

Sara Wiebe's (Rempel) Trip 1928 - - Our Journey from Russia to Canada from Nov 2 to Dec 18, 1928

Or..... "Stories of Sour Pickles and Coloured Jello"

(This journal by Aunt Sara was translated into English by Rita, Anita, Alvin, Ruth and Jeannette over several evenings of our stay in Ukraine with the assistance of several glasses of wine. Explanatory comments in italics are made by Alvin after coming home.)

"Days come and go. The happy ones go quickly. The troubled ones not quickly enough. Who would not wish a longer rather than a shorter happiness, and shorter rather than longer pain? God granted us in his grace many happy days."

I will try and describe our journey with the help of my notes. We belonged to the lucky ones in 1928 who received the news that in 6 weeks, we needed to be over the border.

(Alvin's comment – this account of the emigration from Russia to Canada was written by my Aunt Sara when she was 89 years old. She talks about many events and records a number of conversations. The recording of conversations is interesting and may be a bit suspect as Aunt Sara was very deaf. The Spanish influenza of 1919 was a world-wide pandemic, causing millions of deaths. Aunt Sara was affected as well and survived but was left almost totally deaf. She told me about an incident shortly after she became deaf. She was walking along a road with other young people. They all were talking and since she could not join in the conversation, she was walking a bit behind them. Suddenly a bird flew up and nearly struck her. As the bird passed her, she heard it say, "Sara, someday you will hear again". In Canada she did get a hearing aid and that is how I remember my early years with her. As a youngster I recall others in the house talking to her and they were always yelling. In her old age, she did have an operation which restored her hearing. It was after the operation that she told me about the incident with the bird. She saw the operation and her restored hearing as a fulfillment of the statement the bird had made.)

Yes, we were very lucky, and many were jealous of us, even the Russians. But, it was also very difficult as we had to part with our brothers, mother and father from their sons, Abraham and family, and Kolya, still single. How happily they would have come along. But one does not ask this question anymore in Russia.

(Alvin's comment – The reference to Kolya her brother, still being single is interesting. Aunt Sara makes no reference to him being engaged or even having a girl-friend. What we do know is that sometime in the next year, he did get married and his first daughter Helen was born on

November 10, 1929 – exactly one year after Aunt Sara left Halbstadt. Kolya married Eugenie Geier. She was of German Catholic background and her parents most likely lived a few kilometers away in one of the German colonist villages across the Molotschna River. Her Catholic parents were vehemently opposed to her marrying a Mennonite and there was even talk of killing Kolya. Eventually her parents relented and everyone went to the wedding celebration. Elfie Bishoff, Kolya’s step-niece, remembers attending the wedding as a 10 year old. The merriment went on so long that young Elfie fell asleep in a corner. I suspect that Eugenie’s parents gave their blessing to the wedding when they found out she was pregnant. Aunt Sara’s silence on the subject, speaks to some embarrassment over the issue.

The unusual name of Kolya requires an explanation. His registered name was Nicholas. This was a popular name at the time as the Czar of Russia was Nicholas II. It is common to abbreviate names and in Canada this name is usually abbreviated as “Nick”. In the Russian language the name was pronounced Nicholya – hence “Kolya” is the abbreviation taken from the last part of the name.)

Although separated, we were happy to cross the border without difficulty. We left with 4 families on Nov 2, 1928, at 8 in the morning, from Halbstadt. It was father and mother, me – Sara, Mary, Helen (also known as Helena or Lena), Liesbeth (Elizabeth), and two Konrad brothers, Jacob and Hans (our cousins). There were also several couples from Petershagen and Waldheim. *(Alvin’s comment –Petershagen and Waldheim are Mennonite villages in the Molotschna settlement)*

Many came to say goodbye at the train station. Those accompanying us were Abraham and family, Kolya, Greta and Abraham Wiebe (siblings), Aida and Willy Lebttag (siblings), and Hans and Dietrich Wiebe. They came along up to Feodorovka. *(Alvin’s comments - Abraham and Kolya were Aunt Sara’s brothers. The other Wiebes in the travelling party must have been cousins. It is not known who the Lebttag’s were. Feodorovka is a small town about 10 km west of Lichtenau. It is at the junction of the tracks coming from Halbstadt and connecting with the main tracks coming from the Crimean peninsula, through Melitopol and going north to Zaporozhye and then on to Moscow.*

Aunt Sara’s brother Abraham accompanied the group with his family. He had married a widow by the name of Eugenie Schultz. Her maiden name was Schweier. Eugenie had a daughter from her first marriage by the name of Elfrieda (Elfie), born on October 4, 1919. Abraham and Eugenie did not have any children of their own. After Abraham was exiled to Siberia in 1937, his wife and daughter continued living in Halbstadt. Elfie subsequently married a Mr. Bonke and they had 2 boys named Victor (born May 15, 1940) and Alfred (born December 18, 1941). The extended family was still living in Halbstadt when the German army over-ran the area in October 1941. Just prior to the arrival of the German army, the Mennonite and other German

speaking families had been assembled in an open field near the railway station in Halbstadt for many days. The Soviet government wanted to ship them into exile in Kazakhstan but the rapid German invasion saved them from that fate. While they waited near the railway station, they saw many trains come by from Lichtenau filled with people being sent into exile. They continued living in Halbstadt during the years of the German occupation and then came west with the retreating German army in 1943 and reached safety in Germany. They had remembered Aunt Sara's address in Waterloo, Ontario and wrote to her after the war. It must have been a shock to Aunt Sara to receive that letter. They came to Canada in 1948 as refugees. They stayed first with Aunt Sara in Waterloo as she had sponsored their immigration and then came west to Winnipeg and stayed with us for a while. I remember the visit well. They were on their way to Alberta where Elfie was to be married to Fred Bischoff.

According to Alfred Redekop in his book on the Hueberts from Muensterberg, Elfrieda Bonke's husband was taken into custody during the late 1930's. In Germany as a refugee in the 1940's she received news through his sister that he was no longer alive. Fred Bischoff was born in Germany and as a young man immigrated to Canada. In 1939 he returned to Germany to get married in Dresden. While in Germany, the war started. Although he was a Canadian citizen, he was unable to return to Canada and was conscripted into the German forces. His wife was killed during the infamous bombing raid on Dresden on February 14, 1945 in which over 25,000 people died. After the war, he ended up in Germany in the British zone of occupation. This is where he met Elfrieda Bonke. In 1946 he was free to return to Canada. Two years later Elfrieda, her two sons and her mother were permitted to immigrate to Canada where Elfie married Fred Bischoff. For many years they lived in Peace River, Alberta where they operated a bakery. Fred Bischoff has since passed away and Elfrieda Bischoff is currently residing in Fort Saskatchewan, Alberta. She had 2 sons with Fred Bischoff - Arthur Bischoff born February 7, 1950 and Robert Bischoff born August 12, 1961.)

We had left Halbstadt forever. I have long looked back. It is and stays in the past. It is the homeland that one leaves and one can never find a second one. The Devil, the leader of this world, has disturbed everything. *(Alvin's comment – The railroad track leading south from Halbstadt is on a raised road bed with no trees or obstructions along the way. Aunt Sara would have had a good long view of Halbstadt as the train left her home town).*

When we arrived in Lichtenau, our relatives and friends were there. The train stopped and we started saying farewell with tears and hugs to the relatives who had gathered at the station. Uncle Hamm said to me "Sara, I rely completely on you girls". He meant regarding the debt owed to Uncle Johann. I said to him "Please remain calm, everything will be taken care of". *(Alvin's comment – The Uncle Hamm referred to is Herman Hamm. He was married to our grandfather's older sister and appears in the famous photograph taken in 1890 when they*

posed in front of the ancestral house in Lichtenau. In pictures he has a very stern looking face. It must have seemed intimidating to Aunt Sara to receive this admonition, but she handled it well. It is also surprising that he singled out Aunt Sara for this admonition. Her 61 year old father would have been a more logical person to receive it, but this tells us something about Uncle Herman Hamm's perception of who would really take on the responsibility for repaying the debt.)

Our father had made an earlier attempt to get permission to emigrate. Each submission had to be accompanied by a substantial payment of money. If the application was rejected, the money was lost. There was no money left to make another application. Then Uncle Johann Wiebe in Canada, father's brother, helped us with \$400.00. He paid it in Canada to a Henry Koop. It was supposed to be this Mr. Koop's inheritance. Through Johann Koop, we paid for our journey again. Liesbeth was only 14 years of age and consequently went under her mother's name, and so we had to pay for only 5 passports. We all received our papers thank God. Even our Uncle Hermann Hamm was able to live long enough to understand that all the debt was paid, plus 6% interest, from when it was borrowed in 1927. The Lord God was very merciful to our family.

(Alvin's comment – It is not entirely clear what the money was used to pay for as the overseas portion of the trip was made on credit with money supplied by the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR). From comments made by my mother, I am aware that money was required to apply for passports and other travel documents. Some funds may also have been required for the train travel inside Russia where CPR funds could not be accessed. Also grandfather's brother Johann Wiebe was already in Canada and living in Port Rowan Ontario. This would be why they had to use an intermediary (Johann Koop) to get the \$400 from Canada to Russia.

On the first application to leave Russia, our grandfather had applied for passports for everyone, including his 2 sons. He was advised that including his sons had been the cause of having the application rejected. The second application did not include his sons. This must have been a painful decision. It is not clear why excluding his sons made the application more acceptable. My mother seemed to feel that the authorities wanted to keep all able bodied men in Russia in case of a war. The authorities may also have known something about her brothers past as they had fought in the White Army during the Civil War. This army had opposed the Communist takeover of Russia and was on the losing side in that conflict.)

When we arrived in Feodorovka, we took our last farewell from our brothers and the other loved ones who were with us, whom we have never seen again. It all happened very quickly as the connecting train came very soon. That was the train that was supposed to take us to Moscow.

The farewell was very difficult, and mother pressed her loved ones close to her heart, and they were not to forget to write because it was so very sad for those left behind. We had talked many times about the possibility of emigrating and had tried to make it a reality. Now that it was happening, we were caught off guard and found it difficult to say goodbye.

As we left Feodorovka, we were very sad. At first our group was scattered in different cars. With great effort, we managed to get everyone into one car and so could at least stay together as the train was very full. Mother was able to lie down a little. The rest of us, and father, sat the whole way to Moscow. We arrived in Kharkov at 2 in the morning. It all looked very nice. However we were not able to really appreciate the beauty of the place as we were viewed suspiciously by the other people in the train. This made us feel very uncomfortable.

We did not dare eat. One time I risked opening a basket, but so many other travellers tried to stick their hands into it and get some of our food that I quickly closed it.

The conductor was not good to us. Because we had three baskets, he wanted us to give one away. We did risk trying to explain the matter to him - that we were six people and that we had the right to carry 12 pud. (*Alvin's comment - a pud is a Russian unit of weight equal to 36.11 pounds or 16.38 kg*) But we had much less. He swore at us and called us Jews. He threatened to report us in Moscow where we would have to pay a double fine. I said to him "good", but first he would have to allow us to weigh our things. For now, we would not give up any baskets. Father wanted to resolve the situation by giving him a bribe, but we wouldn't let him. (*Alvin's comment - I believe Aunt Sara is using the royal "we". As the reader will find out later, Aunt Sara, who turned 28 on the trip, was quite used to standing up to her father and overruling his decisions.*)

On the second day, as we approached Moscow, the conductor was decent to us. When our father suddenly fainted, and I quickly went to the conductor's section and asked for a cup of tea, and told him why, he gave it to me and came back with us to assess the situation. Father sat up and gladly drank the hot tea. And the Russian conductor said to me, "You can go and get another cup." (*Alvin's comment - I was never aware of Aunt Sara being able to speak Russian. Maybe she knew a few words in Russian and was able to use them at this time.*)

As we disembarked from the train on the third day, Sunday, early in Moscow, on November 4th, the conductor helped us girls with the baskets. He was very friendly and stood a long time watching us. He said to us, (something that means) "happy journey". We attributed the happy ending of our trip to our mother who was very quiet but prayed a lot.

The arrival in Moscow did not go well. We arrived in Moscow on Sunday at 4:20 in the morning. The immigration office was closed, so we had to go back to the train station on 6 wagons. We also did not find sleeping quarters because it was Sunday. So we all sat in the waiting room at

the railway station, where it was stuffy. The authorities at the railway station said we could stay until 12 at night. If we were not gone by then, they would throw us out.

We did not feel well. Around 9 in the evening, several men went out to the immigration office and inquired about the possibility of staying in that building. They were given permission to stay for one night. We drove there and but left our luggage (except the food) at the train station. We all had to sleep on the floor. There were only 3 benches. Father and mother and several children lay on the floor. There were no pillows. We only had a blanket to cover us and slept in one long row. We slept quite well, despite the fact that a huge rat came scurrying around our heads. Jacob Konrad said that the rat's tail was missing. He had hit the rat once with his mitt and it disappeared.

In the morning, many people came to the immigration offices; mostly Jews, some Russians and a few Germans. All day Monday, the immigration office still was not ready for us. We were waiting for an opportunity to present ourselves to the officials in order to finalize the travel documents.

In the evening, the agent went with us to search for rooms. That was difficult. It was very difficult with mother. We went with the train trolley or street car. *(Alvin's comment – My mother frequently mentioned one trolley ride in Moscow. It seems that my grandmother had gotten onto the trolley and it started to move before any of the others had a chance to board. The 4 daughters literally pushed their father onto the moving trolley so their mother would not be alone. The 4 girls [they ranged in age from 14 to 28 at this point] then stood crying on the street. Two young Russian men came along and took pity on them and helped them get to their intended destination.)*

We found some accommodation right after some Jewish people who were also trying to emigrate. *(Alvin's comment – The statement reflects the attitudes of the time toward racial minorities. At the time it was deemed appropriate to identify people by their race if they came from a minority. Today it sounds racist when we hear such references.)* We were 14 people in 2 tiny rooms. It was very tight. Cost 11 kopeks for one night. We got some water that was just for us.

On Tuesday morning, we went back to the train station in Moscow. Father and Mother were taken in a carriage, and we 4 girls and others went by trolley. We sat there until 10 and finally the call came to board. There were so many Jews with a lot of money. They made an offer for us to make good money, and were quite persistent in their offers. *(Alvin's comment – The rules were that each adult was allowed to take 2000 rubles over the border. The Jewish people obviously had more than 2000 rubles per person and were looking for others help get around the rules by carrying the money over the border for them. The person carrying the money was to*

be paid some compensation for taking this risk.) We could take 2000 rubles over the border, per person, and we were 5 adults. But we did not do it. (Alvin's comment – From earlier conversations with Aunt Sara, she told me that her father was willing to take the money from the Jewish people and get paid for doing this. Aunt Sara is the one who put her foot down and overruled her father. She firmly believed that the Jewish people involved would demand all their money back after they had crossed the border. The possibility of Aunt Sara and others keeping all the money after they crossed the border does not appear to have even crossed her mind.)

There were three railroad carriages of immigrants. We Germans were left together. Everyone got their own sleeping quarters. Everyone slept well. In Moscow we had also met other Germans. There were very beautiful evergreen trees that we drove by.

(Alvin's comment – The beautiful evergreens referenced by Aunt Sara would have been seen from the train after they left Moscow. They were obviously travelling through a northern forest. Aunt Sara would never have seen this kind of forest before as Halbstadt was on the treeless steppes (prairies) with only a few deciduous trees around that had been planted by our forefathers.

It is also interesting that Aunt Sara identifies herself as being German. The passport they were travelling on identified their ethnicity as Dutch while their citizenship was Russian. The contradiction requires some explanation. Our Mennonite ancestors were from the Netherlands. They left sometime between 1550 and the early 1600's and moved to the area around Gdansk [Danzig in German] which was a low lying swampy area where their dyke building skills were in demand. Control of the area shifted between Prussia [Germany] and Poland but German must have been the dominant culture. They retained the use of the Dutch language for close to 200 years but eventually German took over as the everyday language. Their typical language usage would have been high-German in church and low-German at home. Over time, the Mennonites became cultural Germans even if they were not ethnic Germans. This provided a dual ethnic umbrella. During World War I, the Russian government tired of having all these German speaking people owning so much land in Russia while the country fought a bitter war with Germany. [Mennonites made up only 10% of the total German speaking population in Russia.] They passed a law to take away the land from all Germans in Russia. Mennonites suddenly started flying the Dutch flag and asked to be exempted from the law. They caused enough confusion to cause a delay in having the law implemented. [A large bribe paid to Rasputin by Mennonite businessmen also helped convince the Czar to investigate the issue further.] However it started the Mennonites thinking they were Dutch, at least on paper. That is why Aunt Sara is travelling with a Russian passport that identifies her ethnicity as Dutch while she refers to herself verbally as being German.)

On Wednesday at 9 in the evening the train stopped and we were required to disembark at an unknown railway station in Russia. It was the big October celebration that is celebrated in November. It was evening and all our possessions had to be brought out and everything had to be on display at the toll booth. It was a lot, but they were not mean to us. With us, they just asked us to open our things. The authorities didn't take anything out. And we were able to close them. We were not searched individually.

The Konrad boys were treated differently – everything was poured onto the floor. They were both thoroughly searched, including their shoes. We helped them put everything back into their baskets. We didn't have trunks, as you couldn't buy any in Russia. Also one family from Petershagen was thoroughly searched. Otherwise no one else was searched. People said that it was because of the October festival that we were not thoroughly searched.

Everything went back into the train carriages. We knew we were near the border. We looked out as we approached the border. The train stopped just before crossing the border and stood there for half an hour. Our papers were examined by the officials. Officials looked directly into everyone's eyes and spoke to us gruffly. How happy we were when the train started moving. Our train continued into Latvia for another 12 km before we disembarked. The Russian train then drove back. Thank God we were out. It was two in the morning. The next train was there and we were allowed to board. It was going to Riga. On Thursday Nov 8 at 6:30 in the morning we arrived in Riga and drove with the carts to the quarantine station.

(Alvin's comment – It is interesting to note what Aunt Sara does not say in this account. In all verbal accounts from my mother and Aunt Sara, they always referenced the "Red Gate" at the border between Russia and Latvia. They were very aware of this gate as the train passed this point. It became their symbol representing freedom. There are numerous accounts of people singing a hymn after they had passed this gate. The fact that Aunt Sara does not mention it is most likely attributable to the fact that she is writing this account many years later. The gruffness of the officials at the border is most likely attributable to the fact that they looked upon Aunt Sara and others in the group as traitors leaving their homeland.)

At the quarantine station we ate breakfast and then we bathed. That caused us to die laughing. Our hair was examined. We were there for three days before we could appear before the Commission. On the second day, we had to go to a different quarantine where they had very nice rooms.

(Alvin's comment – The story of receiving their bath was often talked about by my mother. It was a public facility, with separate rooms for men and women. Their father had to go off by himself but the 4 girls went with their mother. I gather that it was a shower facility which they had probably never used before in their lives. The girls all managed to take their shower and

were helping their mother get lathered in soap when the water was turned off. They ended up wiping the soap off their mother. The reference to "die laughing" was probably their nervous reaction to all being naked together in a shower for the first time in their lives.)

November 13th, mother lay in bed and could not come to the Commission. There was a female doctor with very large eyes at the Commission. Hans Conrad had to stand on his toes; otherwise she could not look into his eyes. Many people had problems. Lena in our family held us up for three weeks. Her left eye was a little red in the corner. She twisted her eyes so much that she looked cross-eyed. Lena had to go every day to the Commissioner to be examined. Hans Conrad had to wait two weeks because of a mole near his eye. Only two families in our party passed the medical inspection without difficulty.

While we were waiting, we were all together in a compound on a yard. There were many immigrants that ate and slept there. They went into the town until 10 in the evening. At 10 in the evening, the gate was locked. If anyone came later, they had to climb over the fence. That happened to us one day and the fence was very slippery.

We got to know a lot of people, had a sing song, and played and told stories in the dining room. They also played "blind cow". It was always very loud in the dining room.

In the middle of all of the sadness, there was also much laughter. There were so many different people. Every time someone left, there was a great big farewell. Then we stood at the gate and waved as long as we could see the car. It was like a big family.

The food was not very good. We paid one D(?) for the food every day. Our youngest sister Liesbeth was always hungry. She sometimes ate in the breakfast room, and then once again beside us. How she did this, we don't know. She was 14 years old and she made a number of acquaintances. She could sing very well.

After three weeks Lena passed the medical exam and was accepted for emigration to Canada. Only then did mother present herself to the Commissioner. She passed, and so we drove on the 28th of November at 10 in the evening from the quarantine station to the train station. The Conrad boys had left on Nov 21. We were sorry that we could not travel together.

At midnight, we left from the Riga train station and travelled the whole night. At 7 am, we were in Libau. (*Alvin's comment – this is known today as Liepaja and is a city in Latvia on the Baltic coast.*) At the Riga train station we needed to go upstairs to board the train. There were many steps. Mother with her asthma, looked sombre. She thought it would be better to go back to Russia then to go up those stairs. We all worked together. Father had his hands full of things, and so did we. But we all pushed and shoved, step by step, slowly, and at long last, we made it.

We were very happy. The train was roomy and clean. With us were acquaintances from the quarantine station in Riga.

In Libau, at 10 in the morning, we boarded the ship Baltonia. It was a Russian ship that was captured by the Germans in the World War. It was clean, and had a German crew and consequently we could talk with everyone. It was the best part of the trip. We had the first cabin and it had two windows. The ship was loaded on the 29th, and then left on the 30th at 8 in the morning. We were on our way to England. The sun was shining and we were all on the deck having a good time. I would gladly experience that again.

(Alvin's comment – a search for a ship named Baltonia that matches Aunt Sara's description proved to be fruitless. There was a ship by that name serving in the United Baltic Shipping services line from 1926 to 1936. It was broken up in Ghent Belgium. A subsequent ship by that name was sunk in World War II off Gibraltar on February 7, 1943 after hitting a mine laid by the German submarine U-118.)

The Conrad boys went a week earlier and encountered a huge storm and had to put on life vests. The North Sea can be very rough. Everything was calm and still for us. Very few of us got sea sick, but Lena and Liesbeth did get sick. Meal time provided wonderful large sour pickles which were a highlight.

Mary and I helped in the kitchen with drying dishes and putting them away. And we talked a lot with the crew in the kitchen. The cook knew Halbstadt, as the German military at the end of the war had been in this part of Russia. He also knew Orloff and other villages. He spoke about the "Ludendorff Fest" which had occurred in Halbstadt and Orloff. He asked a lot of questions about those who stayed behind and married locals when the German military had to leave Russia. As thanks for our work in the kitchen, we received a large bowl of sour pickles. The sick ones in our family were soon up and around.

(Alvin's comment – the reference by Aunt Sara to the German military requires some background information. World War I had started in August 1914. In late August, the German army had a significant victory over the Russian army at a place in East Prussia called Tannenberg. The victorious German general was Ludendorff. The defeated Russian general committed suicide. This did not end the war for Russia. Rather it dragged on for many years into 1917. When the Soviet government came into power in early 1918, it wished to end the war with Germany. It signed the Brest-Litovsk treaty with Germany on March 3, 1918. The Soviet government was forced to make many concessions – one of which was that Ukraine would be recognized as a separate country and that Germany had the right to occupy it for the next 15 years. That is why German troops showed up in Halbstadt in the spring of 1918. With the end of World War I on the western front on November 11, 1918, the Soviet government abrogated the Brest-Litovsk treaty and German troops were forced to leave Ukraine. The cook in his conversations with Aunt Sara left the impression that some German troops stayed back as

they had married local Mennonite girls. There are some references in the history books to some German officers remaining in Russia after the German troops had left. The German officers played a major role in leading the White Army in its fight against the Red's. I have never seen any references to German officers marrying local Mennonite girls.

Al Reimer in his carefully researched historical novel "My Harp Is Turned To Mourning" describes the arrival of German troops in Halbstadt. The German troops arrived on April 19, 1918. The townspeople were informed of the pending arrival of the troop train by 2 German officers who had arrived by car just after lunch. The troop train was already unloading in Lichtenau, just to the south, and would be in Halbstadt within the hour. The townspeople assembled at the Halbstadt train station with happy anticipation. The station had been carefully decorated. Some pretty Mennonite girls were assembled to provide a welcoming "faspa" of ham and zweibach for the arriving troops. The town had suffered for a number of months from the chaos of the Civil War and was looking forward to order being restored. Some Mennonites were also looking forward to retrieving items that had been stolen from them by the surrounding Russian peasants during the chaos. The troop train, after several unexpected delays, arrived just after 4:30 P.M. The troops disembarked from the train and were welcomed by a Mennonite Choir singing "Deutschland, Deutschland Ueber Alles", the German national anthem. The Mennonite mayor of Halbstadt publically expressed his gratitude on behalf of all "German-speaking colonists" in the area to the "long-awaited German liberators" who had arrived to save them from the Communists and terrorists. Over the objections of the Mayor, the German commanding officers had 3 captured terrorists brought out of the train. These were marched to the end of the platform, blind-folded and shot by the German troops. This was meant to be an object lesson to other terrorists still at large. The surrounding Russian population noted the collaboration of the Mennonites with the German army. They bided their time until the German army left in November 1918, and then had their revenge on the collaborators.)

Saturday Dec 1st, at 1 in the morning, we arrived in Danzig. The ship was docked there the whole day until 12 midnight. Many Germans boarded and we could always speak with them. When the cook saw us, he told us to come and help him with the dishes. We were with him and we sang and talked, and he talked so much. In fact, he talked about the hospital in Muntau.

Monday Dec 3rd, at 6 in the morning, we went through the canal. It took 8 hours. The ship moved very slowly and it was beautiful outside. Everybody was on deck. We received good wishes from the people we passed on shore. At the end of the canal we made some food purchases and then we were off to England.

(Alvin's comment – The paragraph describes their passage through the Kiel Canal. The canal is 98 km in length and connects the Baltic Sea with the North Sea while saving the long trip around Denmark. There are locks at the exit at Brunsbuettel where the ship enters the North Sea. The ship is stationery while in lock and this might be when they had the opportunity to interact with people on shore and purchase food from them.)

Wednesday Dec 5th, at 7 in the morning, we arrived in England. We said farewell to everyone, and the cook said “if ever any one of you is getting married, you can call me and I will come and cook. And don’t forget the sour pickles”. So everyone was happy. We were on the Baltonia on the North Sea for five days. No storms, day or night. It was very nice.

As we disembarked, we immediately went to Atlantic park. There we ate and immediately had to appear before a doctor. We were very angry. In Riga they had told us we had to be very clean when we appeared for the medical inspection in England. When we arrived they didn’t even let us bath or wash our hands before the inspection. Only I, Mary, Liesbeth had our hair combed. Mom and Lena went as they were before the doctor. We all passed the inspection.

(Alvin’s comment – Our mother always said that their ship arrived in London. According to Frank H. Epp in his book Mennonite Exodus, the ship would have docked at Southampton and they were taken to an immigration hall named London Park. Many Mennonite emigrants thought they were in London. I am assuming that Aunt Sara has confused London Park with Atlantic Park.)

It went so quickly. We were all amazed. There were many who were turned away because of their eyes. The poor ones rejected for entry into Canada cried the next day when we drove away.

(Alvin’s comment – The inspection at London Park was the first time they would have been seen by a Canadian official as Russia would not let Canadian officials enter their country. The medical inspection determined your eligibility to enter Canada. By pre-arrangement, the Hindenburg government in Germany had agreed to take all Mennonite emigrants who did not pass the Canadian inspection. No one had to go back to Russia once they had managed to leave that country.)

On Thursday Dec 6th at 10 in the morning, we were driven to the port in England and boarded our ship right away. We got 2 cabins for our family. The ship was called “The Montreal”. It was a large ship and it was very clean.

(Alvin’s comment – The ship was part of the Canadian Pacific fleet as the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization had an agreement with them to finance this mass migration of 20,000 Mennonites. The ship was actually called the Montroyal. The difference in spelling and pronunciation probably was not important to people to whom both of the names (Montreal and Montroyal) would have been quite foreign.

The ship had an interesting history. It was launched at Glasgow on November 11, 1905 with its original name of Empress of Britain. On July 27, 1912 it collided with and sank the S.S. Helvetia off Cape Magdeleine (near Quebec City). In 1914, with the outbreak of war, it became an armed

merchant cruiser. In 1915, it was converted to a troop transport. In 1919 it returned to ordinary passenger service after being converted from coal to oil. It had its name changed to Montroyal in 1924 and was withdrawn from service while it was re-configured into an immigrant ship carrying 600 cabin-class and 800 3rd class passengers. It returned to service in 1927 in time to bring our mother to Canada. It was permanently laid up in September 1929 and scrapped in 1930 at Stavanger, Norway.

I can't help but wonder if our mother knew the history of the ship. She was very fearful of ocean voyages and had heard of many disasters. Did she know something about the history of her ship and named her first daughter Rita Magdalena after the disaster her ship had participated in? She really wanted to name her daughter Rita Madeline but did not know how to spell it. Both options are a variation of Cape Magdeleine where the disaster occurred. Just speculating.)

We were in the middle of the ship with three windows in our cabin. I always lay by the window. There were always fish that circled the boat because of the kitchen scraps that were thrown overboard. We were only three German families. The others were all strangers from different regions. We could talk German with almost everyone. At 7 in the evening, we set sail for Canada.

Everything was upstairs in the lounge. Outside it was cold as it was December. We four sisters were asked to sing in the lounge. We sang in harmony. Everybody clapped. The next day after breakfast, everybody said "Just sing, sing". This was very difficult as Lena, our tenor, was very sea sick and Liesbeth was frequently lying down. She was our soprano.

With us was a young, Latvian woman who was going to her husband in Canada.

We also had a stow-away on the ship. He was discovered on the third day and had been hiding below where the luggage was stored. He was very dirty and very hungry when he was discovered. He was a young, beautiful boy from Germany, and he sometime came to visit me in our cabin. The translator and the captain were not allowed to see him. He could talk very well. As a punishment, every day he had to wash the deck floors with a steel brush. When we walked by him while working, he would laugh and sit down with us. We told him he should keep working. He said he had until 12 noon to finish his job. He did not want to finish too quickly, or they would give him more work. He spoke good English and could sing well. The ship was planning on taking him back to England.

(Alvin's comment – My mother frequently talked about this stow-away but in a more disconnected fashion than Aunt Sara describes him. Aunt Sara appears to have developed a closer relationship with him than my mother did. I suspect that the four sisters probably went out of their way to walk by him while he was working and looked forward to interacting with him. On the last day of the voyage, the stow-away suddenly disappeared. The ship was

searched and they even came into my mother's cabin and shone a flashlight under all the beds. It was speculated that the crew had helped him go over board and left him to swim for shore. This always seemed like a very cold and callous act as they were still hours from port. However in thinking about it, I realized that since the ship was docking in St John New Brunswick, the ship could have passed within sight of the south shore of Nova Scotia. The stow-away could have made a decision to risk swimming to shore. The December waters must have been very cold and it is unlikely that he survived the swim.)

On Sunday Dec 9th, there was a big storm. All the port holes were closed. So we sat with lights on. Mother was very sick. Just father, I and Mary went to eat, even if one could not eat everything. Somebody was very kind and asked about the sick people and asked if they could bring anything. We sailed for 7 days on the ocean.

Thursday Dec 13th, in the late evening, we arrived at St John New Brunswick in Canada. We stayed on the ship until morning. Right after breakfast we were loaded onto the train that was going to Toronto. Many other immigrants, including some from Poland, were also assembled there to board the train.

(Alvin's comment – It is strange that Aunt Sara makes no reference to the officials at St John who processed them. An extensive form was completed and this must have taken some time. This form is preserved in the archives at Pier 21 in Halifax. It records that they arrived on the Montroyal as 3rd class passengers, having left Southampton on December 5, 1928 and arriving at St John on December 14, 1928. It shows that our grandfather was 61 while our grandmother was 56. They gave Lichtenau as their place of birth. Their nationality was Russian while their "race" was recorded as Dutch. They also admitted that they could read German and that the voyage had been financed by the Mennonite Board of Colonization. When asked his occupation in Russia and his intended trade or occupation, our grandfather must have lied as he stated "farming". He had never farmed in his life in Russia as he had worked in a store in Lichtenau. He may have been coached into giving an answer acceptable to the officials. Farming was the occupation of most Mennonites coming to Canada at that time, and the answer would have been believable. He identifies his brother Johann Wiebe in Port Rowan as his destination and claims his closest relative left in Russia is his sister. It is strange that he did not identify his sons as the closest relatives in Russia. The Communist system may have taught him to protect the identity of those closest to you. They all claimed not to be mentally or physically defective or to be infected with tuberculosis. They were given the status of "Landed Immigrants".)

Saturday December 15th at mid-evening, we arrived in Toronto. We were told there was no train to Port Rowan on the weekend. We had to get off the train in Toronto and come into the train station. Nobody spoke to us. All of a sudden, a young Jewish boy came and spoke German to us, wanting to know where we came from and where we were going. The Poetker family had

arranged for someone who would meet us and vouch for us. This Jewish boy facilitated our meeting the people who were supposed to be our contact in Toronto. Through him we found out that someone was soon going to come and get us.

A pastor came. There were many telephone conversations. He spoke to us in German in a very friendly way. He had a station wagon and we could all fit into it. He brought us to a Catholic old-folks home that was eight stories high. We went up to the 8th floor in the elevator. That was something for mother. No steps. We all had a place to sleep and something to eat. And some people spoke German.

On December 16th, after breakfast, our hosts took all the women to a room full of old coats and shoes. We were allowed to keep these gifts. They took us to a service at a Cathedral, and we experienced everything there. We were introduced and we told them where we were from and where we were going.

For lunch we saw "Jello" for the first time in our lives. It even came in different colours. Oh, that was wonderful. Liesbeth thought she would eat it from now on. In the afternoon, mother and father were able to rest. A German-speaking person came to get us girls and took us window shopping in the street and to a park where it was cold. There was good food for supper and many people came to welcome us.

Monday December 17th, after breakfast, they took us to the train station. We sat there all day. In the evening, we boarded the train. It was a small train with not many passenger cars.

Tuesday Dec 18th, we arrived in Simcoe. Our dear relatives, the Poetker siblings, stood there ready to embrace us. It was not easy for them, to take in 6 people after a long journey and provide hospitality.

We felt welcome and we wished God's grace on them because they had done so much for us.

After the holidays, (Christmas?) we all went into one household.

In February, our parents moved into a small house that had a small garden. In June, Mary and I drove to Waterloo. Uncle Johann and Aunt Mary had already been to Port Rowan and through Aunt Mary's relatives the Johann Dyck family from Waterloo, Mary and I moved to Waterloo. I went to the Wettlaufer family who had a big store and who were expecting a second child in two months. I was being hired to help in their household.

Mary went to work for Miss Eby who needed help for her mother. Miss Eby and Miss Krueger both worked at the Forsyth sewing factory. Miss Krueger was the supervisor. Mary and I visited each other and so I had the opportunity to ask Miss Krueger for work. I was hired on Sept 1, 1929 at the factory, and I worked there until March 1960.

Our parents came to Waterloo in 1929 where we had living space. On March 2nd 1931 was mother's funeral. She died Feb 29th on her 60th birthday.

We lived in a place rented from the Lawrence Zepf family for 11 years.

Our father died in Oct 1950. He was 84 years old.

Lena married Jacob Suderman in 1939. Liesbeth married Hans Warkentin in 1944. Mary married the widower Gerhard Wilms in 1953. Sara married the widower Jacob Rempel in 1960 and moved to Winnipeg.

In 1940, I bought a house in Waterloo, together with my brother-in-law Jacob Suderman. After two years, I took over the ownership myself and they moved with two children to Hespeler, a few miles away. In 1947 they moved to Winnipeg, Manitoba.

"One does not learn to pray in school, but rather in God's school of trials. The best teacher is experience."

"The truth is not meant to be hidden, but rather to bring life everlasting".

This document has been written in the year 1989 about our journey and our experiences.