

## Revolutionary Russia and the Migration to Canada in the 1920s: Dan Teichroeb's Family

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My great grandparents, Peter Teichroeb (1857-1944) and Agatha Dyck (1859-1922), were married in 1879. They established their homestead that year in the village of Olgafeld, located in the Fuerstenland Mennonite settlement. Over the next 25 years they had ten children, the youngest one, born in 1904. His name was Daniel (1904-2005), and he was my grandfather. He was always called Dan.

The family prospered. Dan recalled that his family farm was considerably larger than most farms in the area and his father housed and employed many Ukrainian laborers on their land. They amassed considerable wealth.

The socio-economic climate in Russia in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century was turbulent. As recently as 1861 feudal serfdom had been abolished, but the release of peasants from indentured servitude was not accompanied by any viable means of economic survival beyond basic subsistence.<sup>1</sup> During the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century extreme inflation in land prices<sup>2</sup> drove economic opportunities for poor peasants further out of reach. The disparity between the lower classes and wealthier landowners simmered in the background for years, leading eventually to repercussions in Mennonite communities.

Meanwhile Mennonites were dealing with their own political problems. Beginning in the 1870s the Russian government introduced reforms in education and military service that contravened privileges held sacred by Mennonite communities.<sup>3</sup> In response many Mennonite families sold their land and possessions to emigrate to North America, producing two major waves of migration to Canada in the 1870s and 1890s.

Dan's family remained in Fuerstenland and adapted to the challenges they met. However, the 20<sup>th</sup> century brought greater stresses.

Around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the demand for social and political reform intensified throughout Russia. Widespread dissatisfaction with the prevailing Tsarist regime was heightened by Russia's defeat in the 1904-1905

Russo-Japanese War. Protests and terrorist activities were suppressed forcefully by the government, but some political compromises were implemented, thereby achieving a period of uneasy stability.<sup>4</sup> However, the underlying social and political unrest was unabated.

Russia was seriously weakened by World War I, creating conditions conducive to the Russian Civil War in 1917.<sup>5</sup> Concurrently the Ukrainian War of Independence brought additional violence and anarchy to the Ukrainian countryside and the Mennonites living there.

Bolshevik armed forces struggling to achieve regime change battled the pro-regime forces of the White Movement that sprang up to preserve the old Tsarist order. Survival was tenuous with both sides of the conflict aiming to win support from the citizenry. Dan told of the time that he and a group of young local farming men were rounded up by Bolshevik soldiers who attempted to impress them into the Bolshevik army by force. Fortunately, the soldiers were outnumbered and overcome.

Taking advantage of the governmental vacuum created by the revolution, Ukrainian nationalists assembled a loosely organized rebel army seeking to establish an independent state. Their aim was to eradicate the widespread poverty and subsistence lifestyle of Ukrainian peasants.<sup>6</sup> Bands of raiders roamed the countryside in southern Ukraine, sometimes fighting against the Bolsheviks and sometimes allied with them, preying on the wealthiest landowners and farming communities, and always warring with the White Movement.<sup>7</sup>

Armed self-defense forces were established by many Mennonite communities to protect their lives and property from raiders. Dan and his brothers participated in these defensive actions. He told stories about the times they would arm themselves to take up strategic positions overlooking approaches to their village and then fire at invading horsemen. They managed to win the skirmishes and avoid the devastating outcomes recorded by families that were unprepared.

In the latter stages of the conflict, around 1921, Dan was conscripted by the White Army. Despite his earlier experiences he was deemed too young to fight on the front lines, and instead served as a military supply wagon driver.

He survived one escapade in which he was overtaken by bandits while hauling a wagon load of supplies with a team of horses. They took his horses and the supplies, leaving him alive, alone on the road with his wagon. In time passers-by helped him get his wagon home.

Eventually the Bolsheviks gained firm control and hostilities ended. Then began the economic rationalization and restructuring that featured prominently for many years in what would become the Soviet Union. Land appropriation and redistribution were fundamental elements of the new governmental program. Dan's family lost everything, all their land, and even their animals.

Dan's father, Peter Teichroeb, like so many Russian Mennonites before him, began planning a move to Canada. In the past Canada had welcomed Mennonite immigration most generously. The earlier waves of migration in the previous century brought thousands to settle in Manitoba and homesteads further west. However, attitudes in Canada had changed since then.

By 1919 the doors to further migration were barred by Robert Borden's governing Unionist Party through an Order In Council, which banned Mennonites and others from entry to Canada. The Unionist MP John Wesley Edwards, caught up in the emotional bigotry that followed World War I, gave a speech supporting the ban and said "... whether they be called Mennonites, Hutterites, or any other kind of "ites," we do not want them to come to Canada ... We certainly do not want that kind of cattle in this country. Indeed, not only do we not want that kind of cattle, but I would go further and support the view that we should deport from Canada others of the same class who were allowed to come in by mistake."<sup>8</sup>

Fortunately, this Order was rescinded after the federal election of 1921-22 won by Mackenzie King's Liberal Party. The next great wave of immigration began in 1923. By 1929 about 20,000 Mennonites had migrated to Canada.<sup>9</sup>

Dan's mother, Agatha, died in 1922 and his father remarried. Peter finalized arrangements and moved to Canada in 1925. With Peter was Dan's unmarried sister Margaretha. Peter's second wife refused to join them.

Two of Dan's siblings, Agatha and Peter, had already moved to Saskatchewan in 1912. His brother Heinrich had left for Canada in 1922, travelling on a passport belonging to a good friend who had died earlier. Passports in those days did not have photographs. Heinrich got as far as Germany where he contracted Typhus. He died alone in a boarding house on 28 May 1922.

Dan's siblings Johann, Helena and Katharina also moved to Saskatchewan with their families in 1925. His sister Maria moved to Saskatchewan in 1926.

Dan's sister Anna and her husband Gerhard Giesbrecht remained in Fuerstenland. They owned one of the two flour mills in the settlement. In the aftermath of the revolution the mill was nationalized but they were allowed to stay on as workers. Later the family in Canada would send care packages. Around 1934 the Canadian family received word that Anna and Gerhard were deceased. It was learned many years later that Gerhard had died in 1933 but Anna survived him. During World War II, when the German army of occupation in Ukraine retreated, it took with it thousands of German speaking residents, among them Anna and her children. They were resettled in Poland.

Dan had planned to travel to Canada with his father. In fact, the passenger manifest of his father's ship notes Dan as a passenger who was not aboard when it left for Canada. Escaping from Russia was more difficult for him than the others, possibly due to his involvement in the hostilities with Ukrainian anarchists while still a teenager, and then his service in the White Army. During the next few months, he obtained the necessary travel documents. By the end of 1925 he made the long journey to Canada alone.

Dan's journey took him by train to Riga, then by ship to London where he was temporarily quarantined. Receiving a clean bill of health, he boarded a ship in South Hampton bound for Quebec City. From there he went by rail to Saskatchewan.

In Saskatchewan Dan found work on the farm of David Schapansky, an immigrant to Canada in 1875. There Dan met David's daughter, a young Canadian born woman named Maggie, and they soon were married.

## Endnotes

1. Simon Sebag Montefiore, *The Romanovs 1613-1918* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016), 396.
2. Olga Crisp, *Management of Agricultural Estates in Tsarist Russia* (Washington, American Institute for the Advancement of Slavic Studies, 1978, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/management-agricultural-estates-tsarist-russia-1978>), 17.
3. Montefiore, 520-531.
4. James Urry, *None But Saints* (Winnipeg: Hyperion Press Limited, 1989), 209-215.
5. Chang-Dae Hyun, *The Russian Revolution* (Grand Valley Journal of History, Vol. 7: Iss. 1, Article 1, 2019, <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvjh/vol7/iss1/1>), 1.
6. Sean Patterson, *Makhno and Memory* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2020). Patterson explains comprehensively the underlying social, political, and economic impetus for Ukraine's civil war.
7. Ibid.
8. Debates of the House of Commons (Ottawa: J. de Labroquerie Tache, 13<sup>th</sup> Parliament, Second Session, Volume II, 1919), 1929.
9. Cornelius J. Dyck, *An Introduction to Mennonite History* (Waterloo: Herald Press, 1993), 197.