differences. He further wrote that if we were to consider the events of the Bible as legends, myths and stories, exemplary lessons for living, perhaps then we could open ourselves to imaginative speculation. Rather than clinging to our beliefs, we might find the courage to dwell with that collective force that keeps pulling us into war. At one point in the literature he wrote that, "religion does not want war to stop, nor does belief want a psychological awakening."<sup>26</sup>

This study of Hillman's work challenged my perceptions. I had always felt that a strong belief system could only be good. His work opened my consciousness to the shadow aspect of clinging to my beliefs and needing to make others wrong in order to feel better about myself. Again I trembled. Where is the self-acceptance and self-love that Jürgen Moltmann speaks of?

### **Summary**

These reflections became bridges, opening me into my methodology and my desire to do historical, ancestral research and writing with soul in mind. This required that I move into my imagination, into my unconscious, into dream work, into body work, with the intention to let the work lead me. In some ways it felt like falling into an abyss.

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<sup>26</sup> James Hillman, *A Terrible Love of War* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), 214.



The process of letting go filled me with uncertainty, while at the same time I felt a sense of the absolute 'rightness' of this direction. Robert Romanyshyn in *The Wounded Researcher*, Ruth Meyers in *Clio's Circle* and Dr. Evangeline Rand guided and encouraged this pathway. I knew that the unfinished stories of my ancestors longed for expression and my heartbeat quickened at the thought of perhaps becoming a channel for that expression.

This process helped me to move into a subjective mode and to allow my own unconscious to connect with the unconscious of the work. This often created a type of alchemical hermeneutic experience where there were moments of synchronicity.

The literature was the springboard that launched me from the historic into the theological, the psychological, the individual and collective unconscious, and ultimately into the lives of the people themselves. I have noted that all the literature that I chose took me in the direction of my life long journey to understand people, their experiences, their lives and the things that create their destinies. Of course all literature also falls short of providing that as it can only be but a piece of the huge mosaic puzzle and mystery of life. The value received from all my research was a rich picture that nurtured my imagination and guided me through the process of returning to that which *was* and following the threads into the *now*.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### **Returning to Ancestral Grief**

It seemed logical that the deep longing to connect to the lives of my ancestors and the desire to find the threads that weave through time into my own life would lead me to the methodology of doing ancestral historical research, as well as a broader related historical study. That was where I began. It was important for me to research the origin/history and key principles of Anabaptists/Mennonites, the larger Russian history through the era of the reigning Czars, the Bolsheviks, Communism, and the history of my Dutch ancestors in Russia. James Hollis says that “the story of history is the story of the individual.”<sup>27</sup> I felt a tacit knowledge of the interwoven tapestry of the historic and the individual stories. I studied the books already referred to in the literature review, and the great-grandfathers’ journals, those core texts. I planned the journey back to visit ancestral landmarks in Ukraine, which was South Russia at the time my ancestors lived there. Standing in the places where they were born, grew up, worked, raised their families and eventually fled, made their experience much more tangible and real. It was there that I began to feel the deep connections and where I came to know that my research had to go deeper into both the psychological and the workings of soul. Thomas Moore in *Care of the Soul* writes, “To the soul, memory is more important than planning,

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<sup>27</sup> James Hollis, *Creating a Life, Finding Your Individual Path* (Toronto: Inner Life Books, 2001), 34.

art more compelling than reason, and love more fulfilling than understanding. We care for the soul solely by honoring its expressions, by giving it time and opportunity to reveal itself...”<sup>28</sup> My supervisor introduced me to authors Ruth Meyers and Robert Romanyshyn and something within me saw a glimpse of the missing link in my longing to connect with that which came before me. I immediately identified with the title of Romanyshyn’s book, *The Wounded Researcher*. Truly I am that *wounded researcher* longing for healing and wholeness for both my ancestors and myself and perhaps my descendants.

Romanyshyn quotes Greg Mogenson who said, “Twentieth century Oedipal man has forgotten his mythical forbears and is haunted by what he has failed to mourn.”<sup>29</sup>

I have felt deeply the grief of the centuries, the shame and the losses that created gaping wounds that have probably never been fully realized, nor fully mourned, but rather pressed into secret crevices, forced underground into the deep shadows of darkness. It is a darkness that longs for the embrace of compassion, if not by those who experienced the losses, then by the upcoming generations who carry *all* in the cells of their own being. For the ancestors during those turbulent years, there was no time or tools to engage in the process of healing their wounds. Like the restricting arms of an octopus, the need to survive grabbed every piece of their lives. Only later after the crisis was long over, was there any possibility of processing the experiences and most never did. Many took the traumas of brutality, death and rape to their graves often keeping their shame

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<sup>28</sup> Thomas Moore, *Care of the Soul* (New York: Harper Perennial, Harper Collins Publishing, 1992), 304.

<sup>29</sup> Robert D. Romanyshyn, *The Wounded Researcher, Research with Soul in Mind* (New Orleans: Spring Journal Books, 2007), 3.

from even their closest loved ones. Now many descendants look back to uncover and dwell with the wounds.

Marion Woodman says in the *Ravaged Bridegroom*:

We have to come back to the consciousness of our own suffering. To shut off the pain is to shut off the soul. Only when we can consciously articulate the question which the unconscious is forever formulating can the answer come. The answer is in asking the question.<sup>30</sup>

My soul was willing to go to those places and search my ancestral and Mennonite history to find those places calling for healing. It was not enough for me to debate basic principles of what it meant to be a Mennonite. I only needed to dwell with these principles to understand the implications on the lives of my ancestors and how that filtered down to me. I pondered how their stance on pacifism impacted their responses to the violence being heaped upon them during the revolution and the anarchy that followed. I questioned the great enigma of pacifism and wondered whether it holds mysterious power or if it is simply foolish idealism? Whether it suppresses violence or kindles it? These ponderings found their way in and out and through the stories of families as they struggled to live peacefully with their fellow human beings. I was in search of those lost forgotten pieces of soul. Shamans do the work of retrieving these aspects of soul for they know that without that work people perish. When I read Romanyshyn's writings about doing historic research with soul in mind, my heart beat quickened and I grasped at the possibility that perhaps the work I was doing could become part of the Shaman's journey

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<sup>30</sup> Marion Woodman, *The Ravaged Bridegroom* (Toronto: Inner City Books, 1990), 132.

to retrieve both aspects of my soul and perhaps aspects of the souls of my ancestors and maybe even my descendants.

### **Historical Research with Imagination**

Ruth Meyers speaks of doing historical research with imagination:

Historians who dare to embrace unconscious experiences trust their intuition. They follow the apparently strange and unusual paths to research where intuition leads. These historians readily embrace imagination as a path to historical discovery.<sup>31</sup>

She adds that those who lack historical imagination view the world only through the lens of the present, which she says is like being “historically unconscious.” She further describes the “vein of gold” that can be found when one investigates the historical imagination and the relationship between history, depth psychology, and the imagination.

It was important for me to differentiate between fantasy and imagination. Dr. Evangeline Rand in her book *Recovering From Incest, Imagination and the Healing Process*, says: “The imagination is the real and literal power of soul to create images – compared with fantasy, which means a mere conceit, something ridiculous and insubstantial.”<sup>32</sup> She quotes Jung and continues:

Imagination is the *active* evocation of (inner) images *secundum naturam*, an authentic feat of thought or ideation, which does not spin aimless and groundless fantasies into the blue – does not, that is to say, just play with its objects, but tries

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<sup>31</sup> Ruth Meyer, *Clio's Circle, Entering the Imaginal World of Historians* (New Orleans: Spring Journal Books, 2007), xii.

<sup>32</sup> Evangeline Kane, *Recovering From Incest* (Boston: Sigo Press, 1989), 25.

to grasp the inner facts and portray them in images true to their nature. This activity is an *opus*, a work.<sup>33</sup>

Ruth Meyer in *Clio's Circle* speaks of the spirit of Hermes: "The desire to create a fluid work that is open-ended and liberating to the imagination is in keeping with the Spirit of Hermes, the god who gives his name to hermeneutic method."<sup>34</sup> Meyers goes on to quote Ginette Paris as she makes the differentiation between Apollonian communication and Hermetic communication.

Whereas Apollonian communication carries a single meaning – to be straight and clear like an arrow – communication under the sign of Hermes borrows from twisted pathways, shortcuts, parallel routes; it makes round trips and ends up sometimes in meaningful dead ends. The paths of Hermes are multiple.<sup>35</sup>

Romanyshyn seems to concur with Meyer when he says that:

Reverie of origins suggests there are no lines that lead in a direct way from the idea of a project to its completion. Nor are there any straight lines from the origins to the beginning of a work, or, indeed, any clear traces that lead back from the beginning of a work to its origins. The work, like a dream, has you as much as you have it, and, in one very true and deep sense, research as a vocation always faces a researcher with the question of "whom does the work serve?"<sup>36</sup>

This question penetrated my entire being as my compassion for my ancestors and my longing to heal myself remained constantly at the core of my research and my experiences.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 25. Quote from C.G.Jung CWXIV, par.420.

<sup>34</sup> Meyer, *Clio's Circle*, 10.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>36</sup> Romanyshyn, *The Wounded Researcher*, 119.

Even as I was writing the first sentences of this thesis, it became evident that the paths were multiple and convoluted and the question of whom the work served was ever present. My feelings were many and often confusing. There was joy and gratitude for written histories of our family, which paralleled the sadness of that which was not written, or that which was written and had been lost. I was often aghast and horrified as I looked deeply into the tragedies of those days and tried to picture what it must have been like. How could I relate when there was that vast expanse of years of which I had virtually no experiential knowledge or memory? How, without imagination, could I tell their stories and discover their mythologies? How could I dig deeply into history and discover both the linear history as well as the human consciousness that shapes and responds to the events of their lives? I knew I needed to trust an unusually convoluted winding stairwell which often felt hidden and obscure, and yet other times became like a river with many tributaries. Romanyshyn's writings became my road map. He helped to clarify the differences between the imaginal approach and the empirical approach. (This quote does not devalue the place that empirical research has in scholarship; it simply makes the differentiation between the two approaches.)

An imaginal approach to research that works towards re-collecting what has been left behind in order to continue the work is fundamentally different from an empirical approach to research with its emphasis on prediction and control. The former moves into the future through the past, while the latter moves from the present into the future.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 86.

This research is about making a place and ample room for “soul”. Romanyshyn also stresses the importance of doing this work with “half-closed eyes”. What a strange little phrase I thought, but his explanation helped me to understand at least a small piece of it. “It is a way of describing an attitude of reverie, a way of dreaming the world with one’s eyes *wide shut*.”<sup>38</sup> This reverie, he says, is vitally important to an imaginal approach to research and he adds that it is the mood of the poets.

In reverie, we are in that middle place between waking and dreaming, and in that landscape, the borders and edges of a work become less rigid and distinct. They melt somewhat, and the work becomes a porous membrane through which the ancestors might slip into the work.<sup>39</sup>

I have found that to be true. The ancestors came to me in dreams, in my thoughts, during the times when I was having energy body work done; they appeared and they disappeared. I felt their encouragement and guidance to continue my work. There was the sense of healing in the reverie of these encounters; I felt honored and cherished each small insight and revelation that came to me. I treasured my father’s presence in multiple dreams.

### **Dwelling with the Two Texts**

After the journey to Ukraine I returned home to process my own responses to the events and experiences of my ancestors. I wanted to tell their stories. I wanted to write down and validate all they had been through and so I took the two texts of my great-

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 87.



grandfathers and spent at least a month delving into each of their lives until I could get a deep sense of their personalities and the way they lived their lives. On the advice of my supervisor I then went back through the texts again, paragraph by paragraph, word by word, allowing patterns/themes to emerge into my awareness. Even though I had read and reread the texts, this intentional word by word, paragraph by paragraph exploration brought new observations about things that I had not noticed in the earlier readings. Sometimes I muddled about shaking my head and sometimes I felt like I was being carried by the wind into another time and place. Some things felt remote and far removed from my present life and other things felt like I was living with them and they were living with me in the present moment. It was in these places that I moved into a heuristic mode and methodology. Reflections, images and metaphors came to mind. I experienced many night time dreams where my ancestors were interwoven through often obscure images and experiences. I needed to write and write and reflect and attempt to understand how this process was affecting the different layers of my life. As I entered into the archetypes of ancient wounds I observed the parallels in my own life.

During the revolution in 1917 and 1918, and the anarchy that followed, lice-infested bandits invaded and stayed in many Mennonite homes, my own ancestors included. Homeowners were pushed into corners and ordered to serve the bandits. They demanded food, lodging, and when they were ill with typhus, they demanded care. In the summer of 2010 our two sons who have some intellectual disabilities were going through what felt like a bandit invasion when a roommate moved in. She screamed and stamped

her feet to get her needs met and our sons found they simply couldn't stay in their own home. I empathetically immersed myself in their losses while remembering the ancestral losses.

### **Heuristic Research**

As quoted in the introduction under choice of methodology, Moustakas' words rang true for me. "The heuristic enquiry begins with the internal search to discover, with an encompassing puzzlement, a passionate desire to know, a devotion and commitment to pursue a question that is strongly connected to one's own identity and selfhood."<sup>40</sup> The dictionary says that the root meaning of heuristic comes from the Greek word *heurikein*, which means to discover or to find.

Claire Woodbury, who taught *Writing a Thesis with Substance and Style* wrote: "Heuristic Research emphasizes self-reflection and empathetic immersion in the experiences of others in order to develop a narrative portrayal of the phenomenon in question."<sup>41</sup>

I was on a journey to discover, to find, to search; self-reflection and empathetic immersion were key parts of this experience. I did not however, delineate my process into the six phases that Moustakas outlines, avoiding the risk of "putting soul in its pocket."<sup>42</sup> Doing research from the imaginal approach and with soul in mind required

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<sup>40</sup> Clark Moustakas, *Heuristic Research Information*, 40.

<sup>41</sup> Claire Woodbury and Joyce Madson, *Writing a Thesis with Substance and Style*, 573V, (Edmonton: Class material, 2005), 24.

<sup>42</sup> Romanyshyn, *The Wounded Researcher*, 31.

that I balance the rod I carried, as I walked the tightrope, peering both into valleys below and searching the heavens, all the while trying to hear the wisdom of the research, the whispers of silence, and the murmurings of soul.

### **Following Soul**

Carl Jung has said:

Scholarship is not enough; there is a knowledge of the heart that gives deeper insight... The knowledge of the heart is in no book and is not found in the mouth of any teacher, but grows out of you... Scholarliness belongs to the spirit of the time, but this spirit in no way grasps the dream, since the soul is everywhere, the scholarly knowledge is not.<sup>43</sup>

This thought became my mantra. I made a commitment to follow wherever *soul* might lead me and to search for the knowledge of the heart. I committed to listening to all the voices, the great-grandparents, my night time dreams, my intuitions, my readings, the voices of others, as well as my times of meditation and art making. I invited my ancestors to inform me in whatever way they wanted to come to me. Ruth Meyers speaks of the image of inviting all to an ever-expanding oak table. I extended that open invitation.

Romanyshyn says:

Giving voice to the soul of one's work begins with allowing oneself to be addressed from the void, which depth psychology calls the unconscious. In addition, the work of saying what asks to be spoken in one's work is never complete. We begin and we fall short and we begin again.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Carl Jung, Source Unknwon

<sup>44</sup> Romanyshyn, *The Wounded Researcher*, 15.

This void or gap called me to hold the tension that balances the conscious and the unconscious. Gustav Fechner calls it the “day-time and the night-time view of the world.”<sup>45</sup> I grappled with how I could write from this gap? Brendan Kennelly in his book *The Man Made of Rain*, asks the question:

What is a vision? It is completely normal when you’re going through it, odd or tricky when you try to speak of it afterwards. The challenge of ‘afterwards’ is connected with, ‘after words’, how to preserve the normality of the visionary moment without being distorted or even drowned in the familiar sea of ‘Day English’.<sup>46</sup>

Romanyshyn then adds that Jung raises the question of the provisional character of the language of psychology and asks, “How does psychology write down the epiphanies of soul in such a way that it does not forget those epiphanies, but re-members them?”<sup>47</sup>

Jung warns us that epiphanies of soul exceed words and in that, we realize that there is always a gap. The danger is that we catch one piece of insight and then believe that it is the whole truth, thereby using Kennelly’s words, “putting soul in its pocket”.<sup>48</sup> Romanyshyn writes that one cannot write down the soul either in the dark or in the light but one must learn to write the soul in dark-light. He describes that Jung in his essay, *The Transcendent Function*, speaks of the symbol that mediates the gap between the conscious and the unconscious:

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 31.

A symbol holds the tension between what is visible and what is invisible, between what shows itself in the light and what hides itself in darkness, and as such it requires for its expression a language that hints at meaning and does not attempt to define or pin it down. Metaphor is such a language.<sup>49</sup>

Marion Woodman in the *Ravaged Bridegroom* speaks of the importance of metaphor in soul making. She says that metaphor bridges the gap between matter and spirit.

Metaphor yokes them together without bloodshed. It reveals consciousness holding matter and spirit together by the linguistic transformation of the realm of matter into symbols of the spirit... Without metaphor, the mind may be fed, but the imagination and the heart go hungry.<sup>50</sup>

As I pondered the process and what it meant to be in the gap, what it meant to write with soul in mind, I anticipated working with the complexities of the language, the symbols, the metaphors and the images, all of them winding and weaving throughout history and our everyday lives. I felt the inner strength to dwell in the unknown and embraced the integrity to do this historical work with soul in mind. I surrendered the work to Life and expressed an intention to go wherever I was led.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>50</sup> Marion Woodman, *Ravaged Bridegroom*, 24,27.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE STORIES OF THE ANCESTORS

#### Introduction

In the introduction of a resource book called *The Limits of Perfection, a Conversation with J. Lawrence Burkholder*, one of the editors, Scott Holland, writes:

Frederick Buechner suggests that at its heart most theology like most fiction is essentially, autobiographical. Buechner writes that, “Aquinas, Calvin, Barth, Tillich, working out their systems in their own ways and in their own language, are all telling us the stories of their lives and if you press them far enough, even at their most cerebral and forbidding, you will find an experience of flesh and blood, a human face smiling or frowning or weeping or covering its eyes before something that once happened.”<sup>51</sup>

Our theology is shaped and molded by our experiences. Deep within there is a universal longing for the experience of God/Love/the Sacred, something that transcends all our dialogue about what we think God might be and how that force might function in the world. Even the great theologians of the past wove their experiences into their theology and the wonderful mysteries. Our life stories shape who we are and our understanding of theology. In the ancestral stories I see their theologies, their mythologies, their passions, their disappointments, and I get a glimpse of what shaped their lives and threaded its way into my experience in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in Sherwood Park, Alberta, Canada. So I tell their story and pieces of my own journey with special note of

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<sup>51</sup> Rodney Sawatsky and Scott Holland, eds., *The Limits of Perfection*, ii, Introduction.

the three themes described in the Abstract: the deaths of mothers and babies; the ancestors' response to loss and violence; and the emphasis on sin and unworthiness.

### **Dreams ~ Portals of Entry**

I had my plan, my diaries, my thoughts on methodology, my resource books and my satchel with all my notes and gatherings. I was ready. I was listening and wondering where soul might lead. Dreams provided an immediate entry into the imaginal world of the unconscious.

In my first dream in this process I was nursing a baby but failing to have any sustenance in my breasts. I awoke saddened and remembered my own regrets of my inability to breastfeed my children. In a moment I was pulled back to my grandmother Maria Janzen who, according to the stories we have heard, had no breast milk for her babies. She was left with guilt and shame as two of her babies died of gastroenteritis as she tried to give them boiled cow's milk. My father



Dietrich, Maria and Henry Janzen  
circa 1918

Henry, and my Uncle Dick, survived because she was able to hire a nurse maid/wet nurse. Her guilt magnified as the nursemaid's child failed to survive. She was overcome with sadness. Because she had money at that time,

her child lived and the poor woman's child died. As I wrote these words I felt overwhelming grief and sadness. My children lived in spite of my failure to nurse, but according to the stories we were told, my grandmother's failure to have milk resulted in the deaths of three children. In that moment after my dream I felt at one with my very sad grandmother. Her grief became my grief, two mothers holding their pain, generations apart.

I walked back to the times when she lived with us during my childhood. My strongest memory was of her sitting passively in her chair, with sad, downcast eyes. Only once did I recall that she packed a small lunch and took me on a little picnic where we sat on a massive stone at the bottom of the big hill that was the foundation of the farm we lived on. A small child and her grandmother having a picnic on the stone sofa at the bottom of the hill, it was a rare and happy time.

Mainly I remembered her sadness. My mother told me that grandma had often spoken of the pain of having to leave her eldest son, one of her two surviving children, behind as they fled Russia. There were few choices; either they stayed until Uncle Dick's trachoma was healed and risk never getting out, or they leave him with another relative and hope that he could come later. Having his mother in Canada seemed like it might improve his chances of joining her. The year between leaving and his safe arrival was enough time to pull her heart to shreds. She was crushed by the sadness of the death of children, losing her husband when their two sons were small, leaving her eldest son behind in a country ravished by revolution and making the harrowing trek across the sea



to an unknown land, provided plenty of reasons for sadness and fear. I felt compassion as I thought about the demons that led to a depression that hung like a cloudy haze over her life and called her to an early grave in her sixties.

My deep connection with her melds with my own fears around potential dangers to my children and my own regret in not having breastfed my babies. All these thoughts hermeneutically guided from a dream where I had nothing to feed my child. Can my compassion heal my wounded grandmother? Can my compassion heal me? What can I learn about myself and my life from re-membering?

In discussion with Dr. Evangeline Rand, she reminded me that breast feeding requires us to trust that which nurtures from within. Immediately I could sense my own shadow in my need to do it all myself. Death and loss in my history had created an intense need to nurture all within the confines of my own strength. I touched the part of me that was too afraid to trust that which nurtures from within, something beyond my own will to power. I sensed the illusiveness of this fleeting inspiration. A part of me wanted to grab this new insight and nail it down. Another part of me wanted to throw it away and return to the old familiar way of responding. What does it mean to let go of something that has always given me the illusion of some control? "If only I can take care of everything, I will be protected from loss." Breastfeeding, which represents only one aspect of this pattern, required me to trust something beyond myself. With a baby bottle I knew how much milk had been consumed, but with my breast, I never knew whether my

infant had received enough sustenance or not. Breastfeeding required me to trust, something I failed to be able to do at that time.

I was reminded of the words of Ruth Meyer in *Clio's Circle*: "Hermes is characterized by paradox, ambiguity, and fleeting insights. His winged sandals guide us on our twisting journeys to the past."<sup>52</sup>

A few days later a second dream took me again to the Janzens, the ones without written history. In my dream I was travelling with a group of women and we were struggling to climb some steep paths. I had grabbed hold of a branch in an effort to pull myself up to a smoother, more direct pathway. As I held the branch I had a sense that it would not have the strength to support my weight and assist me in the upward climb. I let go of the branch, turned around and traveled downward to find another pathway. As I found what seemed like a good place to climb up, I attempted the leap to the next level. Suddenly I felt my father's hand pull me up. Dad Janzen, the youngest child of my wounded grandmother, was sitting on that higher pathway. He pulled me up and wrapped his arms around me. I rested my head on his portly abdomen and received his encouraging embrace. What a wonderful feeling it was. I remembered the same experience in his last years when failing health had sent him into care and placed him into a large Broda chair<sup>53</sup> in a nursing home. Even in Dad's fragility, I, a middle aged woman was comforted and could simply rest my head on his chest and feel the nurture of this

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<sup>52</sup> Meyer, *Clio's Circle*, 10.

<sup>53</sup> A Broda chair is a comfortable adapted chair that is often used for the frail elderly. It supports the entire body, including extremities.

gentle kind father, simply loving me. He created a type of womb that held me safely. In my dream he was wearing the same yellow shirt that we had given him and that he wore so often while in the womb-like chair that held him during his ebbing years.

The dream and the memory was the sensation of comfort and joy in his presence, the bright yellow of his shirt and his embracing arms felt like rays of warm sunshine wrapping a cloak of love around me. I remembered the yellow canola fields and the beauty of the prairie sunset. I remembered the harvest, the golden wheat fields and waiting as Dad appeared over the hill slowly moving the big red combine through the wheat sheaves. I loved the power of driving the massive



My Dad, Henry Janzen  
2001

red truck as I pulled up beside the combine and received all the harvested grain. I watched the wheat pour out of the hopper into the truck and knew of its value to our daily bread. Once I drove too close to the combine and broke the side mirror off the truck. My heart panicked, but my gentle father walked around the truck and said, "You drove a bit too close." He reassured me that we could fix it. The gap of the years was transcended in the moments of the dream and the memories. I felt so grateful to remember and to feel his presence.

Dr. Evangeline Rand was able to see more depth and meaning in my encounter with my father. She noted that I was travelling with women and that the direct linear path, the branch, wasn't strong enough to hold me, leading me back and downwards before I could move forward. She expressed that the path of the feminine often calls us downward and onto winding ways.

My father's support and embrace encircled me with the soft, fleshiness of the feminine. He was a man very able to embrace the feminine within himself. I felt his encouragement to proceed with my journey into the past. As I embarked on this path I was already in awe of the workings of soul leading and guiding me in the process. The side of my family without written accounts had already opened to my inquiry and connected with my process. While my plan was to travel with the written narrations of the grandfathers, soul had already led me to begin with my grandmother's grief and my father's encouragement. The Janzens had become my portal of entry into the muse of history.

Reflecting on the losses of my paternal grandmother, I remembered with sadness my father's journey. His memories of Russia were only of horror and fear. Born in 1915 he knew nothing of the glory years of the 1800s. He remembered death and hiding in cellars, fearing the rigorous sounds of shots and wondering who now lay dead. He grieved deeply over leaving his brother behind and was deathly ill on the ship coming to Canada. He felt as if his writhing body would tear itself apart. Early on he became his mother's keeper and protector as he clearly felt her sadness. Later as a grown man, I

remember him crying over his mother's casket and my childhood heart breaking. I had never before seen my father cry. I was ten years old.

He met and married the love of his life when he was 24 years old. They moved to a farm in Saskatchewan where my sister and I were born. He loved his family and took great pride in being a good farmer who cared for the land with devotion and hard work. Storms and crop failures didn't seem to get him down because he always said that if the circumstances were out of his control, then he would simply surrender to them. If damage was done because of his own neglect he would chide himself, but he was non-resistant to the elements that were beyond him. I recall a terrible storm sweeping through our farm. The hail broke all the windows in the house and wild winds ripped buildings apart and spread them like rubble across the fields. When the winds and hail receded and we had a few moments to breathe into the fear of being in the path of such a vicious storm, we began to survey the damage. Stepping over broken glass and water we all made our way outdoors and kept gasping at each new sight of destruction. My childhood heart was filled with overwhelming fear and I grabbed hold of my father's hand saying, "Oh dear, what are we going to do, what are we going to do, everything is broken?" He quickly and firmly held my hand and looked squarely into my eyes and said, "Margie, we will rebuild it!" The calm look in his eyes covered his own discouragement as he comforted his small daughter. I remember thinking, "Oh everything is OK! Dad said we could fix it." Strength and courage permeated out of every cell of his being. He and Mom stood together amidst the ruins and faced the tremendous work of repairing the

farm. My sister and I stood in their shadow and felt that we were safe. They did repair and rebuild and we lived there many more years.

But some things couldn't be repaired. When our Mother suddenly died at age 44, my father's heart was broken. Those were the darkest days of his life. He was unable to see any plausible reason to live. I remember him working with his cattle and being in the pen with the bull and feeling no fear, because he said he didn't care if he lived or died. I remember trying to find ways to make him want to live. "But Dad, what about us, we still all need you, even more now than before!" He wasn't convinced. My sister and I were married and he felt our small brother was better off in either of our families than with him as a broken father.

But he did not die then. He married again and lived until he was 88. His new life gave him some hope and inspiration. He was a man who loved a good joke and there was still much laughter when we visited him in their new home. He did his best to repair his shattered life.

As his children and grandchildren grew into adulthood we all became aware of the vastness of his kind heart. Even though he was always called Henry, his grandchildren coined the phrase "The Bank of Hank" to describe the frequency with which he opened his wallet for all of us. Every major purchase seemed to involve "The Bank of Hank". The terms of repayment were always vague, with "when you can" statements. The only thing written in stone was that he would never charge any of us

interest. He was sure that somewhere in the Bible it said that you must not charge interest to your family.

Our middle son frequently feels his grandfather's presence and encouragement and our eldest son describes his Grandfather Janzen as the kindest man he has ever known. Perhaps he gave too much. Perhaps he gave until he had nothing left to give.

As the years took their toll on his body so the clouds of depression returned and became persistent visitors in his life. Once when I was trying to be encouraging he said, "Margie I have lived thirty years longer than your mother. Isn't that enough for you?"

So Hermes took me to the grief of my father and my grandmother and I saw with great compassion, their response to the various ways in which their lives were decimated and how they survived. I remembered the strength that permeated every aspect of my father's presence in his youth and the ways he loved and cared for his family; as he aged much of that strength dissolved into his sadness. He survived by doing whatever was required of him at the time, but I believe that neither my grandmother nor my father had any opportunity to mourn all that had been lost and in old age, the sadness simply became overwhelming.

As with most of humanity I see that they were both brave and defeated, they persisted and they gave up, they were strong and weak. I remember them with great love and gratitude for the gifts I received from them. And so I moved forward to continue exploring how we survive the grief of our lives. I followed the path that is convoluted

and sometimes comes to meaningful dead ends. I wrote with compassion for all and prayed that my work might become an *opus*.

## **My Great-Grandfathers**

### **Part I Isaak Isaak Zacharias 1868-1945**

#### **Introduction**

No dreams or visions from anyone in the Zacharias family. I was disappointed. What then, could be my portal of entry into their lives? Of course it was the 839 pages of the life story that my great grandfather, Isaak Isaak Zacharias had written in what seemed like a secret code of German gothic handwriting. I held the very heavy hardcover copy of the German life story in one hand and the stapled together 50 loose pages that had been translated in my other hand.



As I surveyed these portals I began pulling back, pulling back, going down into the breath. I was pulling back, looking down, holding the moment, holding the space. I could feel the dark-light of then and now and pictured a circle linking us together.

I was a year old when this great-grandfather died. I was void of any conscious memory of him except for the pictures that graced our mantel. However his words and his writings helped me to enter my imagination and return to Zachariasfeld in South Russia in the late 1800s.



## Zachariasfeld and the Early Years

Isaak Isaak Zacharias was born February 22, 1868 at Zachariasfeld in Nova-Petrower Municipality, Ekaterinoslav province in South Russia, (now called Dnjepropetrowsk). (See Appendix A regarding variations in spelling of names and places.) Why Isaak Isaak?

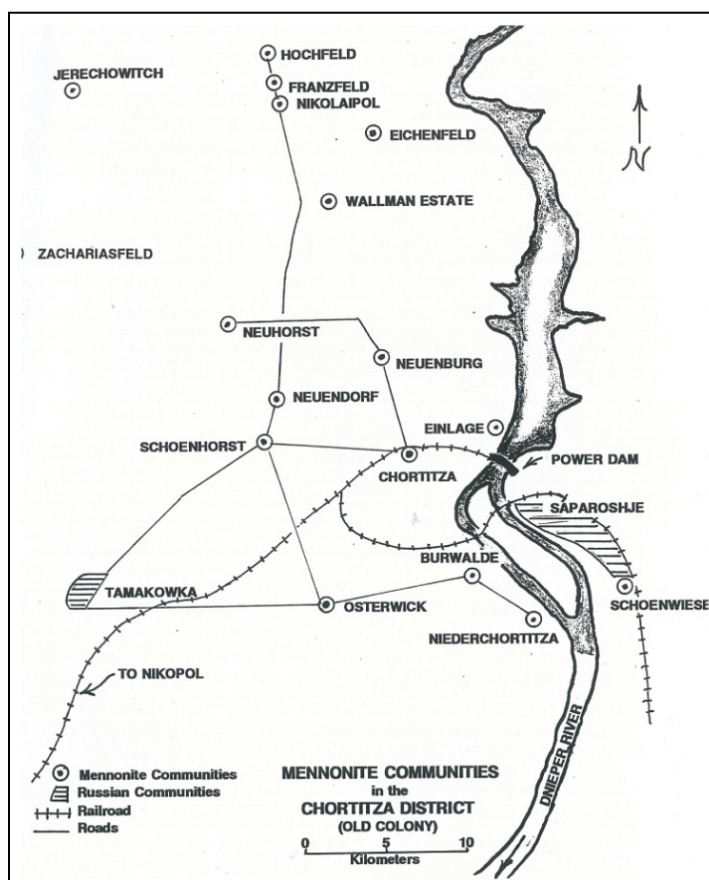
It was the custom that all children, regardless of gender, carried their father's name as their second name.

I assumed the reason for this tradition was to identify children with their fathers.

My inequity voice screamed out, "What about their mothers?" All those women who gave birth to a large

span of children, often

sacrificing their lives to the complications of giving birth, but still the identity of the children remained associated with the father. Isaak Isaak was the third youngest of seven children and he was eleven when his mother suffered a heart attack and died. His diary pays numerous tributes to his cherished mother. (Due to the translators' efforts to



maintain the accuracy of the text, some translated sentences are not grammatically correct.)

Then followed a depressing time not only for my dear father, but also for us young children. However it was threshing time and we couldn't stand still and lose heart, - we had to work in spite of grief and sorrow. Our dear mother's guidance had been taken from us younger children. She rests in her grave built of bricks in beautiful Zachariasfeld. Her clear sharp eyes didn't watch over us any more, her alertness, her special understanding didn't inspect us anymore. Father was deeply bowed, despondent, withdrawn into himself, still and alone. And we little chicks seemed to have no one whose wings we could nestle under and share our sorrow and pain. We grew like little trees that have lost their caregiver and were given up to the storm and weather. <sup>54</sup>

In 2008 my sister, my husband and I, with the help of a Ukrainian Guide, searched until we found what we thought was once Zachariasfeld. We felt it in our bones! We felt we were standing on the soil of Zachariasfeld. So little remained of what had once been a thriving estate, bustling with orchards and gardens, a flour mill, a brick factory, an oil mill, a church, barns, pastures, a school and houses enough for about eight families. It was like a village, a small town. We stood on the land and

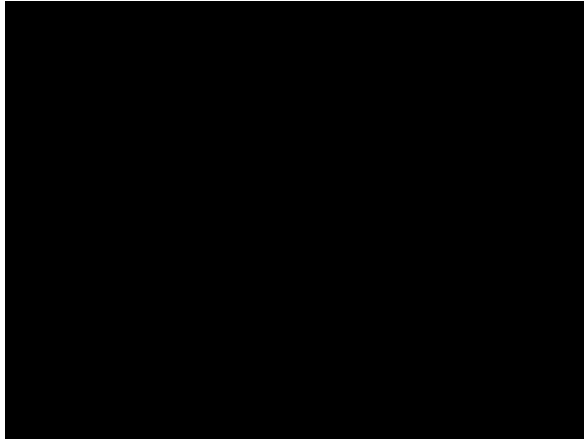


My husband Rudy, sister Evelyn and myself

<sup>54</sup> Isaak I. Zacharias, *Meine Lebensgeschichte (MyLife's Story)* (Saskatoon: Printed by family in 1991), The first four journals were translated into English in 1995 by Ruth Heinrichs and Heinz Bergen and called *Autobiography of Isaak Isaak Zacharias*. Most references are from the translated *Autobiography*, 2.

looked over what we thought had been their fishing pond and tried to imagine what the estate had looked like 100 years earlier.

A Ukrainian man herding a gaggle of geese spoke with our guide who asked if he had ever heard of the Zacharias family. His enthusiasm was only surpassed by our joy when we kept hearing Zacharias stirred and mixed with his pure Ukrainian explanations. He told our guide that the Zacharias estate had first been changed to



a collective farm in the late 1920s and that many of the bricks had been used for other buildings. Everything looked barren to us, but in our imagination we could picture the joy of life on Zachariasfeld in the late 1800s and early 1900s. We remembered how Grandpa Dietrich, (second son of Isaak Isaak and Katherina) had described his wonderful “Vaterland” (land of his father) and his “Heimatland” (homeland) and Zachariasfeld.

“It was a beautiful sight to behold each spring as the trees blossomed and the aroma of all spring blossoms filled the air.”<sup>55</sup> He was describing the beautiful orchards they had planted which included apples, pears, cherries, plums. He spoke of raising cattle and sheep and planting wheat, barley, oats, flax, corn, potatoes, watermelon and other vegetables.

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 10.

Approximately 15 Russian workers helped to do the work on the estate in the wintertime and about 40 to 50 worked in the summer... Many of the workers, in particular the senior personnel, lived on Zachariasfeld, with their families. Some of the overseers also received land on which they grew their own crops and gardens. They also had their own cows, pigs and chickens.<sup>56</sup>

Aunt Katie, the second eldest daughter of Isaak Isaak and Katherina, described their house as being built with cream-colored bricks with a green metal roof. The floors were oak and there were tall windows with wide window-sills for plants. The living room featured green velvet upholstered chairs and a carpet with a small table covered with a green velvet tablecloth, which usually had a photo album on top. There was a large mirror in the hallway she said. The dining room housed a long table with a leather-covered bench and about ten leather upholstered chairs, a beautiful grand piano and double doors that led to the garden.

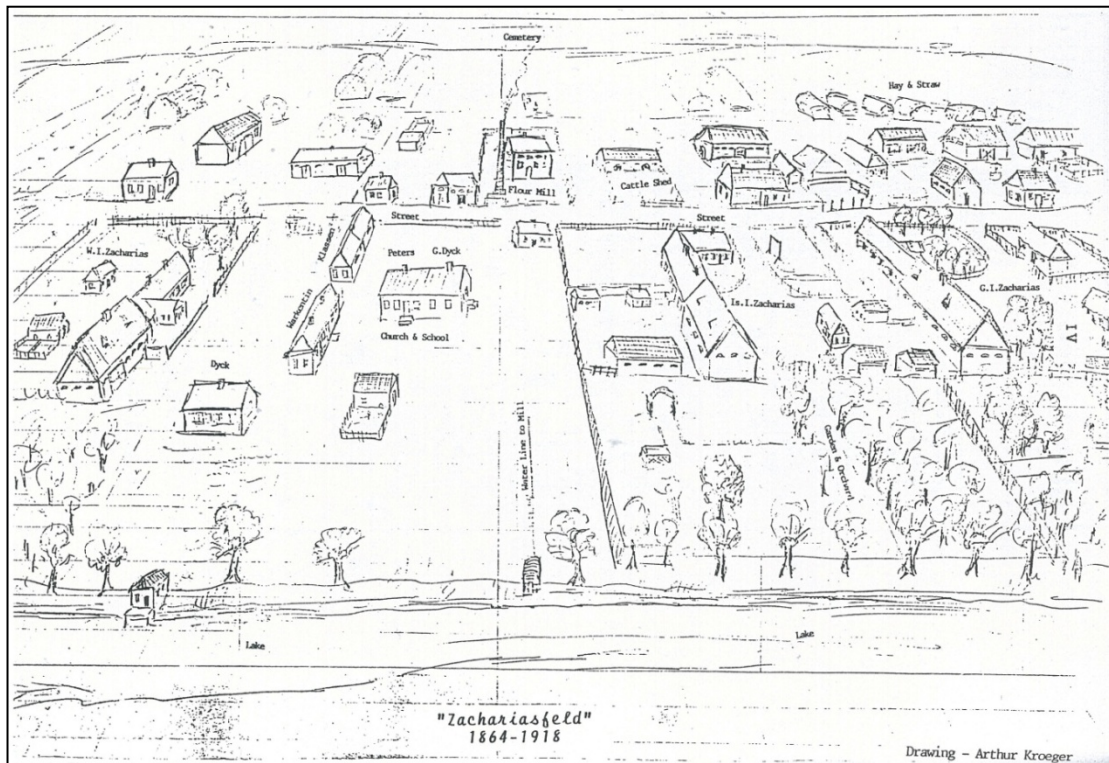
Aunt Katie continued:

One picture I remember is of a mother bathing the children. It had a caption: “Wo Liebe, da Frieda, Wo Friede, da Gott.” (Where there is love, there is freedom and where there is freedom there is God.) Beside it there was a chest with glass doors. In it was my mother’s wedding veil and wreath, and in a special little compartment on top of the chest was my father’s boutonniere with white ribbons attached to it.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>57</sup> George Zacharias, ed., *Wilhelm Zacharias and Descendants* (University of Saskatchewan Printing Services, Agnes and Nick Peters eds., 1996), 557.



So many years later in another country, in another time, I can still hear the beautiful sentiment of her childhood home as her words guided me and in my imagination I could picture their home. I almost felt as if I was there and that maybe I could hear my grandmother, Dietrich's wife, playing the piano. He often described to us how beautifully his lovely wife could play the piano.

Today the fields and orchards are like Isaak Isaak's description of the children at their mother's death, "Like little trees who have lost their caregiver and are given up to storm and weather."<sup>58</sup> In 2009 relatives found the desolate orchards of Zachariasfeld.

<sup>58</sup> Zacharias, *Autobiography of Isaak Isaak Zacharias*, 2.

Their description of these orchards created an image of lost children and desecrated lives.

These trees that once yielded abundance now stood wilted and bent, barely alive.

Isaak Isaak, in the first few paragraphs of his diary, tells more of the history of Zachariasfeld. He writes that in 1864 his parents moved from Osterwick, a village in the Chortitza Colony, to land that later, after much toil and struggle, became Zachariasfeld. That was four years before his birth.

He goes on to say that “by 1893, our pioneer father was sole owner of all Zachariasfeld, for all the others had left and some were buried there. Luck and God’s rich blessings followed them at every turn.”<sup>59</sup>

As I read and reread this man’s words I found myself creating a picture of the kind of man he might have been. Isaak Isaak was passionate in his endeavors, an entrepreneur who had an intense sense of good business. He described the acquisition of more land, the development of their oil mill, their flour mill, the brick factory, and how it all wove together. One business supported the other and made practical use of all products without anything being wasted. He wrote that people from far and wide were impressed.

However, once in his diary, he chided himself for giving too much time and energy to his “money fountain” and not enough time to visiting the sick. At the same time the words in his diary radiate with his passion and joy in his many challenging business endeavors. His youngest son described him as a risk-taking entrepreneur who seemed to

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 1.

love life. I perceived that he was also a robust negotiator in building positive relationships with employees in his various businesses, a skill that later saved his life a number of times.

### **The Forestry – Alternate Military Service**

A sharp contrast to the joyous days just described were the years when, in his youth, he was serving in the Forestry, an alternative service to military duty.

An old forest of seven hundred desjatins, (a desjatin was about 2 and 2/3 acres or 1,092 hectares), dark old barracks and outbuildings, inside and out, a religious, small, sick detachment of Mennonites. To spend three long years of my youth in these dark walls? What a dark, silent and sad future! That's horrible, that's impossible, my heart trembled, my throat choked...long boring days... It was unfamiliar, hard work, always the same people, always the same food and menu, the hard straw mattress, all low-class people, no escape, no running away, definitely no resistance, only to get used to the situation, fulfill all orders, not let one's own plans and wishes come through, only bear everything patiently, learn everything and be able to live a futile life without purpose.<sup>60</sup>



Isaak Issak Zacharias  
in the Forestry

His next paragraph describes the many birds that kept them company and the beautiful sounds of their singing as spring approached. Even with the singing and the

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 4.

spring he remained downcast and sad, tired of the lowly boring work, but reminding himself to be loyal and true:

However, remember young man that it was our parents' dearest wish and desire that their sons should fulfill their service to the state in separation, apart from all dangers of life, in religious surroundings and also to serve God thereby. Away with all dark thoughts, give up our plans, put hands to the plow, become useful to the Czar and his kingdom even if one loses one's youthful years.<sup>61</sup>

It was not long before Isaak Isaak was promoted, and then promoted again. As the Sergeant in charge of 300 men and many more neighboring Russians, he described many worries. He wrote that "one had to act forcefully, keep one's equilibrium, and contend with large accounts...indeed, it was a scurrying to and fro, but unfortunately, no real joy in it. Now and then there were some pleasant hours..."<sup>62</sup> He added that "the furnishings in the barracks, the uniforms, as well as every provision for the Mennonite workers were paid by the Mennonites."<sup>63</sup>

### **Military Release, Returning Home, Family Life**

Isaak Isaak described New Years Day, 1893 as a major turning point. "I received my military discharge, so I was completely free



Isaak and Katherina  
Documented as possible wedding portrait

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 5.



(except during a time of war). Now another life was to begin.”<sup>64</sup> His long time love, Katherina Schulz, had waited three enduring years for him. They married in 1893 and he described it as the grandest wedding that ever took place in Osterwick. A number of times he mentioned that his wife always gave in to his wishes. He wanted a larger home and she liked the smaller cozy home, but consented to whatever he desired. He expressed appreciation for her compliance and many other attributes.

Their lives seemed ever happier when what he described as “living dolls” were born to them.

On February 21, 1895, a second son, whom we called “Dietrich” (my grandfather), was given to us. Again we experienced God’s abundant blessings and true joy in our inner and outer lives. Family, as well as property, everything prospered and Fortuna, the ancient goddess of fortune, accompanied us on our path; everyone was healthy and happy...Then one makes the grandest and wonderful future plans, one makes fantasies without bounds. What optimism dwells with parents.<sup>65</sup>

The American Heritage Dictionary, fourth edition, published in 2006, describes *Fortuna*, as the goddess of fortune in Roman mythology; from the Latin *Fortuna*, *Fortune*; “chance, good luck, and fortune”. *Fortuna* falls under the root category of *bher<sup>l</sup>*, “which means to carry, also to bear children”.<sup>66</sup> I was fascinated by this reference and his knowledge of early mythology. I also found it interesting that he used the word in

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 7,8.

<sup>66</sup> *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language 4<sup>th</sup> edition* (Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006).

reference to both prosperity and the gift of having children, one referred to in the word description and the other in the root derivative.

Katherina gave birth to seven more children, a total of nine, between 1893 and 1906. Their 4<sup>th</sup> child (a daughter) passed away just after her 1<sup>st</sup> birthday and their 8<sup>th</sup> child, also a daughter, died at 8 months. Katherina was able to breastfeed all the children until the arrival of the 8<sup>th</sup> child. For this child however something was different and she had no breast milk. Like my grandmother Janzen, they hired a nurse maid, but even this failed to help the child survive and so Katherina and Isaak Isaak buried a second child. (It is not clear from his writings what the actual cause of death was.)

Were the parents too proud, were they not humbly thankful enough?...The first hours of sorrow in our happy home had come; shocked, deeply bowed, one asked why this had come to disturb our happiness. But later we thought about it and came to the assurance from the word of God. 'Let the children come to me and hinder them not.' In our sorrow, we became resigned and submitted to the will of God.<sup>67</sup>

An act of pacifism seemed to be learning how to embrace and accept what they believed to be the will of God. Further blessing and great tragedy occurred on May 13, 1906, when another daughter named Louise was born, but in the process Katherina, the mother of all these children, slipped away.

My dear wife bled to death before my very eyes, under the care of the doctor and the trained midwife. My pen cannot describe how terrible the pain was...the heartbreaking pain drove me to my knees in the next room, where I groaned,

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<sup>67</sup> Zacharias, Autobiography of Isaak Isaak Zacharias, 9.

“You, Lord have given her to me, you have taken her from me, Your name be glorified and praised.”<sup>68</sup>

Isaak Isaak was eleven when his mother died and my Grandfather Dietrich was eleven years old at the time of his mother’s death. The family did their best to carry on. Often both men and women remarried quickly as children needed a mother and women needed the protection of a husband. Just as the family went on with the harvest at the time of Isaak Isaak’s mother’s death, so this newly motherless family moved forward.

Isaak Isaak described his efforts to take care of his motherless children, but within a year he made the decision to take another woman in marriage. Someone had advised him with the following words.

However I advise you to completely let go of your own will, for the first marriage is an affair of love; in contrast, the second marriage is unchosen necessity, which requires in the first instance, prayer in a closed little room, where one receives upon humble petition the proper answers.<sup>69</sup>

On February 27<sup>th</sup> 1907, he married widow Maria Toews, who had three children of her own. Between 1908 and 1913 this marriage brought four more children into the family bringing the total number of children to fourteen, a large active family.

### **Growing Political Unrest, Early Revolution Rumblings**

Unrest among the working class was growing; in 1905 small revolutionaries were beginning a rebellion and estate owners were experiencing some of their wrath.

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 17.

Disturbances were taking place more in the Taurida and Kherson provinces, bordering on the Black Sea, where estates were being burned and plundered, some only disturbed a bit, while others were burned to the ground...The Jews were also persecuted and harassed quite a bit. It was coming closer to us.<sup>70</sup>

The Czarist government took military action against the protestors but it only pushed the unrest underground for a period of time, where it smoldered and grew, ready to erupt at any time. Isaak Isaak wrote, "This time we still had the upper hand and we could sleep peacefully again. Yes sweet sleep, our colossal short-sightedness, something that we had to pay for with our personal lives and all our earthly goods."<sup>71</sup> He described that the government did attempt to implement some distribution of land to peasants, which was a good thing, but too little too late. "The uprising had been put down, but in secret it raged and spread further and remained constantly very dangerous."<sup>72</sup>

With all our activities, one thing was not cared for enough and that was the political situation, for which we had too little concern. Would it have been more advantageous for us if, after sufficient inquiry into it, we had taken some preventative measures?...Threatening clouds gathered on the horizon; then dispersed again...during threshing time of 1914 an enormous war was ignited between our beautiful Russia and Germany. Who could believe that these mighty neighbors, who were so intricately connected, would come to blows? After all, the Kaiser and the Czar were both grandchildren of Queen Victoria.<sup>73</sup>

The First World War interrupted the smoldering revolution. The war raged most horribly and claimed more and more victims. Our family also did not escape; the turn came to our first-born son Isaak. He was drafted and not sent to the forestry service as was customary and was also our right, but to Karkow, then to Moscow

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 21.

and then to Kiev. The parents' and siblings' hearts bled and all knew how serious the approaching times were... The war soon brought with it the hatred of the Germans. We were seen as enemies of Russia and we soon experienced this. All things German were forbidden.<sup>74</sup>

Conscription of Mennonites had begun in 1914 and continued until 1917. Old privileges were forgotten and stashed in the trenches of war. David Rempel wrote that:

In this period, about 40 per cent of draftable men, between the ages of nineteen and forty-two, of Neider Khortitsa served in one fashion or another. From across the Russian Empire, more than 13,000 of the roughly 33,000 eligible Mennonite men served.<sup>75</sup>

Rempel, a Mennonite from more modest means, talked about business travels with his father shortly before the war and revolution, where they saw the stark contrast between the beautiful estates of many Mennonites intermingled with the poor Ukrainian peasant villages. He spoke of the arrogance and pride that many estate owners carried and his father's words of caution for the future. "Father also voiced his concern that so FEW of his Mennonite contemporaries seemed to be aware that their good fortune could instantly crumble to nothing if the Czarist government collapsed."<sup>76</sup>

Isaak Isaak wrote:

Shortly thereafter came the catastrophic news that the government would apply the land liquidation provisions to us. This was on the ground that we were 'Germans by acculturation' if not of German origin. This could mean exile to the eastern territories.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>75</sup> David G. Rempel and Cornelia Rempel Carlson, *A Mennonite Family in Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union 1789-1923* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press Incorporated, 2002), 157.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>77</sup> *Zacharias Autobiography of Isaak Isaak Zacharias*, 23.

A footnote quote in the Zacharias Autobiography is taken from *Mennonite*

*Exodus* by Frank H.Epp:

On November 3, 1914, the Russian government forbade the use of the German language in the press or in a public assembly of more than three persons. The property liquidation laws of February 2<sup>nd</sup> and December 13<sup>th</sup> of 1915 decreed that all German property was to be liquidated. To escape liquidation, the Mennonites sent a delegation to St. Petersburg to document their Dutch ancestry.<sup>78</sup>

Fortunately few Mennonite properties were expropriated at that time but the ultimate crush happened with the collapse of the Czarist regime. In March of 1917 Nicholas II went on a journey to the front. Isaak Isaak showed his loyalty to the Czar as he spoke of him with honor and respect:

According to Czar Nikolai II, it was a sacred duty to save the people of his kingdom, but under the influence of his assistants, he abdicated with the conviction that his gifted and strong willed brother Michael would take over the throne and the army; however, his hopes, desires, and intentions came to naught. The revolution, the voices of the Duma, (the parliament) became the government and Kerenzky was proclaimed the ruler of the large empire and everything came to a standstill on the front. This pause was used with advantage by the instigators in the trenches, where plans for revolution were designed, advanced, and drilled.<sup>79</sup>

In the darkness and shadow of the trenches seeds of anger and revenge brewed and percolated ready to explode into the furor of revolution and later anarchy. The reign of the Czars, the era of the Romanoffs, had come to an end. Forced to abdicate, Nicholas II was replaced by a Provisional government which also had only minimal support.

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<sup>78</sup> Zacharias *Autobiography of Isaak Isaak Zacharias*, Footnote<sup>26</sup>, 23.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

Exiled Vladimir Lenin meanwhile was being transported back to Moscow by Germany in the hopes that he could enflame the turmoil. The German hopes were fulfilled when on November 6<sup>th</sup> 1917, Lenin led the Bolsheviks in the successful venture of overthrowing the Provisional government and taking over power in St. Petersburg. The White Army made every effort to overthrow the Communist government and Russia plunged fully into a brutal civil war. Meanwhile Tsar Nicholas II, his family and their servants were kept prisoners in St. Petersburg and then transported to the Ural Mountains and held in the town of Ekaterinburg in the spring of 1918.

The Eyewitness to History website said:

By mid-July a Czech contingent of the White Army was approaching Ekaterinburg and the sounds of gun-fire could be heard in the distance by the royal prisoners and their Bolshevik captors. The arrival of their potential liberators sealed the fate of the Tsar and his family. During the early morning hours of July 17, 1918, the Tsar, his wife, children and servants were herded into the cellar of their prison house and executed.<sup>80</sup>

According to Pavel Medvedev, a member of the squad of soldiers who was present throughout the execution, the Tsar carried his son in his arms and none of the family asked any questions. They were completely compliant to the orders and sat in their chairs and waited for their fate to be sealed. All were shot. In those last moments the Tsar was simply a father holding his son, sitting in a circle with his loved ones. It was a

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<sup>80</sup> *The Execution of Tsar Nicholas II, 1918*[article on-line], (accessed December 2010); available from <http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/nicholas.htm> (2005); Internet.

terrible circle of destruction for a family. The defeated Tsar never wanted his most precious people to pay the ultimate sacrifice for his failings. He was simply a father who loved his family, who had both strengths and weaknesses in his abilities to govern a large country with the powerful undercurrents of discontent and anger, and in the end he sat powerlessly with his family in complete surrender to the violence of a mass murder.

An era had ended. A new one was beginning, one that demanded many sacrifices for all. For Mennonites who had always been supporters of the Tsars, it was the end of life in South Russia as they had known it for the last century. If God didn't or couldn't protect the Tsar, what hope was there for them?

### **The Revolution - Fleeing Zachariasfeld 1918**

David Rempel detailed the three periods of the Russian civil war. The first was from January to March 1918, when the Bolsheviks and other Ukrainian peasants began seizing land and personal belongings. Rape and murder were rare at this time but they did occur. The second stage was the short period of German occupation when the Mennonites thought they had been sent a saviour as they were in harmony with the Germans. It was a false sense of security and very short lived for the Germans withdrew in November of 1918.

Upon withdrawal of the German troops, the final and most catastrophic stage erupted, as Bolsheviks, autonomous Ukrainian forces and counter-revolutionary White Armies battled for control over our strategically important area.



Intertwined with that chaos was the worst terror – the occupation of our area by the Makhnovite bandits.<sup>81</sup>

Isaak Isaak held to the principles of pacifism, but it was not done in resignation but rather in full assertive involvement. He negotiated, he watched, he acted. At night they patrolled the circumference of Zachariasfeld with their hunting rifles to prevent theft of their belongings. They used their hunting rifles to protect themselves and they ran when they knew they had no other choice. Even as a pacifist he kept his guns close by and worried about the time when they might all be confiscated. He was opposed to the Selbstschutz, which were self-defense units that were being formed by many Mennonites, (see section on Selbstschutz). He was clearly aware of the intensification of destructive circumstances that greeted them every day and every night. His keen mind was alert to what they might have to do. He was a proud man who did not hide his head and run from reality.

At Zachariasfeld, he described the heartbreaking day when they felt they had no other choice but to flee and leave their beloved home forever:

On the 6<sup>th</sup> of November 1918, on a rainy night, my son Heinrich and I had been at watch, and so we both slept longer. About seven o'clock in the morning my daughter woke me with the words, "Papa there are bad people in the stable; send them away quickly." It only took me seconds to get into my clothes and with my hunting rifle in my hand, I ran through the front door to brother Gerhard's yard, to his estate manager, Wiebe. There was quite a bit of water outside and it was still raining, but otherwise quiet, and in the stables the livestock were being fed and the cows milked. I sent Mrs. Wiebe to Gerhard's place to wake them quickly and

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<sup>81</sup> David G.Rempel and Cornelia Rempel Carlson, *A Mennonite Family in Tsarist Russia*, 183.

warn them, because a robber band had come and they would soon arrive at my brother's place. I was very agitated about the complete uncertainty of the raid. Then I heard the crack of gunfire and the echoes, which were even more terrible... Then I could see two figures coming from my brother's stable. I recognized his son and his brother in law. Then followed many questions. "Was anyone killed?" The answer followed that there were none from our side, but from the bandits' side, the leader was shot. He had looked out from behind the ash hut and the bullet possibly hit him in the abdomen. With that all shooting ceased and the bandits took my wagon and took their wounded to the hospital in Alexanderpol three wersts away. (A werst is about one kilometer.) The bandits had advanced to the kitchen door. All windows were broken in my brother's kitchen and the family was pale and very shocked; the father with his two sons and the family had been saved once more and had saved their hunting rifles. At my house they had taken several guns away. They had very carefully and genially schemed to acquire all our guns so as to have free hand with us.<sup>82</sup>

Their situation was grave and the reality of the implications of the day created a tension and fear that was palatable for everyone. No one spoke much but awareness of the process of a massive change vibrated in everyone's bodies. Was it the time for leaving?

Isaak Isaak wrote that his second oldest son, Dietrich,(my grandfather), had taken Wilhelm to be bandaged for a head wound and while there he heard of the death of Chodak, the bandit shot at Zachariasfeld. The Chodak brothers were a Russian Baptist family who lived about 10 wersts (kilometers) away.

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<sup>82</sup> *Zacharias Autobiograpy of Isaak Isaak Zacharias*, 31.

Isaak Isaak wrote further,

In addition, Dietrich had also heard that the political leader, Petjlura, (the man leading the Ukrainian Nationalists) had given out an order by telephone that all large and small estates be surrounded by 75 men, that all guns should be confiscated from the estates and that no one should be permitted to enter or leave.<sup>83</sup>

The three Zacharias families gathered. They had already had many difficult bandit attacks with an abundance of threats to their lives. Compliance with their demands did not guarantee safety, for there was no safety. In the past Isaak Isaak had been able to negotiate verbally and find something that he could give them for his life. Once they were forcing him into the field where they promised to take his life and he said, “If you kill me you will not know where my money is.” They changed their minds and took the money that he found for them. Being able to think clearly in the moment, even doing a type of charade, he had often fooled the bandits and kept his family safe. But this morning was different, with the leader of this group of bandits dead, the Zacharias families knew there would be serious reprisals:

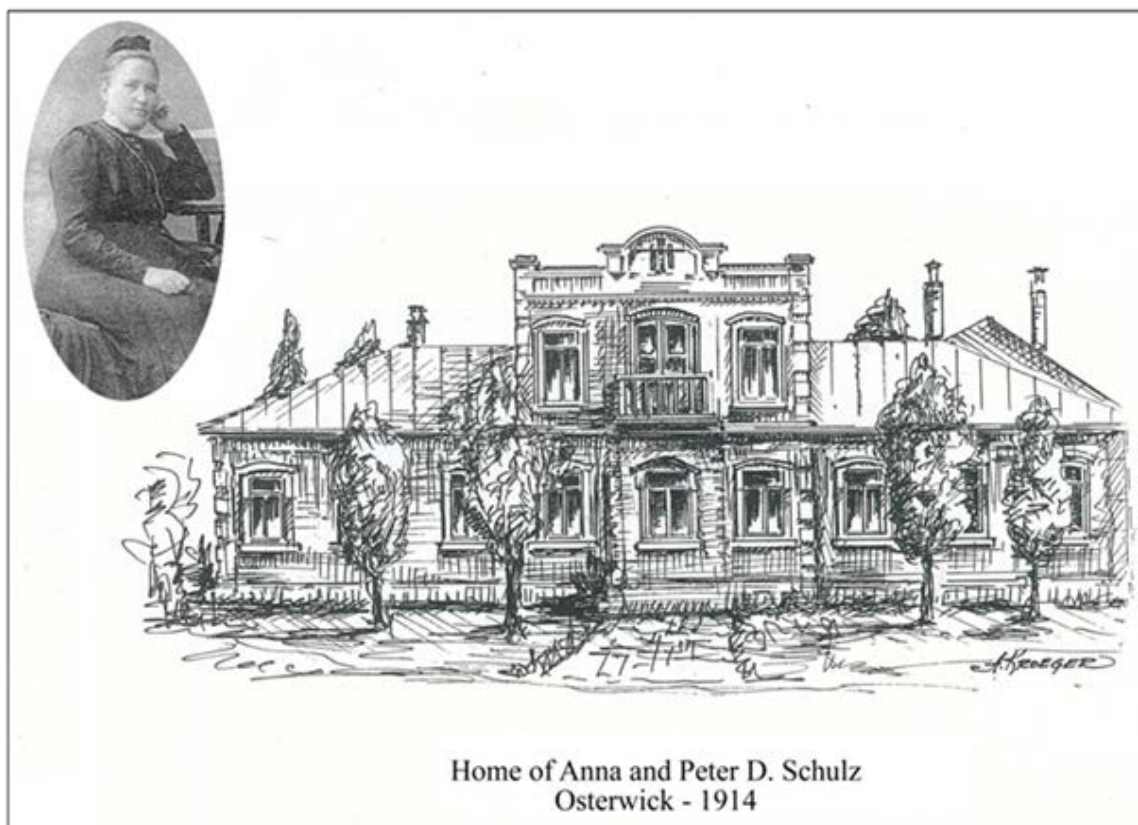
Everyone listened carefully to what Dietrich was saying, they reflected on the terrible events of the morning and dialogued past midnight, with the conviction that they must leave Zachariasfeld forever and find refuge in the Chortitza colony in an effort to save their lives. After our decision, I fell into a feverish sleep. Mother and the older children made preparations for our final flight from our beautiful birthplace Zachariasfeld while I tried to sleep a little. Bowed and with profound sorrow, we humbly implored God’s gracious help and support during our flight and so we said farewell on our knees to our dear home and drove quietly and unnoticed with loaded vehicles from the yard of our dear home at

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 31.

three o'clock in the morning of November 7<sup>th</sup>, 1918. I believe a total of eleven vehicles drove towards Chortitza.<sup>84</sup>

Leaving food on the table and fire in the stove, they fled. They used the road to Chortitza as a ruse and fled further to the village of Osterwick in hope of finding refuge at the home of Isaak Isaak's sister, Anna Schulz. Anna had married Katherina's brother,



Peter D. Schulz. She lived in a lavish new home, (probably built in 1912) in the village of Osterwick. Her home was close to the factory built by her father-in-law and later operated and managed by her husband. Things began crumbling for her when in 1914

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 32.

her husband and eldest son died, and of course war and revolution, hunger and disease followed. Bandits frequently invaded her home, acting as if it were their home and she and her children were their servants.

That day in November 1918, she opened her home to the fleeing Zacharias family. Sometimes there was more safety in the villages than on the estates, but other times it was the opposite. Anna Schulz and her family had found refuge on Zachariasfeld not long before. Now the Zacharias family found refuge with the Schulz family. Really there was no refuge, only temporary places to try to find safety. It was a dodging bullets type of refuge, very tenuous, transient and temporary, amidst the crumbling chaos of people raising their swords and guns to kill one another.

The Zacharias family was deeply grateful for family members that were able to take them in. Many were not so fortunate as there was a grave shortage of places to live and hide. This home became their refuge for a time

That same Christmas of 1918, a group of Ukrainian Nationalists led by Starko burst into the house, demanding food and care while making threats to everyone's life. Anna Zacharias Schulz and the Zacharias family spent the Christmas of 1918 serving this group of rude demanding men. Starko and his men eventually left leaving behind their trail of demise and humiliation.

Extended family (about 30 people) remained with Anna for a number of months until the Zacharias family could find a place of their own in Osterwick. Stories are told of the calmness with which she handled these challenging circumstances.

Upon leaving Zachariasfeld, the Zacharias brothers had told all estate workers that they were free to flee. They could take horses or a vehicle and escape as they felt they needed to. The mill bookkeeper had decided to leave but was persuaded to stay. Other workers convinced him that they were not the rich estate owners that were considered the villains, so therefore the bandits would not kill them. The mill bookkeeper was murdered that evening in a bestial way. The grain broker and the miller were also murdered. Others escaped by fleeing. It seemed that when people rode into an estate, intent on killing, there was little rational thinking left, but simply years of frustration and anger released into gun powder, axes and clubs.

Six months after Isaak Isaak and his family left Zachariasfeld, his sister Maria, (who was still living on the estate of Friesental), her son, two daughters, a daughter-in-law and a grandson were murdered in a bandit attack on May 13<sup>th</sup> 1919. The estate's overseer, his wife and two daughters were also murdered. The overseer was unrecognizable as he had been chopped up. The elderly mother was spared as she trembled and hid behind a door. A young son ran to the garden and survived the ordeal. News of such experiences were common occurrences. My great aunts spoke of often running for the bushes if there was a hint of a raid, for the bandits feared being ambushed in the trees and did not usually go there, making that a hiding place that could sometimes

spare their lives or escape being raped. In reality there were no safe places but sometimes certain corners of a place could become a transient refuge.

The Zacharias family, the Schulz family, and others did what they could to survive. The situation did not get better. The many fighting factions - the Red Army, the White Army, the Black Army and the Anarchists - were all waging war against one another. The most feared of all were the bandits of Nestor Makhno, the Ukrainian anarchist. They became the terror of the Mennonite people as his followers grew to bands of more than 40,000 who roamed far and wide, looting, murdering and persecuting capitalism as far as they could. In the chaos and looting, hunger became the next uninvited guest.

All the rich foodstores of Russia had disappeared, been destroyed, squandered and a great famine gripped the whole land...Field mice, cats, dogs, cadavers, fallen animals and finally their own dead children, were consumed before they themselves died a ghastly death. Then it was the Dutch and American brethren, who gave us bread and various food provisions and saved many lives, and also other lands vigorously helped to alleviate the famine. When one becomes absorbed in those severe times, one almost doubts whether it was really so hard as it is portrayed. Yes, absolutely! And how it leads to thankfulness, to glorify and praise for not having been among those who consumed cadavers and their own children and then still had to die of hunger. Even today I still can hear it, when the small child so humbly made known their hunger and asked in such a childlike way for a piece of bread and one couldn't give it. It was heart-breaking and necessitated much prayer and heavy sighs.<sup>85</sup>

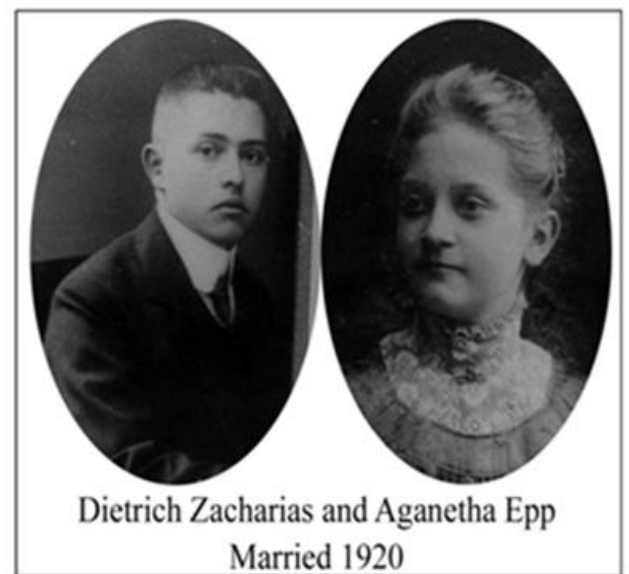
My great-grandfather implored us to never neglect the prayers for our daily bread.

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 37.

The footnotes in his diary said that between 1920 and 1923, \$1.8 million was raised by North American and European Mennonites and used for food and medical aid for about 75,000 people in Russia. It was a life-saving act of kindness.

The Zacharias family, after months of staying with Anna Schulz, moved to a vacant farm near Osterwick where they were able to raise some of their own food. As fragmented as things had become, some aspects of life continued even in the midst of great uncertainty. My grandfather Dietrich married his long time love, Neta Epp. Her parents had fallen victim to typhus and had died. Dietrich and Neta celebrated their marriage in the spring



of 1920. The wedding, of course, was a sharp contrast to Isaak Isaak's description of his own wedding to Katherina Schulz so many years ago, where he spoke of it being the finest ever celebration in Osterwick. In 1920 he simply said, "The wedding was not according to custom, . . . but when true hearts are joined and built on God's love, then it is always a festivity."<sup>86</sup> They were relieved that there was no bandit activity that interrupted the celebration even though a day earlier the groom's wedding suit had been stolen.

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 38.



Without complaint, my grandfather was married in a borrowed suit, small concern compared to violence and murder.

Their marriage was short lived as on April 27<sup>th</sup> 1921, this beautiful bride died giving birth to my mother. Johannes Epp, brother to Neta, described seeing Dietrich and Neta in a wagon with galloping horses rushing to the hospital. A note in Grandpa Dietrich's diary stated that their baby, (my mother) was born in Chortitza on April 27<sup>th</sup> 1921 and that his wife Neta died at 10:00 pm April 28<sup>th</sup> 1921.

Isaak Isaak spoke of their deep sorrow at the death of his own daughter Anna in May of 1922. She left behind a young husband and a small two-year old daughter named Erika. Throughout the anarchy years Anna had toiled endlessly taking care of typhus-infested people and was finally overcome herself. Isaak Isaak was full of sadness.

One year earlier, our strong, friendly, loving daughter-in-law Neta Zacharias nee Epp had died suddenly in Chortitza hospital during the birth of her first child... Like a beautiful bride she lies in the grave, so young and tender and waits for the hour of awakening. The dear little being left behind was given the name of "Neti" and had to be guarded and cared for... To carry to the grave, two daughters in their best years, were very clear admonitions, but meditating on it, we only have reason to say with Job: you Lord have given them and you have taken them, your name be praised and glorified.<sup>87</sup>



Aganetha Zacharias nee Epp and Anna Epp nee Zacharias

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 41.

The surrender to the will of God was the path of non-resistance and it seemed to comfort in times of great loss.

### **Travel to Canada 1923**

Isaak Isaak wrote, “I believe it was June of 1922, when like a thunderbolt out of the blue, our own son Isaak, who had been given up for dead by many, finally came home.”<sup>88</sup> The family’s joy could hardly be described in words. He had been in service to the state for over seven years and during that time had not been heard from. With the fall of the old regime the family knew that he was in grave danger.

Many years later Isaak’s daughter Lenora, detailed some of his experiences during those years. He had had many high powered experiences while serving the Czars. He became acquainted with the son and daughter of Leo Tolstoy and once had dinner with the famous ballerina Anna Pavlova.

When the communists took over Isaak and the members of the Diplomatic Corps were arrested. On the night prior to his arrest he had a dream where he was told that he would live. As he entered the jail after his arrest in Moscow he met a priest who also told him he was going to live. Perhaps being an excellent horseman saved his life. Perhaps destiny saved his life.

His daughter described the scene:

He was chosen by lots to take the place of a communist officer to lead a parade to honor Leon Trotsky. Apparently the communist officers were not well trained

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 41.

horsemen. To avoid detection during the parade Isaak kept his face hidden away from the cameras. Then at the end of the parade he raced his horse towards Trotsky, and reared the horse on its hind legs in a salute to him, . . . a White Army salutes for a Red leader.<sup>89</sup>

This turned out to be the ride that saved his life. He was presented with gifts by Trotsky to honor his horsemanship. Meanwhile all his comrades, as well as the priest who had befriended him, were executed. His daughter expressed that this troubled her father for the rest of his life.

He served the Communists for two more years until his release in 1922 at which time he went directly to Osterwick. He confirmed that the situation in Russia was dire and he did not expect conditions to improve. Isaak Isaak and his newly returned son talked into the night about efforts to leave Russia. Young Isaak was fully supportive of the plans to leave their once beautiful homeland and he and his father conspired together and planned further strategies.

Many of their prayers had been whispered and cried out to the hills, begging God for redemption from the terrible trials. There was a great search for a country that would accept them. They were overjoyed when it seemed that Canada was opening its doors. Much credit for the salvation of at least 20,000 Mennonites is given to David Toews, a Mennonite in Canada willing to sponsor many, as well as Prime Minister Mackenzie King, who enabled the immigration to happen. My parents voted Liberal for as long as they lived, in gratitude to Mackenzie King. The road was long and arduous but Isaak

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<sup>89</sup> George Zacharias, ed., *Wilhelm Zacharias and Descendants*, 180.

Isaak said that in December of 1922 prospective emigrants suddenly received papers and forms to fill out. This seemed to be a period of joy and hope and fear, all being mixed in a stew pot of anticipation. Their lives moved from defending themselves to prospects of a new life filled with meetings, lists, passports and forms. The lists kept changing as people grappled with leaving their crumpled beloved homeland or staying and hoping it would get better. One person would be on the list and then be persuaded to stay behind. Another whispered to Isaak Isaak that they should be warned that the government was allowing the emigration in order to fill the ship with once well-to-do people and then planned to drown them in one fell blow. The fear of death continued its dance throughout all the plans for leaving. In June of 1923, visas were personally brought to Osterwick. Young Isaak was elected the leader and director of the whole large company of emigrants ready to leave on June 22<sup>nd</sup> 1923.

Buns had been baked and dried for the trip. Anything left of their meager possessions was sold or left, and the splitting of families and saying goodbye began. In the excitement and new hope there was also great sadness. Isaak Isaak and his wife walked to the train station saying good bye to those who decided to stay and the weeping began.

The procession went slowly forwards. A crying, wailing, ear-deafening outcry, parting, parting from one's birthplace is sorrowful, pain, and pain gives rise to sighs, groans, weeping and screaming.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Zacharias *Autobiography of Isaak Isaak Zacharias*, 45.

With some sentiment he held his memories of the good times as they walked past landmarks that had meaning for them. As the train pulled away the long road of goodbyes continued. Another inspection took place when they reached the border. People held their breath and prayed for safety as they had to face what Isaak Isaak called, “the penetrating eyes of the horrible border guards.”<sup>91</sup>

Crossing the border out of Russia, they passed through the famous Red gate into Latvia and everyone broke out in song. “Nun Danket alle Gott,” (Now Thank We All Our God, with hearts and hands and voices). They had escaped. Isaak Isaak shared their joy saying, “So, now it is accomplished, what had been so fervently and passionately wished for – we have escaped the Russian hell and can breathe freely and confidently. What a feeling of happiness...not to be so terribly afraid of people.”<sup>92</sup>

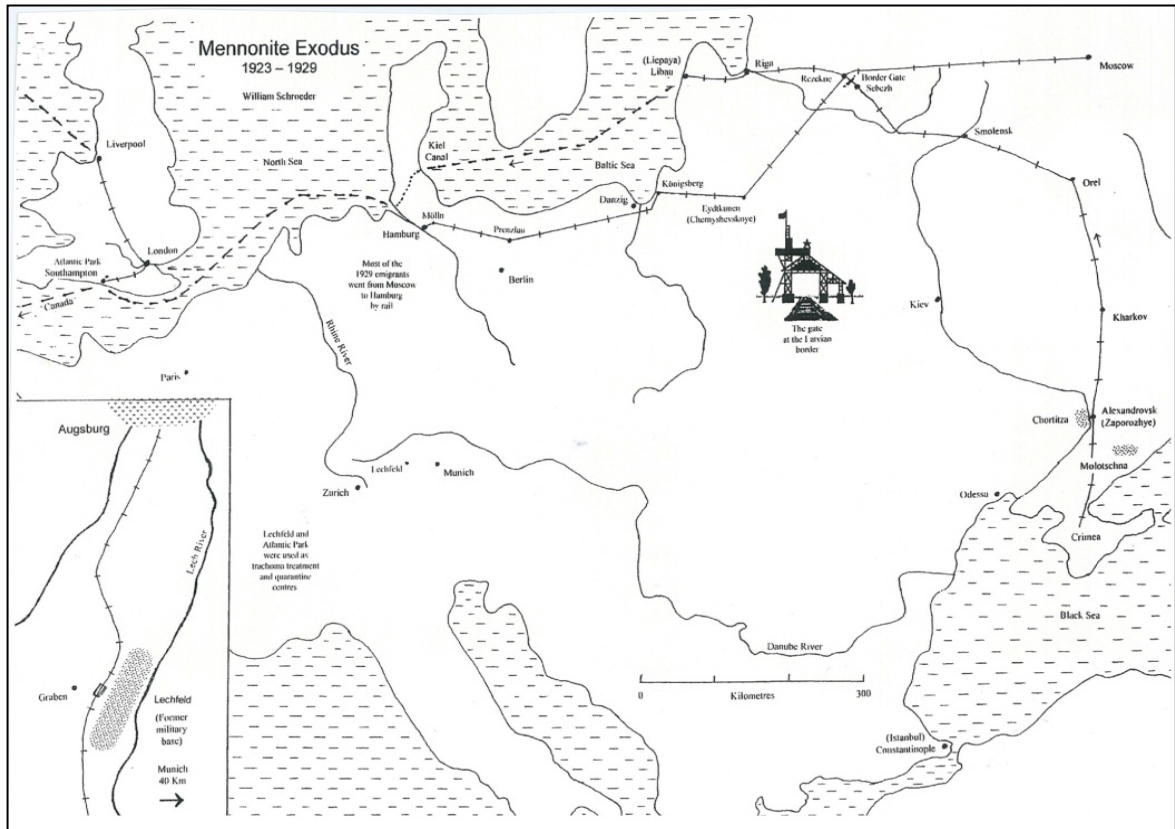
As they travelled Isaak Isaak described the landscape and the beauty of the fields, the farms and cattle grazing. After a number of stops they finally arrived in the town of Southampton where he spoke of another inspection of their eyes, hands, heads, legs, etc. Throughout all these inspections many were held back. The Zacharias family, however, passed this final inspection and they sat in wait for their ship to arrive. Isaak Isaak wrote: “At half past six in the evening of July 10<sup>th</sup> 1923, we saw the giant ship, the Empress of France, being pulled into the harbor by three tugboats.”<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 47.



After a long arduous journey on this massive ship the Zacharias family and many others arrived in Quebec. Transferring then to railway transportation they travelled many days across the prairies to arrive in Rosthern Saskatchewan on July 21<sup>st</sup> 1923, one month after leaving their homeland. Newspaper reporter Gerald Brown wrote of the experience of watching the arrival of this large contingency of Mennonites, in an article in the Saskatoon Star Phoenix:

A great hush fell upon the assembled thousands and to the ears of the Canadians came a soft, slow chant, "Lobe den Herrn den Mächtigen König der Ehren," which is the German equivalent of our own, "Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow." Besides being a favorite hymn of the Mennonites, it is their

nearest approach to a national anthem. Softly the chant arose and fell, seeming to be a musical expression of the great tragedy and heartbreak of the Mennonites. Then the Canadian Mennonites took up the song, and the tone increased in volume, growing deeper and fuller, until the melody was pouring forth from several thousand throats. When the first note of the song burst upon the air, every Mennonite removed his hat, and the others paid like tribute. There were many in the crowd who had sprung from other races, but the significance of the song was manifest to them when they saw their Mennonite friends bare their heads and when they saw grown men, whom they had known for years, burst into tears.<sup>94</sup>

They had arrived in Canada and so began the journey to rebuild their lives in this new country. Arms empty of possessions they were full of hope and gratitude. What does it mean in the life of a family, a person, a child, to rise from the ashes of destruction and to begin to rebuild? All that had been acquired and built had been decimated. Isaak Isaak was 55 years old when he and his family arrived in Canada.

## **Part II Johann Johann Epp 1852 - 1919**

### **The Family Estate of Kornejewka**

In 2008 a weathered Ukrainian Baba pointed to the hills of the once beautiful estate of Kornejewka, which had been home to Johann Johann Epp and his wife Aganetha Epp nee Heinrichs, and their daughter Neta (my grandmother) and two sons, Johannes and Jacob. This estate had been purchased by Aganetha's father to ensure that all his children would have land to farm. Seven families lived on this hustling busy estate

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<sup>94</sup> Frank Epp, *Mennonite Exodus* (Altona: D.W.Friesen and Sons Ltd.,1962) 145.

farm. Later during the revolution, just as with the Zacharias family, the Epps and the Heinrich families also fled in the night to save their own lives.

Now perhaps 90 years later in 2008, I felt the earth of the estate beneath my feet as we stood with a very old, poverty stricken Ukrainian Baba whose clothes were pinned together with large safety pins. She tried to tell us stories her ancestors had told her. In her native language and translated by our interpreter, she spoke of the beauty of the original estate emphasizing that they had flowers everywhere. Through the rain and the clouds we looked across the fields, imagined the flowers, and travelled back in time.

Johann Johann wrote that in 1892 his father-in-law offered to build them a house in Kornejewka. Johann Johann was grateful but wrote of feeling overwhelmed with the expectation of becoming a farmer. He described it as a sad state of affairs because he felt he had no knowledge of farming.

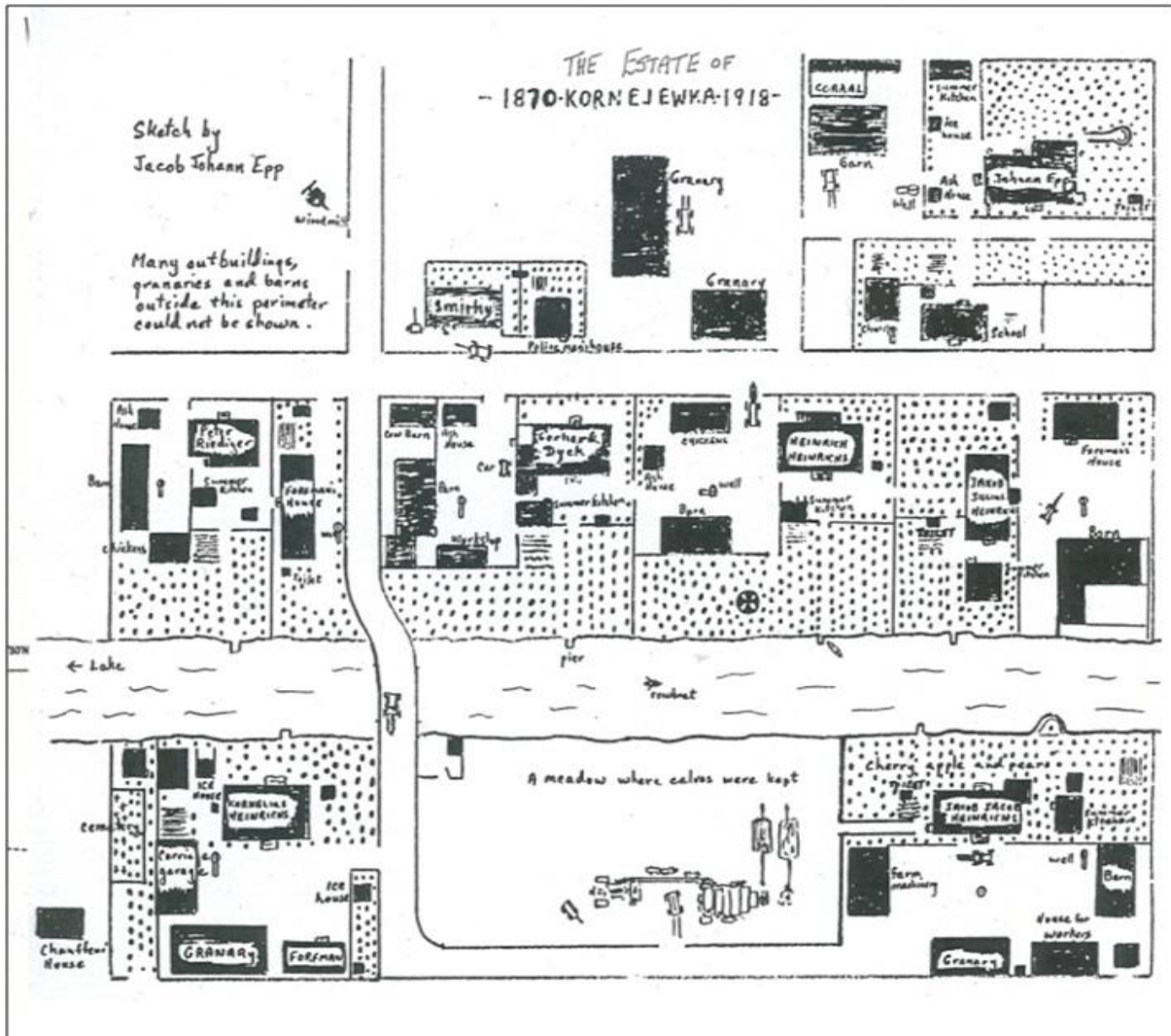
His son Johannes said, “My father was no agriculturist. He felt he owed it to mother to keep the farm going.”<sup>95</sup> Son Johannes was the one who was drawn to the farm and in the attachment in his father’s diary he wrote of his nostalgic memories and his own love for the business of farming. He described that thousands of sheep grazed on the fields of Kornejewka and after the shearing, wool would be piled to the depths of ten feet on the main floor of the 50 by 250 foot storage building and eight feet in the loft. So in

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<sup>95</sup> Johann J. Epp, *Diary of Johann Johann Epp 1852 – 1919* (Winnipeg: Translated and printed by family with assistance from the Heritage Centre, Winnipeg, 1999), 82.



the fields of Kornejevka in 2008, I imagined the sheep grazing on those lush hillsides and felt the idyllic joy of those times.



The estate resembled Zachariasfeld. The Epps and the Zacharias' became friends.

When my grandfather Dietrich and Johann Jr. returned from studying in Germany they fell in love with each other's sisters and later married. My grandfather Dietrich Zacharias married Neta Epp, Johann Jr. Epp married Anna Zacharias, and youngest son Jacob Epp married Katie Zacharias, (the aunt who earlier described her memories of their home on

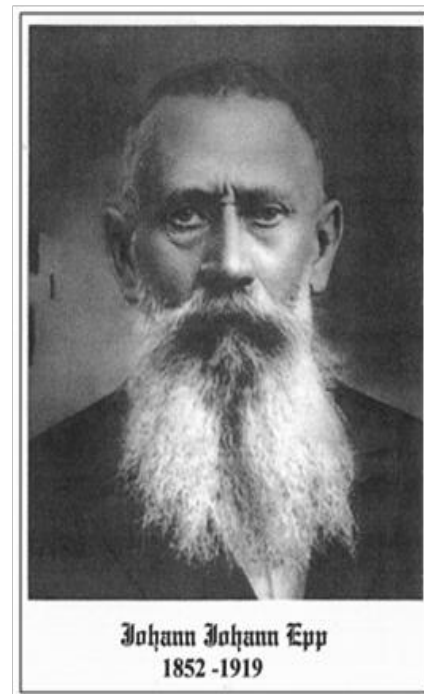
Zachariasfeld). Like the vines of the rich grapes that graced the trellises, these two families were interwoven.

### **Johann Johann, the Teacher/Preacher**

Interwoven and yet so unique - as I entered the portal of Johann Johann's diary, I observed and experienced the differences between these two great-grandfathers.

Although both lived on large estates, Johann Johann clearly did not share the passion for the entrepreneurship that seemed to pour out of every cell of Isaak Isaak's body. Johann Johann was rather a teacher, preacher, superintendent of schools and supervisor of pastoral leaders. His writings were full of scripture references, prayers and his interpretations of various passages.

Entries were made by Johann Johann from 1880 to 1920, with the exception of the missing entries from 1909 to 1919. Those years were referenced as being in the missing blue book which was described in the introduction. Thankfully his sons Johannes and Jacob had written about some of their experiences during the years 1909 to 1919. These were in the attachments at the end of the text. Even with



missing pages, this text was still a lavish point of entry into another era, triggering old memories for those old enough to remember and filling in gaps for those too young to

remember or know. For me it provided insight into the life of my great-grandfather and also into the circumstances of the life of the grandmother I never knew. Thanks to their relative Hans Epp and the convoluted path of Hermes, this diary eventually found its way home, fulfilling the wish of Johann Johann when he spoke of his reasons for his writings:

My dear children, some day when you will be in possession of this book in which I have included my meaningful experiences, my family and the larger church community; you will become aware that your father sought to recognize the leading of the Lord in all things. Hopefully, when you have grown up, you, too, will be able to discern God's leading in your life. Learn to trust and follow the Lord.<sup>96</sup>

### **His Many Losses**

Johann Johann began writing in his diary when he was 28. He shared his joy at the little birthday celebration where his wife had decorated the room with garlands and flowers and given him embroidered slippers and tobacco. They were waiting to have their firstborn and his prayers centered on her and the life of their unborn child.

I entered into my imagination as I walked with him through his losses. In his childhood he was one of twelve children where only five of them survived. Later married to his first wife Gertrude they experienced the birth of their first child. Sixteen months later on July 10<sup>th</sup> 1879 this small daughter Helena passed away. On September 22<sup>nd</sup> 1880 Gertrude delivered a son whom they named Johannes. On September 23<sup>rd</sup> 1880 she told her husband that she had a premonition that the Lord was calling her home.

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 61, 62.

She took her medicines saying that she would do that and then she would die. Johann Johann asked her if she didn't want to get better and come and live with him, if it was God's will? "Yes," she answered, "but let us go out on the lovely green grass in the garden and die together."<sup>97</sup> They exchanged words of their love for each other. He continued writing about their last hours together. She could no longer speak but still stroked his beard three times and kissed him. Later in the night her condition deteriorated and he described the agony. "Her whole body trembled, her fingers shook and she flailed with her arms. I almost felt like grumbling against God."<sup>98</sup>

At 5:45 on September 29<sup>th</sup> 1880, she took her last breath. Johann Johann said, "Her life had ebbed away; my beloved was a corpse. Her soul, however, had been taken to its heavenly home, into the New Jerusalem...She is now with her little daughter, Helena"<sup>99</sup>

After the funeral he acknowledged that she would never come to him again and he asked God, "Did you answer my prayers in a different way than I had hoped for? But you, Lord, do not make mistakes."<sup>100</sup>

In every entry after this experience, Johann Johann called out to God and Gertrude as he marked each day and counted how long since her death and how long until

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 12.

he could die and be with her. Little Johannes was cared for by his grandparents as Johann. Johann tried to keep teaching and preaching and doing his work.

For his birthday in July 1881 his mother had given him a chair to use while he played the accordion. My thoughts pictured a concerned mother, worrying about her son's deep grief and aloneness, and perhaps she hoped he would find some comfort in playing his music. His gifts and love of music have been a golden thread that weaves through into many of his descendants.

Over Christmas 1881 he wrote that the holidays were quite pleasant but he added:

My heart was so lonely and often I asked God, "Why, O God, did this have to happen?" But how can I, the creature, complain to the creator, or the sinner about the Holy One? Why should we be sad and sorrowing? Are we not in God's hands? Does anything happen that is not in his sovereign will? <sup>101</sup>

He prayed often for his son who remained with his grandparents. The infant had numerous sick times. He implored God not to punish his son for the father's sins and asked forgiveness for his own failings. In spite of his prayers, on April 14<sup>th</sup> 1881 his son died.

The sovereign Lord ordained that my beloved son, given to me by God, would die on Saturday, that holy night before Easter. My beloved Gertrude endured so much pain and suffering during the time of his birth. The Lord Jesus has spared our child from all of this world's sorrows and now mother, daughter and son are together before the throne of God. They are seeing him in his great majesty; they are honoring and praising his name. O God and Father, grant me that peace which you have given my loved ones. <sup>102</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 20.

Son Johannes was seven months old at the time of his death. In three short years this family faced so many losses. In 1879 Johann and Gertrude lost their first child, in 1880 he watched his wife die and in 1881 he buried his infant son. Every year there was another immediate family member who died. He was left all alone.

In his diary he dialogued with God and expressed his deep longings for Gertrude. He longed to communicate with her and pondered why she was taken and he was left. He prayed for patience when he simply wanted to die and be with his family. He felt desperately sad but continued reminding himself that God was sovereign and reigned over all. He chastised himself for his sadness and for complaining.

Nothing but loneliness! But what can be done about it? Isn't it the Lord who leads us on our path? He has ordained this from the beginning so it is good, actually, very good. How could one ever criticize what God does? That can never be! A Christian must move on without hesitation.<sup>103</sup>

The year passed and his words continued expressing his desire to be taken to his heavenly home. In one entry he dialogued with Gertrude;

Traut, Traut, my beloved Traut, you my beloved Gertrude, do you know why God has taken you from me? I am certain you do. Basically I do too. Did God not have something very special in mind for us when he called you home and did not allow you to remain with me any longer? I am certain you are in heaven; I wish I could communicate with you. I know this is impossible. What is mortal cannot communicate with the immortal; we would not be able to grasp what you would have to tell us. Oh Traut, Traut, your remains are resting in the earth and mine will follow. How long will it take? <sup>104</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 25.

In 1882 his words began to express hope as he met and became engaged to Aganetha Heinrichs. January 2<sup>nd</sup> 1883, they were married and he expressed overwhelming gratitude for the gift of another's love:

Joy and sorrow are both ever-present in our lives. So the Lord, after a time of deep sorrow, has led me to a time of joy and rejoicing...The old has passed away, behold all things are new! ...

Wonderful and incomprehensible are the ways of the Lord. We do not know how you govern. Are you not the one who has led my life in the direction it is now going? Are you not the one who has allowed a new loving woman to come into my life? I praise you for this Lord and am very thankful that you did not punish me the way I deserved to be punished. You have seen my helplessness and been gracious to me. Your loving kindness is new each morning.<sup>105</sup>



On November 10<sup>th</sup> 1883, a daughter was

born prematurely and lived only three days. They were comforted by the scripture where Jesus called the children to him and again they surrendered to the will of God. On November 12<sup>th</sup> 1885, a son was born to them. On April 7<sup>th</sup> 1886, this small five-month old passed away in the early morning hours after a two-week illness.

This family's sadness did not end with four dead children. Their intimate walk with births and deaths continued. On January 19<sup>th</sup> 1888, another son was born. On

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 27, 28.

September 13<sup>th</sup> 1888, little Julius passed away after a serious illness. He was eight months old. But Johann Johann and Aganetha kept moving forward still without any living children. On September 8<sup>th</sup> 1893, another son was born. They called him Johannes. Thankfully this son survived all his illnesses, came to Canada and lived into old age. On October 21<sup>st</sup> 1895, another son whom they named Julius was born. His life was also cut short and at the young age of fourteen he died of kidney failure.

On December 15<sup>th</sup> 1897, a tiny daughter who they named Aganetha was born. This daughter later became my grandmother and as already spoken about, died at age 24 giving birth to my mother. September 26<sup>th</sup> 1902, the family welcomed another son. Thankfully this son also lived into old age. He was their youngest child and they named him Jacob.<sup>106</sup>

In summary of the births and deaths, only two children out of nine had the privilege of reaching old age. This was not uncommon during this period of history as Johann Johann made references to others who lost many children. One family he referred to had nine children and all of them died in infancy.

In my world, in this country and this time, when someone loses a child, we are aware of a permanent wound of loss and pain. We have access to support, counseling and many measures to help us heal. How did Johann Johann and Aganetha recover from watching so many of their children die? Did they become immune to the depth of pain or

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<sup>106</sup> He described that he wanted to name this son David, and his wife wanted the name Jacob, so they cast lots and his wife won. Epp, *Diary of Johann Johann*, 93.



did each death pierce them more deeply? As more and more children died Johann Johann continued documenting the events and he and his wife carried on with their lives, always clinging to their faith and holding fast to the belief that God knew best. He expressed his pain and called out to God but always came back to reminding himself to surrender to what was.

When son Julius struggled with long-term kidney problems, Johann Johann and Aganetha had planned to remodel their home to make room for a live-in teacher to teach him at home. He died before the renovations happened. In the death of this fourteen year old son, his father cried out to God from the depths of his sorrow.

He related to David the psalmist in Psalm 88, verse 13:18: “But I cry to you for help, O Lord; in the morning my prayer comes before you, why oh Lord, do you reject me and hide your face from me?...You have taken my companions and loved ones from me; the darkness is my closest friend.”

Johann Johann lamented in his sadness but his writings consistently described his journey back to surrender and asking forgiveness for his sins and lack of trust. He did however, ask penetrating questions. “Isn’t everything in your hands? Can’t you direct things as you please?”<sup>107</sup>

Another characteristic of Johann Johann was his love of nature. Once he described the splendor and beauty of the moon which he said surpassed any beauty

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<sup>107</sup> Epp, *Diary of Johann Johann Epp*, 58.

created by man. On January 2<sup>nd</sup> 1900, he wrote about travelling to a church service in Gerhardsthal:

On the way there I saw the most magnificent sight, two sun dogs next to the sun. On the way back there seemed to be a ring around the sun as well as two sun dogs and the moon was surrounded by two rings, one of which was not complete. I wonder what message God is passing on to us.<sup>108</sup>

### **His Travels, Pastoral Work and Theological Perspectives**

Economically these were the good years in South Russia and this family also prospered financially. Johann Johann remained deeply engrossed in his teaching and preaching. He travelled extensively and described trips to Leipzig, Hamburg, Berlin, Kiev and many parts of Russia. Much of the travel within Russia involved supervision of schoolteachers and church pastors, as well as preaching and teaching. During his trips to Germany, Johann Johann did some pastoral studies/conferences and visited pastors in various locations.

His texts were abundant with his supervisory opinions on what was scripturally correct or incorrect. He was not happy with some more modern weddings. On December 29<sup>th</sup> 1896 he wrote: “There was no mention of the Biblical responsibilities of the groom and bride. To my way of looking at it, a sermon is not necessary, but the rules of marriage as stated in the Bible and that marriage is a commitment for life should

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 77.

always be presented to the couple.”<sup>109</sup> Coming home from another wedding in the same year he wrote:

A wedding like this has never taken place before and what took place there was not what usually happens at Mennonite weddings. The young couple and their parents were not satisfied with a quiet wedding celebration. To entertain their guests in the evening they had hired musicians from Alexandrowsk. These musicians also provided the music for those who wished to dance. What has happened to us ordinary, quiet-living Mennonites? What will become of us in the future? <sup>110</sup>

On the same day he described his dismay that at a funeral, “They incorporated some Russian traditions, using candles in broad daylight and burning incense even though the body had not deteriorated. I can’t understand why this was done?”<sup>111</sup> Another time he spoke of the fact that major and minor chords were used together, something he felt was inappropriate.

He disapproved of song leaders changing the traditional hymns and making them more lively and to their liking. “Therefore music is coming into the church that does not belong there.”<sup>112</sup> While doing a school inspection in 1907 he expressed his criticism of the poor enunciation of the students while singing:

In most schools they are not teaching them to sing anthems, they prefer to sing other songs, some of them worldly. And when they teach the old melodies they change the rhythms. We are not accustomed to hearing them sung this way. I

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 48.

don't think this should be permitted. However, for the most part, teachers are to be commended for their good work.<sup>113</sup>

He also expressed his opinions on how many different speakers interpreted the scriptures. On June 6<sup>th</sup> 1905, his journal entry described his response to a pastor who was speaking on Ezekiel 36: 25 – 28:

I couldn't believe what I was hearing! Lacking resources and insight to present the message found in this glorious text, he referred to Medusa, (a Greek mythology goddess), Schiller, (a German playwright and poet) and Sleeping Beauty. He said that as Sleeping Beauty came out of her spell by a prince's kiss of love, so a certain prince, namely Jesus, the Son of God, kisses us with his kiss of love and redeems us. What nonsense! What a distortion of the text! What a misleading interpretation of God's Word! If he would have said that this is how some people interpret the concept of redemption and then continued by explaining what salvation is all about, he could have been excused for what he said. But since he insists that his interpretation is correct, it has become a serious matter. Even though his audience may not have fully understood what he was saying, his interpretation is frightening and damaging.<sup>114</sup>

He was further dismayed that this preacher referred to a poem that Johann Johann felt was an immoral poem. "God have pity on us and protect us from such godless and corrupt interpretations."<sup>115</sup>

The journal also included many of the questions that he pondered when he wasn't so sure of what the church's responses should be. He described a situation where a man left the Mennonite church and was baptized a second time and married someone from another denomination. The man was excommunicated from their church. However

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 119, 120.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 120.

neither the Baptists nor the Methodists would accept him into their churches. The man insisted that he was still a Mennonite. Johann Johann struggled with their decision to excommunicate him from the Mennonite Church.

But in my heart I am still asking, if he repents will I or will we be able to forgive him? Should we not forgive him already? Must he first apologize for all his mistakes? Is Thieszen really convinced that he committed an error and will he honestly contact all those whom he has wronged and plead forgiveness? Do we only forgive if he repents? Should we not forgive regardless of his stand? <sup>116</sup>

Further to these deliberations he added that he thought that Thieszen should be dealt with sternly as all this was not a good example for the young people.

### **Political Events and Arising Turmoil**

His diary also related political events. He wrote about the murder of the Czar which happened on March the 4<sup>th</sup> 1881 and about the people pledging their allegiance to the next Czar, Alexander III. He prayed for protection for them all. He related that Czar Nicholas II declared war on Japan in 1904, and the huge Russian casualties. Loyalty to the Czars remained strong for the Russian Mennonites and when the Czarist regime was eventually overthrown it was a major blow to them. Their loyalty to the Czars, their identification with Germany and the German language, and their prosperity, combined to make a potent mixture of reasons that made them prime targets for revolutionaries and anarchists. Envy and anger were rising like yeast and the poor saw much they wanted on the rich Mennonite estates.

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 96.

Johannes, (son of Johann Johann) wrote about travelling and studying in Germany with my Grandfather Dietrich Zacharias in 1912. The joy of the experience was somewhat overshadowed as they stood at the train station in Munster on their way home and their professor who was accompanying them spoke gravely and clearly:

My Russian gentlemen, when you return home, remember these words of mine. Russia is at the brink of a catastrophe. In each human heart beats a heart that experiences joy and sorrow. If you will meet the people halfway, you will have success, if not, you may have to face many hardships. This is the first step towards socialism.<sup>117</sup>

Young Johannes took these words seriously and as he took over the management of his parents' estate he made every effort to treat the workers fairly. Fair and kind treatment of workers often saved their lives as the winds of revolution grew into funnel clouds and hurricanes of rebellion. Johann Johann had earlier ensured that young Johannes learned the skills that the workers had, "because," he said, "you may not always be rich."

Johann Johann in his November 10<sup>th</sup> 1919 entry, made reference to the blue notebook already described. Entries from January 21<sup>st</sup> 1909 to November 10<sup>th</sup> 1919, were written in that blue notebook which was lost in the turmoil of the times. The missing pages, descriptions of the revolutionary years, the gap, the mystery of what these missing pages might have said, remains unknown.

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 133.

**Nestor Makhno 1889 - 1934**

The stages of the revolution were described in Part I, however one aspect that requires more explanation is the infamous Nestor Makhno, supposedly the childhood friend of my grandfather Janzen. They grew up only a few kilometers apart. In contrast to my grandfather who was born into riches, Nestor was born into a poor peasant Ukrainian family. His father died when he was 10 months old. He was the youngest of five children. Due to extreme poverty he became a shepherd at the age of seven and later worked for local landlords. He left school at the age of twelve to work as a farmhand on the estates of the wealthy, (the *kulaks*). At 17, Makhno began his involvement in revolutionary politics. He carried latent anger at the perceived injustices he had experienced when working for the rich, as well as having been witness to the terror of the Czarist regimes. The Czars were attempting to squelch revolutionary activity occurring in 1905. Some called Makhno a psychotic man who was known to have fierce outbursts of intense anger. In 1906 he joined an anarchist organization, was arrested, tried and acquitted, only to be re-arrested in 1907 and again released. Other arrests came in 1908 and in 1910 when he was sentenced to death by hanging. This sentence was later commuted to life imprisonment, at which time he was sent to Moscow. In prison he was influenced by his relationship with intellectual Peter Arshinov, who took him under his wing. It was here that he obtained his formal introduction to the political philosophy of anarchism. He became an avid student, studying whatever was available to him,

especially libertarian philosophy. After his release in 1917, he began to organize peasant's unions and expropriated large estates and distributed the land to the peasants.

It is important to note the huge impact and terror that this man and his band of men inflicted on an already vulnerable population. To many he was a hero, to others and of course to my ancestors he was a murderous villain whose cruelty knew no bounds. At the height of his power he had gathered about 40,000 men who attacked many Mennonite villages, killing the inhabitants and/or forcing them to flee. The large rural landholdings of pacifist Mennonites were prominent targets.

As with most wars and revolutions, fighting parties took turns being in bed together and later killing each other. For a time one force was the friend and at another time the same force was the enemy. Eventually the Red Army (Bolsheviks) under Lenin declared the Makhnovites counter-revolutionaries and outlaws; orders were for them to be arrested and Makhno was to be assassinated. It is said that Trotsky decided that it was better to cede the entire Ukraine to the White Army than to allow an expansion of Makhnovism. Consequently Makhno's answer to the Red Army was to escape with his closest associates, while Trotsky's forces were defeated by the White Army. Meanwhile Makhno was regenerating his forces and came back to defeat the White Army. However by now, nearly half of Makhno's troops were infested with lice and being struck down by typhus. Trotsky's hostilities resumed and by autumn of 1920 the Bolsheviks (the Reds) finally defeated the Makhnovites. In August 1921 an exhausted Makhno was finally driven into exile, fleeing to Romania, then Poland, Danzig, Berlin, and finally Paris,



where he died of tuberculosis in 1934 at the age of 46.<sup>118</sup> Five hundred people attended his funeral and his tomb is at the Cemetiere du Pere-Lachaise in Paris.

Travel companions on my 2008 Ukraine trip visited the Makhno Museum in Gulyae Pole, the birthplace of Nestor Makhno. Walter Braul wrote that the German curator at the museum said that she was not aware of any anti-German or anti-Mennonite sentiment in Russia before and during the Revolution:

She said that Makhno only reacted violently if people resisted his programs of redistributing land to the Ukrainian peasants. He was remembered as the peasant Robin Hood or the Taras Bulba of the Ukrainian Steppes. She did say, however, that the Town celebrated Nestor Makhno Days every summer and the celebrants become boisterous and enthusiastic as they remembered the details of his exploits. She did not think that we would enjoy being at such an event.<sup>119</sup>

### **After the Missing Pages**

On November 10<sup>th</sup> 1919, Johann Johann's diary entries continued almost as if it were the next day, rather than 10 years later.

Six chickens were stolen last night, their heads were lying on the yard. This evil was being done by the wicked people who are staying at brother Jacob Epp. Lord, our God, deliver us from Makhno's gang; free us from these godless people. Return law and order to our land, protect us in these difficult times. In your name we pray, Amen.<sup>120</sup>

Pieces of the events of the missing years are described by son Johannes, in the attachments in his father's diary. He described being drafted into the military in 1917.

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<sup>118</sup> *Nestor Makhno*, (accessed February 10, 2011); available from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nestor\\_Makhno](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nestor_Makhno).; Internet.

<sup>119</sup> Walter Braul, *The Mennonite Journey in Russia* (Edmonton: unpublished writings by Walter Braul, 2009), 4.

<sup>120</sup> Epp, *Diary of Johann Johann Epp*, 153.

The confusion and chaos was growing like wildfires leaping across the land. He knew that staying where he was would easily lead to his death or exile to Siberia. Official corruption was rampant, proving the Russian proverb concerning bribes. “The law is like the tongue of a wagon, which can be turned in many directions, and the more you grease its couplings, the easier it turns.”<sup>121</sup>

When Johannes was called in front of the Commission, food was becoming a precious commodity and he was able to get some butter and take it along with him. With this butter he purchased his discharge from the army. He was overjoyed to be able to return to his family and his beautiful young love, Anna Zacharias. They married at Zachariasfeld on November 17<sup>th</sup> 1917, the same day that Lenin led the second revolution in St. Petersburg. The wedding was not interrupted but everyone was uneasy.

Meanwhile the bandit raids were happening on neighboring estates. So far Kornejewka had been spared but one evening in mid January 1918, five or six armed men were banging at the door. They came in demanding to see the landowner. Young Neta, (my grandmother) ran to get her father. Son Johannes described his father entering the room calmly, then grabbing hold of two of the men’s guns saying, “There will be no shooting here. What do you want?”<sup>122</sup> Strangely enough, the men dropped their guns and asked for money. Johann Johann gave them what he had and they left.

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<sup>121</sup> Rempel and Rempel Carlson, *A Mennonite Family in Tzarist Russia*, 165.

<sup>122</sup> Epp, *Diary of Johann Johann Epp*, 17.

The description of this scene surprised me because as I read the many prayers of Johann Johann, I had pictured from his writings that he was a completely passive idealist. Here I saw his courageous assertive behavior as he grabbed hold of the guns saying, “There will be no shooting in this house.” This scenario could have ended badly. Johann Johann took a risk, asserted himself and it worked. The family was left shaken, but unharmed.

Then on January 18<sup>th</sup> 1918, there was a full raid on the estate and by evening the farm and the house were empty. Only the piano and the organ were left. Johannes Jr. remembered his mother cowering and weeping in a corner, bemoaning that all she had inherited was gone. He also described that he heard his father say to her, “Netie, was that all that you had?” She sighed and said, “No, I still have a Saviour.” Then father said, “Give me your hand and stand up. The Lord will help us further.”<sup>123</sup>

### **Fleeing their Kornejewka Estate**

That same night two of the workers harnessed horses to the wagon, which had two sheep, some eviscerated chickens and a small bag of flour on it and they ordered young Johannes to take his wife, his sister, his parents, and flee:

In a few minutes we five were on the wagon, riding into the darkness of the night, away from Kornejewka and into the unknown. We heard horses’ hoofs and knew that we were being followed. Soon we heard gun shots and the bullets whizzed past us but no one was hit. I drove into a side road and the pursuers went straight on ahead. Then it became quiet.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 188.

They travelled and eventually found lodging with a kind family in Neuendorf. The family spent the next two months there and never returned to live at Kornejewka. However Johannes Jr. drove to the estate every other night to steal some of their own wheat. He said that he managed to steal many bushels back and some of their Russian neighbors returned some of what they had stolen. Eventually the family moved to a home that Johann Johann had purchased in Chortiza. It was in this house that Anna Epp nee Zacharias, wife of Johannes Jr., gave birth to a daughter on October 3<sup>rd</sup> 1919. Amidst the horrors and atrocities, a child was born. This little Erika is now in her nineties and still lives in her own home here in Canada.

Johann Johann continued writing daily prayers of thanksgiving and supplication:

O God, our Father, you have given us rest. We give you praise and thanks! Thank you that I have been spared until now... They have not burned our house as they have our neighbors...We still have our cows and pigs. They have not raped my dear wife or our dear daughter Nettie... Do not let the gangs carry out their evil intentions. <sup>125</sup>

Every day they heard of murders and violence perpetrated on family and friends, now happening in surrounding villages and not only on estates; 80 in Eichenfeld, 15 in Petersdorf, 16 in Nikolaifeld and 18 in Hochfeld. People they knew and loved were shot, dismembered, raped and tortured on a daily basis. There was no space for grieving the massiveness of the losses.

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 153, 154.

Jacob, youngest son of Johann Johann wrote: “Who can forget the gruesome nights during which strong men trembled? Who can forget the mutilated bodies that found their rest in mass graves? Who can forget the violated women, who were mistreated by rough soldiers?”<sup>126</sup>

Johann Johann’s prayers continued: “Where are we to obtain food and fodder? Are you trying to destroy us? Famine threatens us if you won’t free us from these roving gangs. Please save us. Yes, we deserve punishment because we have sinned. Please forgive us. Hear us and help us.”<sup>127</sup>

On November 18<sup>th</sup> 1919, Johann Johann quoted Jeremiah 30:14:

*I have struck you as an enemy would and punished you as would the cruel, because your guilt is great and your sins are many.* These are the words the prophet Jeremiah had to give to the Israelites. Today we are beaten, we are robbed of clothing and food, children and young people are imprisoned and murdered with axe and sword and guns. With all these things happening to us, should we not confess that it is our wickedness that has brought this punishment upon our people?<sup>128</sup>

Johann Johann asked further if they had not taken enough time to read God’s word, or not prayed enough, or not been humble enough in their obedience to God’s Word? He begged forgiveness and asked for strength, mercy, grace and salvation from the gangs and bandits.

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 199.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 157.

### Lice-Infested Bandits Bring Typhus

December 17<sup>th</sup> 1919, Johann Johann made his last entry where he asked:

O God, grant that the soldiers living with us would make fewer demands. You alone can do this. Have pity on us and lead us through these oppressive times. Yesterday our Jacob was able to get 33 baskets of chaff and 3 wheat sheaves. O Lord, help us for your name's sake. Amen.<sup>129</sup>

Son Johannes wrote that on December 20<sup>th</sup> 1919 at 12:15 am, the Lord took the former writer to himself. He was 67 years, 4 months and 22 days at the time of his death. His son felt he could see from his father's expression, his deep longing for his eternal home and his last words were, *Jesus Heiland Meiner Seele, (Jesus Lover of My Soul)*. In the attachments at the end of the diary, son Johannes wrote of the circumstances of his father's death: "The Makhno forces brought the typhus epidemic into the villages. Food was very scarce and soldiers died like flies. Villagers also became sick and died. My father was one of the first who died of typhus."<sup>130</sup> He further described that he, his sister Neta, (my grandmother) and his brother Jacob, contracted the disease and before long there were 18 Makhno soldiers, (those who had invaded their home and demanded care) who lay unconscious on the floor. Only his mother, his wife Anna and one soldier were well enough to take care of anyone. By the middle of January 1920, Johann Johann's wife fell into delirium and died on January 20<sup>th</sup>. As she was dying she denied having typhus and said she was just so tired. My grandmother Neta recovered and she and Anna

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 170.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 190.

(son Johannes' wife) took care of the dying in their home. Later Johannes Jr. recovered and it became his job to go from house to house to load the dead soldiers and villagers on a wagon and take them to the cemetery where they were placed in mass graves. He wrote that two thirds of the 6000 villagers died at this time. It is estimated that typhus claimed some two – three million lives in Russia from 1918 – 1922.

Disease and the Red Army brought the reign of the Machnovite anarchists to a fatal end, but the Whites and the Reds still rivaled for control of the area that the Mennonites called home.

For the family of the Epps, death continued its torrid dance as my grandmother Neta Zacharias nee Epp died April 28<sup>th</sup> 1921, leaving my mother motherless, and Anna Epp nee Zacharias died May 9<sup>th</sup> 1922, leaving three year old Erika motherless. Two close friends died in their prime leaving infant daughters. (See picture page 80)

A year later in 1923, youngest son Jacob described their joy when emigration hopes began to materialize:

A strong hand opened the door and in the summer of 1923, 22,000 Mennonites were permitted to leave the country and immigrate to Canada. The journey through Russia entailed many difficulties: the railway was in poor condition and our locomotive shuddered from old age. On one occasion when we arrived at a mountain, the engineer commanded all men to get out and push with a united effort to get the train up the hill. The miracle materialized, slowly but surely we conquered the mountain. After two weeks we arrived safely at the boundary station of Sebesch, Latvia... You should have seen the faces of the people when we finally passed the Red Gate with its hammer and sickle! Old men jumped for sheer joy and thankfulness. Women embraced each other and the children became

excited, even though they were not completely aware of the significance of this crossing.<sup>131</sup>

On their voyage across the ocean they experienced many feelings. Jacob described nostalgic memories of their homeland in the good years, sadness of the horrific last years and anxieties about their survival in a new land. Their receptions both in Quebec and Rosthern were warm and he wrote in his later years as he remembered:

“Today all of this appears, *like a dream*. An invisible hand drew us out of the fire of terror and in miraculous ways transferred us to the *promised land* of Canada. To him alone be thanks, honor and praise through all eternity! Amen!”<sup>132</sup>

### **The Selbstschutz (Mennonite Self-Defense Units)**

Another piece of this Mennonite history required more explanation to be understood. A 1989 website article described the self-defense units as follows:

The Selbstschutz (self-defense) began as a spontaneous movement by the Mennonites in the Ukraine to protect lives and property during the period of violent anarchy following the Russian Revolution. During the German occupation (April – November, 1918) hitherto secret Selbstschutz units were trained under German supervision mainly in the Molotschna, Chortitza, Nikolaipol and Sagradovka. If and when the German troops withdrew, these militia units were to become operative.”<sup>133</sup>

For Mennonites who had historically attempted to live without raising the sword, this was a big change and created much controversy. In the early days of the Mennonite

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 199.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 200.

<sup>133</sup> Al Reimer, *Selbstschutz*, [1989 Website Article] (accessed January 2011), available from <http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/S444ME.html>; Internet.



Commonwealth they were self-governing and law enforcing. A man named Klaas Reimer and 18 followers broke away from the main church, forming what was called “Die Kleine Gemeinde,” (the small congregation). Their main complaint at that time, 1860, was that leaders were straying from the traditional pacifistic stance because they were turning Mennonite law breakers over to the Russian government for punishment, rather than dealing with them through internal Mennonite law enforcements. The desire to stay separate was ever present in the Mennonite Commonwealth and created both strengths and weaknesses in their systems. Walter Braul in *Mennonites, a Mystical People*, used Dr. Benjamin Unruh’s words as he referred to the Mennonites pretending that they could live in locked houses, separate from all:

It is not useful to think that the Mennonites should have done something to change the course of history and influence the very many factors which played a role in fostering the revolution which occurred. It is useful however, to recognize that the Mennonite practice of pretending that they were living in a locked house may have contributed to some of the extreme measures that were levied against them.<sup>134</sup>

Ultimately we cannot isolate from the rest of the world. We are a global community, not islands unto ourselves. Many of our ancestors’ lives were spared because, even in their separation, they did show kindness and respect to their workers during the prosperous years. This did not, by any means, guarantee safety. However servants who had been treated fairly and equitably often made efforts to save the employers they had once worked for, when violent actions were threatening them. I was

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<sup>134</sup> Braul Walter, *Mennonites, A Mystical People* (Edmonton: unpublished work 203),89.

reminded of Jürgen Moltmann's book *On Human Dignity* and his emphasis on the importance of human dignity. Humiliation and disrespect almost always breeds more hatred and violence. The struggle to know how to respond to the violence being perpetrated against the Mennonites and others, became a day to day challenge and created much confusion, fear and uncertainty.

A family member who was living in South Russia/Ukraine at the time of the revolution wrote to his enquiring niece here in Canada and said: "Prior to the revolution the police force in Russia was the tool of the Czarist Regime. It brutally suppressed all anti-Czarist sentiment, always favoring the rich people and the clergy."<sup>135</sup> Inequity and inhumane acts breed contempt. And so it was when given the opportunity these suppressed people took revenge. Policemen were killed and the police force virtually disappeared. Initially the Selbstschutz was an effort to regain some kind of order, perhaps a temporary police force. During their occupation of this territory the German army was encouraging Mennonites to defend themselves and perhaps to help them maintain order. David Rempel wrote that he remembered the German army dispensing two wagonloads of rifles, ammunition, hand grenades and even one machine gun to the village where he lived. He described the conflict in his own family:

Mother strongly opposed armed resistance, while Father was ambivalent. On the one hand he was a pragmatist and a firm believer in the sanctity of property. But he was also aware that the Ukrainian peasant – and landless Mennonite as well -

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<sup>135</sup> Personal Letter written by Peter Wiens to his niece, Evelyn Rempel Petkau. Permission to use given by Evelyn Rempel Petkau March 2011.

had ample reason to rebel against the existing order. Nevertheless, he felt Heinrich and I were old enough to decide our own course.<sup>136</sup>

It is important to note that many landless Mennonites did not join the Selbstschutz but rather the various factions of the revolutionaries, as they too shared the frustration of their own powerlessness.

Rempel wrote that the Neider Khortitsa (the Old Colony) self-defense units were neither cohesive, nor trained, and had literally no skills to act in real conflicts. However he added that in the Molotschna area where young people especially were much more pro German, hundreds of youth fought peasants and partisans. The German command was ordering that expropriated properties be returned but cautioned that no one should penalize culprits beyond restitution. But revenge was so sweet and with German support some revolutionaries were flogged and even killed. Power and powerlessness was simply flipping back and forth. Some order was restored by the Germans and the Mennonites were grateful even though they knew that anything could change at any moment and the threat of the Anarchists remained ever present. The German army continued in their efforts to arm the Mennonite people.

Alarmed by the conflict of how to respond to the violence, the Mennonite Church called a conference in Lichtenau which took place June 30<sup>th</sup> to July 2<sup>nd</sup> 1918. Many leaders still opposed any form of self-defense while others felt that non-resistance was not a viable option and should be abandoned or left to the conscience of each individual.

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<sup>136</sup> Rempel and Rempel Carlson, *A Mennonite Family in Tzarist Russia*, 195.

Facing a deadlock they formed a commission to create a statement of direction for the people:

The General Conference holds fast to our present confession in respect to non-resistance. It finds this grounded in Jesus Christ's behavior during his sojourn here on earth and in his word; the conference however recommends each separate congregation not coerce the conscience of any of its members who think differently on this question.<sup>137</sup>

Historically the conviction of rejection of the sword came gradually to the Anabaptist movement. The first witness to the total rejection of the use of the sword was Conrad Grebel and it was then later articulated in the Schleithem Confession compiled by Michael Statler in Switzerland in 1527:

One of the basic problems with the use of the sword, argued Anabaptists, was that killing a person destroyed any possibility of improvement or repentance. Robbing anyone of the freedom to decide for Christ was a grievous wrong... Basically, Anabaptists believed that the use of the sword in human relations was counter-productive. It served only to produce more hostility, more vengeance, more chaos. It was too final in its action, especially when such action was frequently unjust. Once the sword had spoken, the injury could not be rectified.<sup>138</sup>

Rempel stated that there were many reasons why people abandoned their stance of being pacifists during these chaotic times. Some have already been talked about; firstly the persuasion by the German army, secondly the lack of a police force and a hope to restore some order, and lastly, in Rempel's own words: "As one who succumbed, I think revenge motivated many Mennonite youths (sometimes encouraged by our elders),

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 197.

<sup>138</sup> Klaassen, *Anabaptism in Outline*, 266.

hoping to punish the ‘stupid peasant’ who with impunity had robbed us of our hard-won belongings.”<sup>139</sup> He acknowledged the anger and hatred that was growing within most people. I ask the question, “How could you not be angry and afraid and sickened by all that was occurring around them?”

On his website, Allan Reimer wrote that in December 1918, aided by the White Army, the Molotschna Selbstschutz led a successful attack against Makhnovite forces at Chernigovica. By that winter the Selbstschutz had grown to an “army” of 2,700 people divided into 20 companies and 300 cavalry who were attempting to provide a front against Makhno forces. Things came to major blows especially in Blumenthal, which was 20 miles north of Molotschna. The Selbstschutz had held the front for two months, however by March 1919, Makhnovites with the help of the Red Army advanced and there was a fierce five day battle. The Selbstschutz folded like an accordion. Men put their rifles down and simply tried to escape, retreating to the city of Halbstadt (now called Molochansk) in the Molotschna Colony. For the Bolsheviks this was not seen as an effort to return some form of order but rather rebellious acts against the now semi reigning power. Betrayed and betrayer, everyone was suspect of being for or against all the blazing factions. One family member described that he was once accused of being a Bolshevik because he had chosen to be kind to his workers. At one point something might work in their favor and at another point the same thing caused them to be accused,

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<sup>139</sup> Rempel and Rempel Carlson, *A Mennonite Family in Tzarist Russia*, 195, 196.

beaten, or murdered. The by-products of such times resulted in behaviors that did not need justification, but were inspired by great anger and the eternal desire for revenge.

The ebbing months of 1918 saw the withdrawal of the German troops and utter chaos in the Mennonite villages of south Russia. The Whites, (former Czarist officers and some Cossacks) fought the Yellows, (Ukrainian Socialists) interspersed with the Reds, (Bolsheviks) and the Blacks, (roving bandit groups who were anarchists). By now the *Selbstschutz* was unarmed and helpless and whether one was a strong pacifist or not, all the lines had gotten grey and answers to the questions of response to violence were washed away into swamps of despair and distant hopes for survival. The idealism of non-resistance is easier to affirm during times of peace and calm. However, in retrospection, people still speculate and express opinions on the matter. Website writer Cornelius Krahn stated his thoughts: “On the whole the *Selbstschutz* organization was a regrettable deviation from a cherished principle of the Mennonites. It was an illustration of the fact that a peacetime principle tested under unusual conditions will likely not find 100 % adherence.”<sup>140</sup> He added that the numbers that participated were small. There were about 100,000 Mennonites in these areas and approximately 2,700 participated in self-defense units, which also included non-Mennonites. I quote from the letter that a family member wrote to his niece:

I don't think your Grandpa ever regretted having been a member of the *Selbstschutz*. The latter was generally regarded as a police action to protect the

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<sup>140</sup> Cornelius Krahn, *Selbstschutz*, [1958 Website Article] (accessed January 2011); available from <http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/S444ME.html>; Internet.

population from the outrages of the bandits...In this it was successful...In my opinion people who were not in the Mennonite settlements during the time when the Selbstschutz-psychology was gradually building up due to robberies, break-ins, hold-ups, murders, rapes, all without any protection, should not judge those who did take part in the Selbstschutz.<sup>141</sup>

David Rempel wrote in detail about 1919 being the year of the height of the Makhnovite Terror when the White Army was advancing towards Moscow leaving its rear poorly guarded. The Makhnovites quickly noted the gaps and advanced and took over. Rempel says: "Once the Makhnovites consolidated their forces on our side of the Dnieper River, their barbarity became boundless. Everyone in the region suffered, but the bandits unleashed their worst rampages on the Mennonites."<sup>142</sup> In many cases they were sitting ducks, powerless to defend themselves.

It is important to note another aspect of the Selbstschutz that came to life through a Mennonite man named Abram Lowen. He originally championed the Selbstschutz but later became an aggressive seeker of revenge and violence. His exploits with his three companions were full of murderous acts which caused even more grief and hardships for those around him. Always his cruel actions became justification for more vile acts by whoever was the enemy at that particular time. Eventually he was brutally murdered just as he had done to others. For his fellow Mennonites he expressed much of the anger that was held in the hearts of many and so he was both applauded and condemned by his own people.

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<sup>141</sup> Personal Letter written by Peter Wiens to his niece Evelyn Rempel Petkau.

<sup>142</sup> Rempel and Rempel Carlson, *A Mennonite Family in Tzarist Russia*, 227.

The two great-grandfathers whose texts I have shared as the heart of this thesis, were both clearly opposed to the self-defense units. Even Isaak Isaak, who had always had hunting rifles in his house and who kept them hidden so as not to have them confiscated, was opposed to organizing the self-defense units. In November of 1918 he wrote: “Out of all the villages, loaded vehicles with young men gathered here in order to train with the Self-Defense Unit in Chortitza. Again a short sighted, not well thought out plan, which had as consequence much havoc, murder, plundering, great misery.”<sup>143</sup>

Years after the revolution and all the travesties that followed, David Rempel, speaking from his new home in the United States, shared his thoughts on the many responses to the violence and struggles with his faith, asking the question:

How could God have permitted the murder of so many innocent people, the rape of defenseless women and the commission of so many other acts of unconscionable brutality?...That so many of us suffered a crisis of faith is hardly surprising. Later, when some Canadian and US born Mennonites wondered how we could have lost faith, resorted to self-defense, or despaired during the revolution, civil war, and blackest anarchy, my reaction was straightforward, “What do you know of such traumatic experience? And what assurance do you have that your faith would have been firmer, or that you would have offered the other cheek?”<sup>144</sup>

I return again to the two betrayals that Miroslav Volf spoke of in *Exclusion & Embrace*, “...divided between the God who delivers the needy and the God who abandons the Crucified...”<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Zacharias, *Autobiography*, 32.

<sup>144</sup> Rempel and Rempel Carlson, *A Mennonite Family in Tzarist Russia*, 250.

<sup>145</sup> Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace*, 9.



## CHAPTER V REFLECTIONS

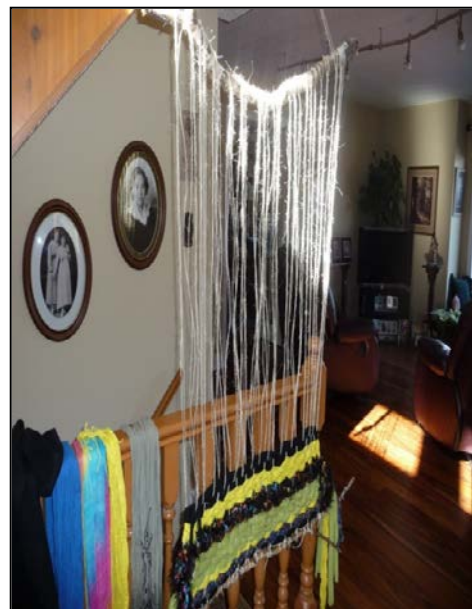
### Introduction

I have written my reflections in three parts. In Part I relate my longing to weave together past and present and my experience of that process. Creation of a piece of woven art was something that became a sensory, tactile, meditative way of remembering both the ancestors, as well as ancient crafting that involves fabric. Part II is a compilation of the themes pertaining to the texts of the ancestors. This part is divided into three themes which I described in my abstract: the deaths of mothers and babies; the response of my ancestors to violence and loss within their Mennonite belief systems; and the sense of personal unworthiness, often expressed with words like *sinful* and *guilty*.

Part III is a description of my personal relationship with the same three themes: the deaths of mothers and babies; my response to fears of loss; and my experience of dealing with the sense of personal unworthiness. My closing reflections and summary end Part III.

### Part I My Experience of Weaving

During the process of travelling back into my historic roots and doing the work of this thesis, I had a longing to weave. I was a complete novice, as I had never woven before.



I was drawn to some curved branches from the weeping birch tree in our front yard and pictured one at the top of the weaving and one at the bottom. I decided that I needed a type of binder twine to tie the two branches together to create a warp. The twine I purchased came in a large ball and reminded me of the experience of baling hay on the farm when I was young. I began to cut lengths of the twine that measured the distance I thought I needed between the two branches. As I cut the twine, memories of my Dad cutting the binder twine around the bales came back to me. I recalled that as the string was cut, the bale of hay fell apart ready for the cattle to eat. The strings seem to disappear into the nothingness of manure and mud. Cutting and remembering I noticed that there were mounds and mounds of twine piling up on the floor at my feet. They naturally formed circles. The circles reminded me of the cycles of life, of my returning to the stories of the ancestors.

The next step was the creation of the warp, the foundation of the weaving, the strings that would hold it together. I began to tie one piece of twine to the top branch and the other end to the bottom branch. The branches tipped up and down as I struggled to balance string and branches. It was impossible to keep the two branches an even distance apart as they were as curved as the path of Hermes. The coarse twine was rough on my hands and seemed symbolic of the struggles of living off the land and my long agrarian history.

With hands rough from the strings I lost myself in the softness and color of my scarves. I felt like a child as I pulled them out of the drawer and allowed myself to relish



the colors and the fabrics. I wrapped them around me and experienced their textures and their warmth around my neck. Some scarves were cherished gifts, made with loving hands, some were purchased in wonderful places while on pilgrimages, others were bargains purchased at a local scarf shop. All had various degrees of emotional meaning for me.

In Dr. Evangeline Kane's book,

*Recovering Feminine Spirituality*, she wrote about the *pilgrim's wallet*. "We normally think of a scarf as neckwear. It is also a variant of the old French word '*escherpe*,' originally meaning 'pilgrim's wallet suspended from the neck' – developed from the Latin '*scirpea*,' a basket made of rushes or bulrushes."<sup>146</sup> I remembered our Mary Magdalene Pilgrimage as well as our journey into our ancestral roots. (Note the pictures of ancestors behind the weaving.)

Meanings, symbols, colors, textures, all became part of the experience. Some scarves were narrow and could be woven without changing them. Others were wide and needed to be cut into strips. With many layers of resistance, I began cutting the wide ones

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<sup>146</sup> Evangeline Kane, *Recovering Feminine Spirituality*, (London: Coventure London, 1997), 66.

into long pieces and anticipated weaving them all together. One scarf in particular was especially difficult to cut. It had been purchased in Kiev, was a rich bronze color with silver and gold threads running through it. I admired its beauty, wrapped it around myself, looked at both the scarf and myself in the mirror, thinking “I can’t cut this one into strips.” But the colors reminded me of the rich soil of Ukraine and how decimated and blood saturated the land became during the revolution years. Cutting that scarf helped me enter into the grief of that decimation. Cutting and weaving became my meditation for the journey I was on; every inch of the long scarves that I wove in and out and through felt like a metaphor of the process of feeling the sorrow in the land.



The branches of the weeping birch connected me to the story of the famous 800 year old oak tree that stood proudly in the village of Chortitza in South Russia. Strange that I experienced this connection as there are major differences between an oak tree and a weeping birch. An oak tree is strong hard wood and reaches upward into the sky. A weeping birch tree is soft wood and its branches hang towards the ground, seemingly weeping. Perhaps both trees became a reminder of the various polarities we face daily. Perhaps these two opposite trees were a

call to balance, both the search that leads us downward and inward as well as upward and outward.

For me they were connected and cutting the branches off our tree in our front yard took me back in my imagination to the 800 year old oak tree that my ancestors had loved and valued. Before the Mennonites claimed this tree as theirs, the Cossacks before them had called it their own. The story is told that Catherine the Great, revered by the Mennonites, was in many ways a ruthless ruler. It is said that she both used the Cossacks to help her fight the Turks in 1775, and then turned on them and had her army destroy their fortress immediately after. She had decided that she wanted this area to be settled by agrarian people who would farm the land. The Cossacks were nomadic people and populated the island of Chortitza and surrounding areas.

Edmonton lawyer, Walter Braul wrote in his unpublished writings that:

According to Ukrainian legends, the Cossacks were excellent horsemen and could ride swiftly through the trees to attack or to withdraw. The oak trees made it difficult for an enemy cavalry to penetrate the island in pursuit of any Cossacks. Catherine's army ravished the oak trees until only one was left, sending a clear message to all Cossack rebels.<sup>147</sup>

Nature and animals suffer and die in the midst of our wars. The Cossacks were scattered to make room for the agrarian people that Catherine the Great was inviting to this area. The Mennonites did develop the farms and fields that pleased Catherine and the Cossacks lost their island and the fields that they called *home*. The Mennonites

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<sup>147</sup> Walter Braul, *The Mennonite Journey in Russia*, (Edmonton: unpublished work, 2009), 19.

inherited the land and the one oak tree that was left. It was a huge tree, a pillar of strength, a place of safety, a gathering place, and its large branches embraced many generations of my ancestry. It is seen on many photographs and it is expected that every tourist will visit what remains of the famous 800 year old oak tree.



The Cossack/Mennonite Oak Tree in 2008  
Held up by wire cables

In 2008 as my husband, my sister and I stood under its once expansive branches that are now barren and being held up with support cables, with only one branch still

trying to survive, it is a dying shadow of its former elegance. It reminded me of Isaak Isaak's description of the orphaned children being like trees who had lost their caregivers.

My weaving then became about the trees and the deep rich soils of South Russia/Ukraine. Dark colors created the perception of the earth and the soil, and the yellows, reds and blues expressed the skies, with dark clouds penetrating throughout.

Weaving my decimated scarves through the warp left frayed threads and loose ends that often needed to be braided and pinned with a safety pin. I remembered the old Ukrainian Baba who now lives where the Johann Johann Epps used to live, whose sweater and dress were pinned together. In her honor I pinned loose frayed edges together. Many years earlier I had purchased a small weaving of a tree that I thought looked like an oak tree. I found it and pinned it into place, (see picture page 123).

The final scarf that I draped over the weaving was made for me by a precious friend. It is black with gold threads running through it. I have worn it often and gradually it has become unraveled. Its beauty is in the dark and the light of becoming unraveled.

## **Part II Compilation of Texts of Ancestors Related to the Three Themes**

### **Introduction**

In Part II, I have pulled together the events described in the texts of the grandfathers that relate to the three themes described in the Abstract; firstly the deaths of mothers and babies, secondly their responses to violence and loss, and thirdly their use of words related to unworthiness, sin and guilt.

**a) Theme Related to the Deaths of Mothers and Babies**

The texts described a long litany of these losses. Johann Johann opened his text with a description of the pleasant birthday party his wife had planned for him and then moved into prayers for her and their expected infant. Their first child died when she was eight months old. When their second child was born his wife had a premonition of her impending death, a death that did occur only days after she spoke these words. Their son went to live with the grandparents. Johann Johann was heartbroken and counted the days since his wife had died and implored God to take him as well. A year later their son died and Johann Johann was left with an empty heart and home. After much grieving he met another woman who became his wife. Over the years they had seven more children with only two of these children living into old age.

Isaak Isaak and Katherina had nine children. Two of these children did not survive beyond infancy. Katherina bled to death giving birth to their ninth child. Isaak Isaak was heartbroken and described himself falling to his knees in despair and prayer. In the upcoming months he struggled to take care of his seven motherless children, as well as doing the work on Zachariasfeld.

Earlier in the text he wrote about his grief at the death of his own mother when he was eleven. He said that he and his siblings were like trees who had lost their caregiver, like chicks that had no wings to hide under.

During the revolution both these families suffered more losses. Isaak Isaak watched his eldest daughter die of typhus. She left a three-year-old daughter and a young husband



to struggle without a mother and wife. A year earlier his daughter-in-law had died giving birth to my mother. Again a husband and an infant are left to mourn. The ancestors I have studied knew much about death and dying. They both lamented and returned to prayer and surrender to God's will.

**b) Theme Related to Their Responses to Violence and Loss**

Son Johannes described his mother cowering and weeping in a corner on the floor on that cold January day in 1918, when bandits thrashed through their home and took everything leaving only the organ and the piano (probably these were only left because they were too heavy to carry). All their possessions were taken as they watched, powerless and fearful for their lives. This tired mother buried her head in her arms and wept that they had taken all her inheritance away. I pictured the scene of the destruction of their property and her husband Johann Johann going to her and reaching out his hand to help her up from the floor. As he lifted her up he reminded her that they still had their Saviour and together they would go on.

I ask the question of how these ancestors got up when it seemed like there was nothing left? Johann Johann reached out his hand and helped his wife to her feet. Son Jacob used the same image/symbol when he wrote that in 1923 "a strong hand opened the door," and they were able to immigrate to Canada.

For the two great-grandfathers it was their belief that all was in God's hands that seemed to keep them strong, even when the questions of "why" became a frequent lament. In a few short years their experience moved from the glorious words that Isaak

Isaak spoke about Fortuna and unending plans and dreams for their future and their children, to seeing their desecrated homeland laid to a barren wasteland. The once abundant grain fields had become an unmarked mass graveyard full of corpses and the soil was saturated with blood. Everywhere people were starving and dying; neighbors were killing neighbors and everyone became a potential enemy and trust was being blown up with the gun powder. When life had been so good, how could it all end so quickly and abruptly?

The ancestors could only allow themselves brief encounters with the “why” before they automatically switched back to surrender to the will of God. Isaak Isaak asked briefly when he and Katherina lost two of their nine children, why this had come to disturb their happiness? Quickly he added that they came to the conviction that God only wanted what was best for them and so they surrendered themselves to God’s will. When Katherina died giving birth to their ninth child he wrote that the pain drove him to his knees as he groaned in agony. Again he surrendered and prayed that God’s name be glorified. Later when his beautiful daughter Anna and daughter-in-law Neta died in their youth, leaving infant daughters and husbands, he wrote that this was a clear admonishment to them to again surrender to God.

Johann Johann asked when he had lost two children and his wife “Why have you taken them and not me?” He too, quickly admonishes himself and says “How can the

sinner question the Holy One?”<sup>148</sup> He writes: “Does anything happen that is not in His sovereign will?”<sup>149</sup> Occasionally he asks what might be a rhetorical question: “Isn’t everything in your hands? Can’t you direct things as you please?”<sup>150</sup>

When he faced violent unpredictable bandits, Isaak Isaak seemed to try to outwit them or negotiate and reason with them. Johann Johann also challenged the invading bandits in his home when he grabbed their guns and said there would be no shooting in his house. These tactics worked a number of times for both families. When that final bandit raid occurred and someone on the Zacharias estate shot one of the thieves, they knew that all negotiations had ended and that the time had come to flee their home in order to try to save their own lives. The Epps also left their estate in the middle of the night with shots being fired around them. Their prayers expressed gratitude for God’s love and protection, as well as requests for salvation from the violence and the crimes.

The ancestors I have studied repeatedly surrendered to the will of God, regardless of the questions that raged within them. They held fast to the belief that all was in God’s hands. Both families also used their wits and intelligence to walk through the horror of their times. However for many people it became impossible to survive. Johann Johann and his wife Aganetha, in complete exhaustion, died of typhus. The surviving members of both families chose to leave the country the first opportunity they were given.

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<sup>148</sup> Epp, *Diary of Johann Johann Epp*, 18.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

### c) Theme Related to Unworthiness, Sin and Guilt

The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, provides a description of the word *unworthy* as “lacking value or merit.” *Sinful* is defined as “marked by or full of sin, wicked.”<sup>151</sup> These are strong words.

The text written by Johann Johann has frequent references to sin and unworthiness. When the revolution was raging in full force, his prayers of confession centered on what he called their sins. “With all these things happening to us, should we not confess that it is our wickedness that has brought this punishment upon our people?”<sup>152</sup>

The horrific belief that if something bad happened they must have done something wrong and the belief in a God who rewards goodness and punishes evil created waves of anguish within me. Of course our actions have consequences, but I do not find it helpful to take on personal blame for something as complex as a revolution. The other extreme is to move completely into victim mode and blame others for everything. Feelings of unworthiness thread through both these responses.

Johann Johann made frequent references to his unworthiness and his sinfulness. He spent his life praying for good, thanking God for his gracious mercies, while

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<sup>151</sup> *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language 4<sup>th</sup> edition* (Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006).

<sup>152</sup> Epp, *Diary of Johann Johann Epp*, 157.

affirming his unworthiness. These passages in his text touch my own deep shadow of unworthiness which I will address in the concluding section.

Isaak Isaak's texts did not speak of being unworthy. When he and Katherina's babies died he asked if the parents had been too proud? On another occasion he spoke of his regrets that his love for his money machine businesses often kept him from visiting the sick. He also spoke of the fact that they didn't pay enough attention to the festering political events and questioned how their increased awareness might have changed circumstances for them. He related to the times and addressed his own actions and questions whether he/they could have done something differently. He did not use the word unworthy or sinful. I sensed he took responsibility but not blame. In contrast he often used words that referenced his pride and joy in his life and his accomplishments.

Even as the two great-grandfathers' approaches to life varied they both repeatedly returned to surrender to the will of God. I see this surrender as part of their understanding of the principle of non-resistance as well as the belief in a theistic God who was all-powerful and all knowing. For Great-Grandfather Johann Johann, his relationship with the God of his understanding was the central core of his writings. He expressed much gratitude for God's grace and kindness to him but often added that he was unworthy. He asked many questions of God but never allowed himself to question that power and authority. The impact that these religious concepts have had on my life will be discussed in the following section.

## **Part III My Personal Reflections Related To the Three Themes**

### **Introduction**

In Part III, I share my experience of the journey with this study of the lives of some of my ancestors. I have used the same three themes described in my abstract. Those themes are the deaths of mothers and babies, my response to fears of loss and violence and my response to words like *unworthy*, *sin* and *guilt*. I will address the last two themes in section b) because in my process of working with my thoughts and feelings, they seemed to flow together. I will conclude with my closing reflections and summary.

All three of the above mentioned themes are intricately interwoven. I am reminded of the beautifully wide Dnieper River that runs through the places where some of the Mennonite Villages in South Russia used to be. The Dnieper River has many tributaries which wind, meander and forge new pathways as they go. In 2008 I was cruising on the Dnieper Princess Riverboat, travelling from Sevastopol on the edge of Crimea to the Dnieper River in Ukraine. There was a storm raging in the Black Sea and the night was spent rocking back and forth in the turbulence. The Dnieper Princess was a riverboat, not an ocean liner. I was waiting for an epiphany to rescue me from the fear of drowning in the back waters. But instead of an epiphany, I just lay on my bunk trying to remember to breathe as the rocking motion knocked books off the shelves above my bunk bed. I felt grateful for a strong, (albeit older) body that did not add seasickness to this stewpot of fear. Many people on the cruise were not so lucky. I also remembered my

father speaking of the agonies of being seasick when they crossed the ocean to come to Canada. I was grateful that our trip across the Black Sea was short and I welcomed morning and calmer waters.

It was Sunday and we attended church. As communion was being served at the conclusion of the service we were all invited to join together to sing, *How Great Thou Art*. As we were singing we looked out of the windows to see ourselves gently leaving the Black Sea waters and entering the quiet serene Dnieper River. It was an awe filled passageway as after the storm, we felt the calm of the river that flowed through the land of our ancestry. Over a hundred people singing in harmony and going through that passageway were moments that filled me with awe. Over and over I have remembered this experience and what it meant to me to be in the places where my ancestors had lived so many years earlier.

Just as the Russian Mennonites went through many passageways, I too have gone through hills and valleys in this journey with my ancestors. I have wept, been horrified and rejoiced with them.

### **My Questions**

Is there any gift that I have given to my past and to myself by dwelling with the hardships and sorrows of their lives? Has this journey into my past helped me to know more of who I am? Has this process helped me to heal and become more whole? Does my compassion and attention validate anything in their lives and/or my life? “Science” tells us that molecules change when they are observed. Does my ancestors’ response to

trauma affect my response to trauma? Are there invisible threads and fingers that link a grandmother who dies in a seizure to a mother who dies in a seizure to a grandson who struggles with seizures? All different causes and yet the struggles with death and near death are all related to seizures. Is my despair and fear all present moment feeling or am I carrying the deaths of babies, mothers and grandmothers in my fear circle as I focus on my son's health challenges? Do the ancestral memories of many dying babies and mothers filter into my intimacy with fears of loss? All these questions are aspects of my initial research question. What are the threads that weave through the ages and connect the wounding and questions of my ancestors to my agonies and questions? Can this process heal ancestral wounds in multiple generations?

The scope of what I have learned through this process of research and the journey of remembering is many layered. It is deep and wide and has been interspersed with moments that feel transformational. There are threads that weave through the ages and connect the wounding and questions of my ancestors with my own agonies and questions. My experience of this process has been a healing journey and I sense that it might also be healing for future and past generations. Over and over I have felt the presence and encouragement of ancestors who have passed on long ago. I have learned that there is a gift in building relationships with all aspects of life, be it our ancestral history, our dreams, our day to day encounters with people, our bodies, our souls, nature, our possessions, to list only a few. In those relationships we can be touched with an awareness of how we are interwoven.



**a) Theme Related to The Births and Deaths of Mothers and Babies**

My husband and I were on our honeymoon when police issued statements about searching for newlyweds, Rudy and Margie Koop. Relatives in Vancouver located us and told us that my mother, Nettie Janzen nee Zacharias had gone into heart trauma and died. My family had been trying to find us for a number of days. I was 21 years old and my



My mother and I a week before her death

mother was 44.

The mother archetype has owned a large part of my life as far back as I can remember. After my Mother's death I had a dream in which she was hauling wheat for Dad. I was inside the house on my parents' farm, waiting and watching for her to return.

For readers who are not from a farming background, I offer a brief picture of harvest time on a Saskatchewan farm in the 1960's. The large fields were widespread, timing was of the essence in order to bring in quality grains and everyone on the farm participated in the harvest. Whoever was of driving age took turns driving the large grain truck out to the fields. The combined pathways would lead the truck driver to Dad on the combine. If the grain hopper was full, Dad would wave and the truck driver would drive parallel to the combine with the combine auger directed into the back of the two ton truck. Then he would push/pull the levers that would empty bushels

and bushels of grain into the back of the truck. Once the load was full, the truck driver would haul the wheat home, pull up to the auger beside the granaries, lift the hoist on the back of the truck and let the grain flow into the auger which transported the harvest into the granaries. Harvest was always about hard work and stress because it was the year's daily bread. Until the grain was in the bins, it was at risk for all kinds of destructive weather conditions which could damage it.

In my dream I was in the house waiting for Mom to return. It was getting dark and I was anxious and worried about where she was. Suddenly I looked out the window and saw that the big red truck had pulled up by the granary. I rushed out and opened the truck door. My Mother's dead body fell directly on top of me and both of us heaved to the ground in one fell swoop. I called out for help and was awakened by my husband shaking me and calling my name.

My earlier dreams immediately following her death were frequent. They carried the common theme of her and I being together in a number of different scenes. The commonality of all those dreams was that I was so glad to be with her but there was the ominous sadness of knowing she would soon leave me. Then came the dream described above. In my youth I thought perhaps her dead body landing on top of me meant that I was finally fully aware that she was dead and that she wasn't coming back. In the present process of going back to remember, I related this dream to my supervisor, Dr. Evangeline Rand and she suggested that the dream, as well as being about my personal experience of

my mother's death, might also be showing a larger pattern related to the dead weight of the mother archetype having fallen on me.

In her book *Recovering Feminine Spirituality*, Dr. Kane writes:

The story of the mother/daughter mysteries was a ritualized seasonal and sacred grain story which brought culture and agriculture and rites of initiation into Western human experience. It is these mysteries that have been overlaid and forgotten by our patriarchal values and our over-identification with them.<sup>153</sup>

She goes on to describe that the Demeter and Persephone story and those feminine mysteries were central to Greek culture and prevailed for thousands of years preceding and following the emergence of Christianity. I was fascinated that my work of doing research for this thesis had a clear resonance with the planting and harvesting of grain, a connection to my long farming history.

One understanding of the story of Demeter and Persephone is that it is the mythological exploration of the changing seasons. While Demeter/mother and Persephone/daughter are together, the world flourishes; when Persephone returns to the underworld Demeter lets everything die and she herself is heartbroken.

I am learning about the mother/daughter mysteries and I resonate with the grief of the separation of mother and daughter. The fear of that separation and later my mother's actual death, became key factors in my dedication to carrying the mother archetype. Dr.

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<sup>153</sup> Evangeline Kane, *Recovering Feminine Spirituality*, 1.

Kane addresses the difficulty that we have in our culture related to the “selfhood” of motherhood. When this selfhood is denied it can create a type of self sacrificing strait jacket, one that easily becomes unbalanced. I had this jacket tied both from the inside and the outside.

At the time of my mother’s death I had no idea what a “mother archetype” was, nor how the dead weight of unvalued, unconscious self-sacrifice would impact my life. I was not aware of the “mother mysteries” of ancient times and the void which that lack of awareness created. All I knew was the sensation of the most inordinate grief and loss that was gripping my heart and my longing to make it stop hurting so much. Nurturing the world became my exhausting answer to my aching heart.

Now I am growing in awareness of what it means to carry the dead weight of the “unacknowledged mother archetype”. This territory has excluded many aspects of self. I can think of countless examples of how this has manifested in my life and created almost compulsive care-taking habits. Over time I have had repeated night time dreams of starving children dying in my care. Often I would see skeletons looking up at me and always I seemed to have forgotten to feed the children. There were parts of me, my progeny, that wanted to be fed, but I kept forgetting to give life to those parts of me.

Even though my mother was a jolly outgoing person, she also carried a deep sadness and felt guilt for her mother’s death since her mother died giving birth to her. This left her with a deep need to nurture others. Her nurture was all embracing. She poured it out on all of us. I felt I could simply bask in the warmth and love. At the same

time I always knew on a deep level that her life might be short, so I did all I could to keep her alive. I began caretaking as a child. I was a good girl and I tried not to have any needs. But it wasn't enough! She died anyhow. That is the grief of my childhood and it threads through the generations and lays itself down among the dying babies and mothers of the ancestors and comes back and impacts my life today.

Having a child with disabilities and a seizure disorder has brought the unwelcome visitor of uncertainty and fragility into our everyday lives. Every seizure created trauma and suffering as we have watched our son's flailing body and grieved for him and us. It is not a revolution but it carries the unpredictability that interrupts almost every aspect of our lives as a family. My biggest longing has always been to have our children enjoy good health, but no matter how hard I tried, no matter how much I prayed, no matter how much I nurtured, I couldn't make everyone well. Our son remained at risk and we had to live with the constant uncertainty of never knowing when or where he might become deathly ill. Often my sadness for him flowed into despair and my hyper-vigilance was exhausting.

At one point in my life I became aware that as a child I had repeatedly checked on my mother when she slept, wanting to reassure myself that she was still breathing. Years later as a mother, I would check that our sleeping son was still breathing. It was an awakening to realize that I had been afraid of my loved ones dying almost all my life. There was also a new awareness that somehow I felt like if they were to die it would be my fault. Even today I weep whenever someone tells me, "It's not your fault." My tears

flow because I feel the deep sadness that for so many years I have carried this sense of blame.

This ongoing awareness brought me waves of compassion for myself and an understanding of my own suffering. It was the beginning of validating my responses to the events of my life. Compassion and self-acceptance embraced me. I had no judgment of myself and even today I can hardly describe in words how freeing that felt. I called it the experience of salvation. I was beginning to create enough psychological space to see more aspects of my own wholeness, rather than simply living so completely in the role of “motherhood”.

Through many years of taking challenging steps towards healing my wounds, the work of this thesis at the conclusion of my studies is yet another step in understanding further aspects of that journey. I am learning to build a relationship with my fears and my compulsive caretaking, and that process, one step at a time, creates the inner space to expand and grow. I am coming to *know* that for me, the healing of my ancestral wounds is a major piece in the process of individuation. Something alchemical has been happening.

In my imagination I have been present and developed relationships with the losses of my ancestors; I allowed myself to grieve with them. I pictured my own mother born into these turbulent times and wondered if my grandmother had been able to hold her newborn infant before she took her last breaths. I was in the process of shifting from

seeing suffering as the enemy to be avoided to being open to feeling it and embracing its healing.

In two different body energy sessions with a therapist during this process of working with my ancestral history, I received the gift of sensing the presence of both Great-Grandmother Epp and Great-Grandmother Zacharias. As the therapist spoke of areas of my body that seemed to be carrying pain, I made an effort to focus on those places, and it was at those times that I felt an awareness of Katherina Zacharias. I could feel her exhaustion after the birth of her eighth child and her inability to nurse. After nursing seven infants it seemed there was nothing left for this child. A year later she was giving birth again. Isaak Isaak described her bleeding to death in front of him and in the presence of a midwife and a doctor. I felt both *his* helplessness and *her* life force draining out of her body.

The next session with the therapist I experienced the presence of Aganetha Epp. I could picture her at the end of the revolution simply being so tired. She had been forced to provide care for many typhus infested Makhno bandits. She had watched her husband die a month earlier and carried the pain of having buried many children over the years. I felt compassion for her as I remembered reading how her son described his mothers' death. She had told him that she didn't have typhus but was simply so tired. I have not experienced a revolution but when I have tried to mother the world I have felt a tiredness that is beyond description. This exhaustion has produced my desire to heal.

Working with my imagination, doing this research, doing the writing, having visceral energy work done with my body, has been a healing combination for me and I have been deeply grateful for the experience of building a type of relationship with the ancestors through their writings, my memories, and through my night time dreams.

A few weeks ago I had a dream that I had a child that was thriving and growing and developing even faster than I could imagine. I awoke delighted that this nurtured, healthy infant had replaced the starving emaciated infants in my past dreams. I knew something had shifted within me.

**b) Theme related to Loss, Violence, Unworthiness, Sin and Guilt**

While studying their lives I have asked questions and experienced reactions; one of the strongest of which has been to Johann Johann's frequent use of words like unworthy, wicked, sinful. I have felt both sorrow and freedom as I have abandoned much of the old language of the religion of my ancestry. I attempt to hold the tension between the teachings I have been raised with, nurturing that which resonates for me and letting go of that which imprisons me. The addiction to perfection and piety locked into prison cells of unworthiness and self-blame, is for me the prison with the highest walls. It is a confinement where fears of loss are the prison guards, be it loss of love or loved ones, property, money, power, a way of life, loss of self.

My ancestors had many possessions, land, a sense of entitlement, self-governance, feelings of success and large hopes and dreams for the future. They lost everything. They were benevolent hard working people who were grounded in their traditional



Mennonite faith. They had strengths and weakness as all people do. They lost their property and many lost their lives. Many went to their graves feeling that somehow, somewhere, they deserved the hardships they were experiencing. This is perhaps the greatest tragedy of it all.

I have become increasingly aware of how easily Protestant theology has become interrelated with this sense of unworthiness. We were taught early of our sinful nature and our deep need for redemption through the death of Christ on the cross. I never understood and felt guilt that my sins created Christ's death. How easily these teachings can become translated into unworthiness even when teachings of God's love ran parallel to our sinfulness. Especially in the era of my great grandfathers, the language of sin was common and humility highly praised.

I resonant with Jürgen Moltmann's writings on the importance of self-love and self-acceptance, (referred to in the literature review). This self acceptance embraces both shadow and light and does not demand perfection. In my life unworthiness has often overwhelmed me. I carried unconscious historical guilt/shame for my ancestral mothers/grandmothers dying in childbirth and I birthed a giant need to be perfect. Moltmann wrote of selfishness being a form of self-hate and I sense that the need to be perfect also falls into that category.

When I was eleven I experienced a whirlwind of obsessive behaviors. I became immobilized with fears that I would hurt someone or something. If I sat on the grass and pulled a few blades I was convinced I had hurt the grass and would need my mother's

reassurance that I hadn't hurt anything. At school I was unable to write as I sensed that sharp corners of my writing pointing in the direction of my home would hurt my parents. My mother was deeply concerned and in her heart she blamed herself as she had struggled with periods of depression and she felt that I had inherited it from her. Self-blame raised its head again. Clearly I was overtaken by shadow qualities that weren't allowed. I was addicted to a need to be perfect, pure and clean, (obsessive hand washing swept in and out and through my other troubling behaviors). The great unconscious illusion was that if I was good enough and kind enough and self-sacrificing enough, perhaps then I could somehow protect myself from my loved ones dying and leaving me, truly a prison with very high walls. Then add a deep desire to please God in the mixture of compulsions that were dwelling in the heart of a very sensitive child.

Reflecting on this experience and the process of recovery throughout my life, I am becoming more convinced that the psychological work of healing cannot be dealt with from the aspect of sin and guilt. My experience of salvation differs from my ancestors, even though I am in a continual evolving relationship with the vibrancy of the Christian symbols and rituals. My lived experience of salvation comes to me during those times when I am free of all self-judgment, guilt and blame and I feel the inner freedom to give and receive love. This self acceptance embraces all aspects of self, even the gremlins.

My image of God also differs in that I do not resonate with the image of one who judges and condemns and rules over us. I am unable to use words like, "this is God's will," even as I am comforted by an inner surrender to the events of my life. Any

resistance that I have experienced has only added to my suffering, while release and surrender have often created the sensation of peace in my entire being. This inner surrender is what non-resistance in my daily life means to me and it is a gift passed down from my ancestors. My father never complained when weather ruined his crop because he knew that was beyond his control, but he worked long hours to nurture the soil and take care of his equipment that he might always be ready for that which needed to be done. In his quiet way and in his day-to-day life, he taught me about non-resistance.

I cannot speak to non-resistance/pacifism in the face of violence because that has not been part of my own personal experience. I do resonate with the image of Johann Johann reaching out his hand to his wife who was cowering and weeping in the corner after bandits had taken their possessions. I can also relate to the image when son Jacob Epp wrote that in 1923 “a strong hand opened the door,” and they were able to come to Canada.

I ask myself, “What helps me get up when I am defeated?” In my mind I sometimes return to that early dream, where I was trying to climb a mountain and I felt the strong hand of my father in the bright yellow shirt, lift me up and bring me to a higher level. The moments of my greatest despair have been the times when our son James has been ill. Racked with unpredictable seizures, I can hardly bear to see him flail uncontrollably and then sink into a deep unconsciousness. He seems to go somewhere and I fear that he might not come back. When he finally begins to respond and is in the recovery process he looks defeated and beaten and I can feel my heart being ripped to

shreds. I do not want to become discouraged because I can sense that he can probably handle his own pain, but adding his mother's pain is simply too much. Once when I felt flooded with sadness as I sat with him in the Royal Alex Hospital, I told him that I was just going outside for a while. As I exited his room I hurried down the corridors. I began to run as I found my way outdoors. There between two buildings of the hospital I screamed out to the heavens in my agony. I paced back and forth and cried saying, "I can't stand the pain, I can't stand the pain, I can't stand seeing him so beaten and discouraged, how can we again try to return to a normal life not knowing when this might happen again. I can't stand it, it hurts so terribly." From somewhere inside, or outside, or beyond, I felt a voice that cried out saying, "Of course I can stand the pain, he has to stand the pain and I will stand the pain." I felt a surge of power as I returned to his bedside. Ideas of what we needed to do were flying through my mind. James was clearly relieved that I was no longer so downcast and together we went on. What was that voice I heard? What was the hand that pulled me up? In all of this and many other experiences, I have felt nurtured and loved by something that I cannot explain nor put into words. I search for a language and cannot find it. The old language doesn't work but I do not have a new language, only a sensation of being loved sometimes and abandoned other times. In both the embrace and the sense of abandonment, there is love.

### **Closing Reflections**

I returned to "My Questions". Is there a gift I have given to my past and to myself by dwelling with the hardships and sorrows of my ancestors? Has this process helped me

to know myself better and helped me to heal? My experience of this process has been a healing journey. I felt a sense of wholeness, validation and compassion for both my ancestors and myself. The gifts I have received were many and I felt gratitude. I pondered the invisible threads between past and present and future and simply held the mysteries. I have been enriched by being present to the past.

Today I am sitting in my lovely large home in peaceful Sherwood Park, Alberta. It is Christmas time and the whole house is decorated and sparkles with beauty. As I was filling our home with twinkling lights I recalled the Christmas of 1918 when Isaak Isaak described their flight from Zachariasfeld and the sadness of leaving their beloved home. In my mind I imagined both their sadness and their gratitude for finding temporary refuge at the home of his sister Anna Schultz. This refuge was quickly interrupted by the invasion of Starko and his men, those Ukrainian Nationalists who arbitrarily spent that Christmas with Anna and her relatives.

This is Christmas 2010, ninety-two Christmases after the event described above. During those ninety-two years there have been many interrupted Christmases, not exactly like the Christmas of 1918, but disrupting and discouraging as well. One Christmas our infant son James was admitted to hospital on Christmas Eve, barely able to breathe. This Christmas my mother-in-law, a child born in South Russia during the revolution, became ill and had to leave her home for the hospital and a Care Home. When speaking to her about my studies she said that the bandit of poor health had taken her home from her.

Christmas 2010 my thesis advisor, Dr. Evangeline Rand was stranded in London and unable to return to Edmonton for Christmas with her family. While she wrestled with flights at the Heathrow Airport her home was invaded by bandits. Mysteriously they took strange things like a container that was filled to the top with safety pins and all the presents she had wrapped for her family for Christmas. Were these bandits, children in big bodies, who were simply looking for some presents to open at Christmas? The sense of invasion was huge. Dr. Rand and I sat in her home and pondered the weavings of life and the many things that our homes represent. We are interwoven with our homes and our possessions. When they are taken away we experience a sense of invasion and injustice. The image of Great-Grandmother Epp cowering on the floor in a corner and weeping that all her inheritance had been stolen portrays that invasion and injustice.

The gap between the rich and the poor easily triggers violence and is probably the cause of many wars and revolts. I know my own inner conflict around money and possessions. I love the many things that money can buy; I feel guilt when I have more than others and envy when I see those with much more. It is my own little inner revolution where guilt, fear, and envy dance together. Relationships with money and possessions are still areas to be explored.

Many embittered Mennonites joined revolutionaries against their fellow Mennonites because they were envious of those who had much when they themselves couldn't seem to prosper. We are all mirrors with two faces but it is difficult to embrace that. It seems much easier to see either the side we admire or the side we hate. We are

either guilty or victims. When we live in duality we are ignoring/dismissing half of the whole and my desire is to become whole. I don't need to glorify my ancestors and I don't need to judge them; I simply need to hold all the paradoxes in a large vessel. That is what I have tried to do throughout this research. The stories of the ancestors have been interwoven into my stories and a beam of light has shone through.

“And Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart.” Luke 3:19

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## **Appendix A An Explanation of Various Spellings of Names and Places**

There are variations on the spelling of names of persons, as well as geographic cities, villages, provinces, etc. When using quotations the writer has followed the spelling of those being quoted. Mainly then it would be primarily the Mennonite/German spelling of words. When part of South Russia became Ukraine in 1991, many cities were renamed and now have Ukrainian names.

## **Appendix B Permission to Use Maps**

Permission to use the maps created by William Schroeder in *The Mennonite Historical Atlas* was provided in an email by William Schroeder, Winnipeg Manitoba on January 5<sup>th</sup> 2011.

## **Appendix C Post Reflections on Ethics and Validity**

Throughout the process of studying and researching my deceased ancestors, it has been my deep intention to do this work with integrity, respect, honesty, and accuracy. I have had ongoing dialogue with family members striving to validate my understanding of the texts and our shared history. While writing my own personal reflections, it was my deepest longing to do this with integrity and honesty, while holding the traditions of my ancestors with care and respect.