

A Letter from Winnipeg in 1907

Jacob Penner¹

Translated and introduction by

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Introduction

Jacob Penner, longtime alderman from the North End of Winnipeg, was one of two city politicians, Joseph Zuken being the other, who had successful political careers as members of the Communist Party of Canada. Both drew on a solid block of voters from the working-class area north of the Canadian Pacific railway lines and served their constituents and the city with distinction, Zuken almost winning election as mayor of the city.

According to Wendy Dueck,² Jacob Penner arrived in Canada about 1905 and taught briefly at the MCI in Gretna before coming to Winnipeg, where he was active in the formation of the Socialist Party of Canada in 1905. In the Old Country he had attended a Russian teacher's college and worked as a land surveyor, where he came in contact with young revolutionary intellectuals. He subsequently was involved in the Russian Social Democratic Party before emigrating to Canada. Around 1905 he was active in the formation of the Socialist Party of Canada; later he participated in the Winnipeg strike of 1919 and in 1921 became a founding member of the Communist Party of Canada. He was elected to the City Council in 1934 and served almost continuously until 1961.

Many Mennonites also lived in the North End during the terms of Penner and Zuken, but few will have voted for them if at all, since their loyalty was still

largely to the Liberals, who were credited with having helped them escape the Soviet Union not many years before.

But, like other Mennonites in the Ukraine, Penner had picked up ideas which were inimical to his Mennonite tradition, and when he arrived in the New World early in the century he was already predisposed to socialist thought, as his letter of 1907 indicates. In addition to this perspective, the letter shows Penner to be a keen observer of life in Winnipeg in the boom years, of the weather, commerce and the agricultural hinterland.

Like many another fascinating text from the Mennonite past, this letter was discovered by James Urry, who kindly allowed me to translate it.

702 Sherbrooke Str., Winnipeg, Canada,
23 February 1907

Dear N. N.³

In our first winter here I wrote you a letter, but as you know, it was lost. That I haven't written until now is due to the fact that from the beginning I was not well here, and people in such a frame of mind don't communicate easily. I became ill very soon in America. *This cancelled all of my plans, since I did not intend to stay in America.* Even now I would not hesitate for a moment and return if I were well.

But I do not want to say that America has made only a bad impression on me—on the contrary, we have experienced during our time here that America has many good sides, but we have a hard time adjusting to the new circumstances, customs and views—indeed, to Americanism. This is not a simple matter, as one might think, and we see it in the immigrants who arrive here as adults and for the rest of their lives feel strange here. It would be the same for Americans in Europe. I believe that one does not value one's fatherland until one is in a strange land, and that is our situation now. We often long for our homeland, and yet our parents and siblings are happy that we are here. In material terms it is better for us here, compared with the last ten years in Russia.

We all have positions now and are earning well. In the last while I too have felt better, now that I have employment again. I am working in an office belonging to two doctors; I keep the books and correspondence and answer the telephone. It seems as though the telephone will do away with the writing of letters, like the telegraph. Almost everything is now done by these means. Long-distance has been perfected here to the point that one can be understood to a distance of 1000 miles, and Winnipeg is now connected with all important centres within 1000 miles by telephone.

We are now in the deepest winter here. By now it is the fifth week that our temperature is below 20 (Reamur)⁴; a few times the thermometer fell far below 30. We are still having a difficult time adjusting to the climate here in Canada. It is said of Canada that there are 13 months of winter in a year. In any case, the

farmers can only begin seeding after May 1, and are busy with this into June. The winter weather is very steady; when the cold weather arrives it remains cold until spring. A midwinter thaw never occurs here, so one can never use a wagon in winter. There is a thick snow covering—4 feet at present. But what makes the cold bearable is the dryness of the winter. There is mostly bright sunshine and for this reason the cold is not as noticeable as in regions where the winter is humid.

The summer too does not have much pleasantness. Either it is uncomfortably cool or so terribly hot that we from Russia are not used to it. And then the mosquitoes! It is hard to describe what a pestilence they are. Doors and windows must all be covered with screening in the summer—otherwise one cannot survive. To take a walk in the woods during the mosquito season means to return with thickly swollen hands and face.

Fruit trees do not flourish in the Province of Manitoba, but on the coasts there are very good gardens. Because one cannot plant gardens here the life of a farmer is not attractive to us *Russländer*. In addition there is the loneliness of farm life here; since there are no villages, every farmer lives on his farm and since the farms are at least a half-mile apart, but often 2 to 3 miles, there is no sociability. All this together makes for the fact that we are not interested in moving out of the city, although land may be had for the asking.

As far as the growing of grain is concerned, it is hard to imagine a better place for it than Canada. Here the best wheat in America is grown, and in addition, there are no crop failures here. If grain had better prices the farmers would become very rich, but the price is always very low.

Taken all in all, the life of a German farmer in Russia is immeasurably better than that of the American farmer. The latter would never admit this, but it is true. First of all, there is the village life, compared with the loneliness of the farm, and secondly the beautiful gardens which one can have in South Russia. Here people on the land can only plant forest trees and wild cherry bushes. It is said that in America all the work is done by machines. This is true in part, but not for the farmer. His machines and tools may be more advanced than those in Russia, but he still must work like an ox all his life. Not every farmer can afford hired help; it is too costly and too hard to find. Even well-to-do farmers only take on help for a few months during harvest, and then they have to pay 2 to 3 dollars a day in wages. It is also necessary to be very quick with this work since the summer is very short.

Here in Canada there is, by the way, also a very beautiful area—that is the province of British Columbia, which is situated to the west along the coast of the great [Pacific] ocean. The whole region is criss-crossed by the largest mountain range in America—the Rockies, which is appreciably higher than the Alps. The climate of this region would be like that of the Crimea. In the many fruitful valleys all the southern fruit flourish, like grapes, peaches and the like. In this area, too, which is very suitable for gardening, the land is being given away for nothing. But this mountainous region is only serviced by one railroad,

on both sides of which flourishing settlements and towns may be found. But the greatest part of this province is still inaccessible and will remain so as long as there is no more railroad construction.

For the workers conditions are significantly better than in Europe. No one need be unemployed here and work is well paid. The average daily wage is two dollars for general work. Tradesmen do especially well here. The proverb: 'the trades have a golden floor' is true here in the fullest sense. Tradesmen work nine hours a day and earn the following: carpenters 3.5 to 4 dollars, painters and decorators 4 to 4.5 dollars, blacksmiths and locksmiths 5 dollars and bricklayers 5 to 7.5 dollars.

Commerce and industry are also doing very well here. The American is a very clever businessman and very energetic. Even the Jews are behind the spiffy Yankees in business matters and it seems as though they will not do well in America. This [flourishing] situation is due to the general prosperity of the people. Doubtless, the industry and commerce in Russia would do well also if the 80 or 90 million peasants were as well off as the average American.

Our city of Winnipeg is rising with American speed. Ten years ago Winnipeg had 30,000 residents and now there are 120,000. Every year buildings worth more than twelve million dollars are built here, and the city administration spends huge amounts every year for improvements and beautification of the city. So now most of its streets are paved with asphalt. A number of gigantic American firms have been established. For example, in the business in which our P. and A. are employed, over 200 salespersons work, and together with the other employees, like bookkeepers, cashiers, etc., they make up a work force of over 300. But there is another store here which is much larger. I scarcely believe that Moscow or Petersburg has anything like that. In this store 1200 persons are employed. Of these 700 are salespersons, 150 are office personnel, cashiers, etc., 100 who unpack and pack the goods and 80 who deliver them. Goods that are bought here are delivered to one's home; one needn't take anything along, even if it is small. Apart from these employees another hundred or more look after various other tasks. The whole business is run with gigantic machines, powerful enough to run a large factory. They power the various installations in the store, like the elevators, which lift the customers from one floor to the next. No one walks up the stairs anymore. These machines also generate the electricity to light and heat the building, as well as the compressed air which moves the money to the cash registers. Every salesperson has a pipe nearby which leads to the cash registers. The money is put into a box by the customer and pushed into the tube, upon which the compressed air, which is constantly in the pipes, quickly moves the box to the cashier, whereupon a receipt is rapidly sent back by another pipe. Such a business could not possibly exist in a large city in Russia, but here it does very well. The number of customers is also very great—from morning till evening all six floors are full, so that one can sometimes hardly make one's way through them and it becomes a little unpleasant.

A superficial observer will at first be of the opinion that America is a very happy land, but when one becomes familiar with the circumstances and looks more closely, it is apparent that there are still many negative aspects. First of all, life here is very expensive; food and clothing are two and three times as much as in Russia. If a tradesman earns 5 dollars a day here one cannot assume that he can live like someone in Russia who earns 10 rubles. I will try to clarify this by itemizing several average prices in Russian weight and money. Bread is 8 kopeks a pound, meat 16 to 25 kopeks, butter 60 to 80 kopeks, eggs 50 to 120 kopeks a dozen, potatoes 80 kopeks a pud [16.38 kg], coal 40 kopeks a pud. Now, in the cold of winter, we need fuel for 50 rubles a month. Clothes and shoes are also more than twice as costly as in Russia. But tea and sugar are somewhat cheaper here, because these items are not taxed. A pound of tea costs 80 kopeks and sugar 12 kopeks. On the average one must assume that the buying power of a dollar here is not greater than a ruble there. Those who bring money to America become aware of this fact, since every ruble becomes fifty cents, and that is not more here than 50 kopeks there. I would not advise people who are well off to emigrate to America, especially if they are used to having a maid. That would cost them at least 35 rubles a month. In general one must do everything for oneself here and help oneself in all things.

Especially unpleasant in this land are the impossibly high railroad ticket prices. For example, the 1600 verst [1.067 km.p.verst] from Ekaterinoslav to Petersburg cost only 12 rubles. Here the same distance costs 65 rubles. On the positive side, the coaches are not divided into classes here. There is only one coach type and the worker is as comfortable as the capitalist. This comfort is limited to the railroad coach though, because in the circumstances of ordinary life the capitalist is as privileged by fate as elsewhere in the world. Or perhaps even more, since when one speaks of the darker aspects of American life then the first thing to mention is the incredible power of the organisations of the capitalists, the so-called trusts. These trusts are truly the despots and tyrants of America, and one can scarcely imagine the harmful effect that they have on the whole of life. Here money has the greatest power, and since the trusts have most of the money, they can do as they please-and their pleasure is selfish. Apart from the destructive influence on the smaller trades, they still also have the upper hand in government, since by means of their money they always have a sufficient number of their creatures sitting in Congress, who make sure that no anti-trust laws come before the House. At first I was very surprised that the American people would stand for that, but when one gets to the smaller trades, they still also have the upper hand in government, since by means of their money they always have a sufficient number of their creatures sitting in Congress, who make sure that no anti-trust laws come before the House. At first I was very surprised that the American people would stand for that, but when one gets to know the Yankee soul a little better, then one realizes that every American has the quiet hope of one day becoming a member of a trust.

The American has another characteristic expressed in the saying: Help yourself. Everyone who cannot help himself cannot survive. It is because of this that there is so much blameless unhappiness in this country. The battle for one's existence is carried out with incredible intensity, or, as I would call it, with a bestial ruthlessness. He who is clever and less choosy in his methods in achieving his goals will usually have great success, and the weaker one succumbs or collapses completely. But this is the case elsewhere as well, and if one considers the relationship of people to each other, one finds that they are like a chaotic virgin forest, where the mighty giant trees stretching to great heights, take all the room and sunshine for themselves, while beneath them innumerable small trees and bushes carry on a bare existence. But if our institutions were built on rational foundations our life would be like a garden in which every tree would have equal space and sunshine. Jacob Penner.

Notes

¹ This letter appeared in [Kroeker's] *Christlicher Familienkalender 1908* (Odessa, 1907), under the title: "Zur Charakteristik von Nord-Amerika, wohin gegenwärtig viele aus unsrer Gegend auswandern, teilen wir folgenden uns zur Verfügung gestellten Brief mit."

² "The Penners of Friedensfeld, Russia" Part One, in *Preservings* 8 (June, 1996), 33-36. This article is based in part on a University of Manitoba M.A. thesis by A. B. McKillop, "Citizen and Socialist: the Ethos of Political Winnipeg, 1919-1935" (1970).

³ The address is given as it appears in the *Familienkalender*.

⁴ This temperature scale, using 80 degrees, was in use in the Old Country. It is named after a French scientist.