

**Waldemar Janzen, *Reminiscences of My Father*  
*Wladimir Janzen: Teacher, Minister, Gulag Survivor*  
*July 26, 1900 - May 15, 1957*. Winnipeg: CP Printing  
Solutions, 2017. Pp. 140. Softcover, \$15.00.**

This short book is a combination of memoir, biography and autobiography that tells the story of a missing father. Waldemar Janzen last saw his father when he was four years old after his arrest and imprisonment in the city of Dnepropetrovsk (Dnipro). While his father languished in the Gulag and then in Kasachstan, the author and his mother became part of the refugee experience of the Second World War and eventual immigrants to Canada. The author's father would die in a car-pedestrian accident in 1957, after failed attempts to rejoin his wife and son in Canada. Although the memories of his mother and others are important in the book, the main sources are three collections of letters written over considerable spans of time. The first letters were written between 1936 and 1941, when the author was a young boy, while the second and third collections (1948-50 and 1955-57) are from a time when

the author was an adolescent and young man pursuing studies and beginning a career as a professor at what was then Canadian Mennonite Bible College in Winnipeg.

It is not an unusual story in the sense that the disruption of family and other primary associations is a recurring theme of the Soviet Mennonite experience of the 1930s and 1940s. The reader cannot, however, help but be overcome by sadness when reading of the senior Janzen's attempts to be somewhat of a father even when separated by a chasm that could not be bridged in his lifetime. For the historian, Janzen's interpretation of his father's correspondence sheds further light on the all-pervasiveness of the Soviet totalitarian regime's reach into daily life. As Janzen points out, his father's letters had to paint life in the Soviet Union in somewhat rosier terms than may have been the case, while his mother had to avoid being too clear about what life was like for them in Canada. The result is that neither the author's mother, nor her husband in the Soviet Union could express themselves freely, or to effectively be witnesses to each other's lives. Janzen and his mother were also not confident that telling their story publicly would not endanger their husband and father, and others still living in the Soviet Union. As Janzen points out, Canadians wrote this fear off as paranoia.

Not surprisingly perhaps, the image of his father that emerges is somewhat idealistic. Janzen is certainly conscious of this tendency and while he seeks to be somewhat frank in his assessment of his father's weaknesses, he acknowledges at the outset that the subject of his book is a portrayal of "an outstanding man." (7) At the end of the book, after examining the correspondence with his father from the perspective of a now 84-year-old man, Janzen concludes that this "high view" of his father has not changed. (121)

Although the letter collection is fragmented and fraught with challenges, the correspondence and Janzen's interpretation offers rare insight into the life of a minister and teacher during a difficult period in the Soviet Union. Ministers were targets of the Soviet attack on organized religion and few ministers would survive long enough to leave any footprints behind. Through Janzen's conscientious effort to recover and interpret his father's life through correspondence with him, readers gain valuable insights into Mennonite life after the catastrophe of the 1930s and '40s.

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