

Moving Forward, Looking Backward: The 'Great Trek' from the Soviet Union, 1943-45

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The 'Great Trek' of Mennonites out of the Soviet Union, beginning in the fall of 1943, has been remembered and mythologized mainly in visual and sensory images. Participants in the trek and also those who have been told stories of the trek most frequently refer to mud, wet, cold, and hunger as dominant memories and experiences of that event. Most of us have seen photographs of the refugee caravan, depicting families huddled on rundown wagons pulled by weakened horses struggling knee-high in mud. Individuals on foot, trying to urge on the horses or push wagons from behind, similarly fought against falling on the wet, slippery ground. These photos, published already in the late 1940s in North American Mennonite periodicals, were shocking evidence of the hardships experienced by Soviet Mennonites leaving their homeland and created a visual historiography that became familiar to many. These pictorial memories have been reinforced over the years, in the 'Exodus' paintings of Kitchener artist Agatha Schmidt for instance, and more recently, in the documentary film 'The Great Trek' produced by Winnipeg filmmaker Otto Klassen.

In many ways, the trek is an event best chronicled by media other than an academic paper since it is remembered most vividly in the senses and emotions. The photos, film, and artwork mentioned create an important historical record on their own. As well, numerous memoirs and fictional accounts of the trek have added drama to the remembering of the events. As a momentous turning point in Soviet Mennonite history (from some perspectives an end to that history), the trek is cast in religious terms, likened to the biblical exodus of a chosen people.¹ This paper will chronicle the departure of Mennonites from the Soviet Union during the Second World War in two stages: the first, popularly known as the 'Great Trek', was a planned and orderly retreat of thousands of individuals from their homes in southern Ukraine westward towards German-occupied Poland; the second, correspondingly remembered as a 'flight', was a panicked and disorderly movement away from the advancing Soviet army in the eastern territories of Germany. In addition to the gripping narrative of movement which is central to these events, a number of themes emerge that made the trek and subsequent flight so unique in Mennonite history. One feature that differentiates this trek from the many other migrations in Mennonite history was the striking sex imbalance and the existence of so many fragmented families. Soviet Mennonite society was, by this point, almost a society of women without men. The predominance of women and children had an impact, particularly significant for gender roles, on how this movement was experienced and possibly also how it has been memorialized.

Not only for families, but also for villages, and entire settlements, the westward departure of some resulted in a splitting of the Soviet Mennonite population into those who 'escaped' and those who were left behind or taken back. This separation also divided the 'survivors' from the 'victims' of Soviet oppression, even though the latter did not all experience physical death. An ongoing sense of 'survivor's guilt' plagued those who successfully re-settled in the west, especially when news reached them of the cruelty experienced by those left behind. The migrants who left the Soviet Union in the 1940s were a very different group than earlier populations of Mennonites that had left for the west. While the immigrants of the 1870s and the 1920s were resolutely looking to a new life in a new land, those who departed in the midst of war were moving forward, but in a sense, continually looking backward.

The Great Trek

The trek out of the Soviet Union in 1943–44 followed two years of German occupation of the 150-year-old Mennonite settlements of southern Ukraine. Until the summer of 1943 Mennonites generally clung to the conviction that Germany would win the war, and many families hoped and expected that their loved ones, arrested prior to the war or deported during the war, would be freed once the Germans had advanced far enough in the east. Not until the westward

trek began did this hope begin to fade. With the defeat of the German forces at Stalingrad in the winter of 1942–43 the tide of war had shifted and the Red Army was advancing rapidly westward to reclaim territory occupied by Germany for the previous two years. In the summer of 1943 the German army was ordered to retreat and to take with it the remaining population of Soviet Germans, numbering approximately 350,000. Included in this mass were some 35,000 Mennonites.

Villagers from the Molochna Colony, situated the furthest east of Mennonite settlements in German-occupied Ukraine, were the first to be evacuated. On September 12, 1943, the 10-kilometre caravan of horse-drawn wagons, heavily laden with people and possessions, began its westward movement. After a treacherous crossing of the Dnieper River, over temporary and unstable pontoon bridges constructed to expedite the movement of the endless wagon train, the Molochna residents reached the Mennonite settlement of Zagradoivka. There they remained several weeks, the hope being that the Germans could maintain their hold on territory west of the river. In fact, each extended rest stop along the trek raised the hope, among the refugees, that this might be their new home. Such expectations soon proved futile and in October the residents of the Khortitsa settlement on the west bank of the Dnieper were evacuated. Although about 1,200 Khortitsa Mennonites fled west by train, most joined the caravan of wagons and horses from the Molochna, which by November had grown to include the inhabitants of Zagradoivka and other Mennonite settlements west of the Dnieper. The westward trek also included thousands of other Soviet ethnic Germans and units of retreating German military.

The conditions of the trek are best described in the recollections of those who made the journey. One participant in and chronicler of the trek, Jacob A. Neufeld, described the refugee trek as the “most difficult migration in all of Mennonite history” because of its “duration and suffering.”² Helene Dueck’s typical recollection vividly portrays the physical conditions experienced by the trekkers:

Winter was coming, and with it never ending rains. The main roads, paved ones, were as much as possible reserved for the army. We used the others. They were a sea of mud. It is impossible to describe them and the hardships they caused to the trekkers. Often up to the axles in mud. The horses would slip and fall. Often even the whip would not get them up. We would push the wagon, walking deep in mud ourselves. Faces, hands, clothing, shoes—everything full of mud and wet. We were cold and wet, hungry and had little strength left. No men to help us.³

After several days of travel, continuous rain and over-burdened wagons made travel treacherous and most families had to dispose of heavier belongings, thus leaving sewing machines, butter churns, chests, and even sacks of dried fruit by the roadside. Travelling on open wagons through steady rain that soaked the refugees to the skin, accompanied by unusually intense cold of late autumn, made many people sick, thus worsening the situation.⁴ Many deaths occurred along the way, most from illness, but there were also killings by attacking partisan groups in the Ukrainian countryside. As well, there were births in and under wagons, often prematurely induced by the

hardships of travel. Travel frequently continued at night and refugees recall with horror crossing treacherous bridges and navigating unfamiliar roads in the darkness. One woman recalled the crossing of the Dnieper thus:

It was night and pitch-dark when we arrived to cross the river. Because of air-raid danger no lights were allowed, and the river had to be crossed on two floating bridges made of boats. No railing on the bridges. Thousands and thousands of wagons lined up, most of them manned by women, often afraid to death, but very brave. They HAD to be brave. There was no other way.⁵

Mothers with small children were especially burdened because they had so few resources with which to provide care. They could do little to remedy the illness caused by the elements and lack of proper food. Years later one woman marvelled at the way in which mothers of babies managed with only a few diapers that needed constant washing along the way.⁶

Most families had begun the trek with an ample supply of food—dried fruit, roasted bread and zwieback, and sometimes preserved meat. As the weeks and months of travel continued, however, food stocks ran out and the refugees often had to scavenge for meals. This meant sending children into the village ahead to beg from door to door or venturing into farmers' fields to search for whatever grain or root vegetables might be left after harvest. Cooking was also a challenge since fires had to be put out when air raids threatened, sometimes before the meal was prepared. Although the German authorities with the Red Cross set up feeding stations along the way, rations were small for the refugees and the supply not always sufficient for the thousands that needed to be fed. As well, one refugee woman recalled that the German S.S., their sweethearts and others in their favour received extra and better food than the masses.⁷ Helene Dueck also recalled the much welcome warm soup or stew obtained at the feeding stations but said that such support was received only at the beginning of the journey while the weather was still good and before their progress became so hurried.⁸ Besides feeding themselves, the migrants needed to obtain sustenance for their horses, which often meant walking several kilometres from the main road for hay and other grains. It wasn't unusual for the able-bodied adults to spend the entire night searching in the darkness for food and water for their horses and cow. One woman likened the thousands of foraging refugees on the trek to grasshoppers destroying anything edible on the land.⁹

Those who were 'fortunate' enough to make the journey west by train had different kinds of difficulties to contend with. Travel by train, while somewhat faster and offering slightly more protection from the elements than travel by horse and wagon, nevertheless had its own discomforts. The refugees were packed tightly together in closed freight cars or on open coal cars. Toilet facilities were primitive and lice became a major problem.¹⁰ Furthermore, train travel was not necessarily safer. Several memory sources relate how a train carrying refugees was hit at full speed from behind by an army train in Poland. A number of people were killed, including a Mennonite woman's three children, and many were injured.¹⁰

A brief respite from travel occurred over Christmas, 1943, when the trek was temporarily halted at the Polish border for nearly two months. The retreat was renewed by a further advance of the Soviets and by early 1944 the westward trek had reached the region of central Poland occupied by Germany since early in the war and now known as 'Warthegau'. Germany's plan was to settle the Mennonites and other Soviet Germans in territory from which resident Poles had been expelled earlier that year. To further strengthen Germany's claim to the Warthegau, Soviet Germans were naturalized as German citizens shortly after arriving. Most Mennonites received their new citizenship without question and, in many cases, quite eagerly.

In the Warthegau the Mennonites received housing and work placements and were also recruited into various military and non-military wartime services.¹² Young men in their late teens as well as older men who had escaped deportation in the Soviet Union were now conscripted into various departments of the German military, meaning further separation for families. Women found work on farms, in factories and offices, and because of their language facility in Russian and German, were valued as interpreters for the military effort. The same was true for families that had made the trek by train and thus ended up further west in Germany proper and its surrounding occupied territory. The feeling of temporary stability was such that some young women were able to enter school for training in teaching, nursing, and midwifery skills.¹³

Fragmented Families

The trek represented hardship at the physical level, but was all the more tragic because the refugees were leaving much more than their homes behind. Each family on the trek was also leaving members behind "mainly husbands, sons, and brothers" that had been exiled prior to or earlier in the war. Estimates suggest that by 1941 about 50 per cent of Mennonite families were without fathers. Adult sons were also absent in many households. In most families only the women, children, and the elderly remained and, as a result, domestic units composed of individuals with extended family or village relationships became common. One example is the story of the "family with a tablecloth" told by historian Gerhard Lohrenz. After the death and disappearance of all the adult males in one extended family, the household came to consist of the matriarch, her remaining son, her two married daughters, two daughters-in-law, and an unknown number of children. The tablecloth, a family heirloom, was one possession that they managed to retain during their refugee sojourn.¹⁴ Many families came to fit the 'grab bag' description offered by historian Sheila Fitzpatrick, in which related and non-related individuals created households for the sake of physical and emotional survival.¹⁵ The close kinship ties and the strong community orientation of Mennonite society did much to facilitate the creation of new family units.

Each wagon on the trek thus carried a household of family remnants. The wagonload carrying Katie Friesen's family was typical. They left the village of Gnadenfeld, Molochna on September 12, 1943: "Aunt Katja drove the wagon, Aunt Njuta, who was paralyzed, sat on the wagon with Aunt Katja's three boys ... who were suffering from whooping cough, and mother and I walked behind the wagon and watched the cow."¹⁶ Two middle-aged sisters, Susanna and Tina Toews, at first shared their wagon with their relatives, "Johann Toews, his wife and their youngest daughter, Gerta." Later in their sojourn, having lost their relatives in the flight from the Soviets, the Toews sisters travelled with "two 75 year-old grandmothers, a 19 year-old girl and three small children."¹⁷ Throughout the westward journey, individuals grouped together to share limited resources "food, shelter, transportation" as well as the emotional support needed to confront fearful situations.

The hardships faced by the travellers meant that each member of a family had a large or small role to play in the day to day survival of the family as a whole. One woman's memory of how her family negotiated their wagon up and down steep hills demonstrates how they all worked together to avoid disaster:

Boys and girls took on tasks and responsibilities well beyond what would normally be expected of their age. Each child had a job to do, whether it was to scavenge for food in farmers' fields, to gather wood for fires, or to care for the horses. Even a small boy of three was expected to carry a water kettle in one hand and a potty in the other after his family was forced to proceed on foot.¹⁸

About expectations placed on her during the trek, one woman remarked: "I was fourteen but had to act like another adult."¹⁹ After settling in Poland in the winter of 1943–44, two adult women sharing a house went out to work each day, leaving the household and two youngest children in the care of the two oldest daughters. The eldest girl, who was only age eight at the time, observed that the responsibilities she carried at a young age influenced her personality into adulthood. She said, "As long as I remember, I was a little mother."²⁰ Children of the trek had to assume roles far beyond their age and many later expressed regret over lost childhoods. Recalling his boyhood years as a refugee, one man said it was a time he should have been learning "reading, writing and arithmetic" but instead he was learning how to "beg for food and find edible berries, leaves and mushrooms in their natural setting," as well as repair shoes and "make something out of little."²¹ Yet, children also carried fewer emotional burdens than their elders and found ways of experiencing the trek and unknown future events as adventures. Families worked together, as did neighbours and friends. The difficulties of the trek were, to a degree, lessened by the comforting knowledge that families were part of a larger community experience. Many individuals and families travelled as village groups, bonds that were maintained sometimes right through the process of migration.

While family groups worked together in the context of a larger Mennonite community, there is memoir evidence to suggest that a 'survival of the fittest'

mentality also existed among the trekkers and that help from others was often not forthcoming. The Toews sisters referred to earlier had trouble obtaining assistance when they experienced their second wagon wheel breakdown, as one of them relates:

Our trek leader went ahead with about half of the vehicles. We were left behind with ten other vehicles. Then a wheel on our wagon broke another time. The others drove on and we were left all alone. My sister and I were helpless as we had no tools to repair the damage. We were frightened at the thought of robber bands and of being all alone on the road with no village nearby....Forty more wagons of our trek arrived. We begged for help to repair our wagon. Love for one's neighbors seemed to have grown cold in many hearts. Thirty wagons passed before someone took pity on us....²²

In another case, a family whose horse dropped dead on the road were shouted at to "get out of the way. The trek must go on."²³ And in a similar vein, a woman remarked that when a family had a wagon breakdown or other misfortune, "There was some help from friends or relatives, but not much. Sad to say, not much." She felt it was war that hardened people's hearts.²⁴

A Gendered Trek

In addition to the altered configuration of family units, a significant characteristic of the trek was the sex imbalance amongst the Mennonite refugees, there being more than twice as many adult women as men. The refugee trek was composed mainly of women, children and the elderly, a fact remarked upon in most narratives of the events. For instance, Agatha Loewen Schmidt traced the fate of 1,153 residents of Gnadenfeld, Molochna, from 1918 through to their postwar destinations. She found that the following numbers departed on the trek west in 1943: 227 married or widowed women, 31 married men, 222 single females and 148 single males (young adults and mostly children), and 45 individuals (sex unknown, mostly children).²⁵

Such a striking gender imbalance had significant implications for the kind of difficulties encountered, how obstacles were overcome, and the way in which resources were allocated. Helene Dueck described the situation simply: "We had no men and so the women had to do all the work."²⁶ That the few men may have been at an advantage because of their sex is suggested by some participants in the trek, particularly when it came to the distribution and management of horses. Helene recalled, "the few men we had in the village, got the best horses and the best wagons, one family to a wagon. The women, usually the mild-mannered, not aggressive ones, had to be satisfied with what they were given. And two families to a wagon and two horses." Helene with her mother and two sisters, shared a wagon with her aunt who had four children all under the age of ten. Her mother held the reins of the two horses pulling the wagon, "because she

knew best how to do it," while Helene walked in knee-deep mud beside the young stallion. She held tightly to its halter since the horse had never before been hitched to a wagon and was "very unruly." The difficulty was compounded by the fact that the stallion was paired with an old horse which was "almost blind [and] had hardly any teeth at all."²⁷ In fact, many of the horses used on the trek were not fit for such travel. They were mainly unshod draft horses, to be used on the fields but not able to travel long distances on asphalt or gravel roads. Since there was no time to shoe all the horses, many of them became incapacitated as their hooves began to wear down with travel.²⁸ Some families opted for more difficult travel in the roadside mud in order to protect their unshod horses from the cobblestones.

For another family of women, receiving 'good' horses only added to their difficulties. Frieda's sister had worked for the German occupation forces at the district agricultural offices where she had been in a favoured position and thus received two strong horses "a stallion and a mare" to pull the family's wagon on the trek. But the horses proved difficult to manage because the stallion was so strong and spirited. After crossing the Dnieper River, the family requested permission to continue by train and handed the horses to their cousins. Frieda recalled that for her male cousin the powerful horses were a real fortune whereas for the family of women they had been nothing but trouble.²⁹

Families like Helene's were also disadvantaged because their slower rate of travel meant they often were the last to arrive at the care and feeding stations set up by the German military along the way. Helene recalled that her family never reached the stations in time: "Only the strong ones did, usually those were men, who had the best horses and the strongest wagons. Those that eventually reached the nightcamp, those that were late, often came to empty wells and tables."³⁰

Reflections on this upset of normal gender relations vary. One perspective is expressed in the historical novel *The Wanderers*, which tells the story of three generations of Mennonite women who left the Soviet Union on the trek in 1943 and eventually migrated to Paraguay. The three female heroines are strong and independent while the one adult male accompanying the family on the trek is a pathetic, comic figure, portrayed mainly as a good-for-nothing. On the other hand, in some memoirs the absence of Mennonite family men is compensated for by the presence of German officers and soldiers that frequently came to the assistance of female-headed families. Already during their two-year occupation of Ukraine, the German forces had assumed a caretaking role within Mennonite communities and even for specific families. In light of the absence of adult males in many households, German soldiers came to be viewed as protectors and also formed romantic relationships with young Mennonite women and sometimes with widows as well. On the trek, some of these men continued to play the role of protector and, when it came to fixing wagons, controlling horses, and enforcing order, replaced the males that had been removed from so many families. One refugee woman recalled the assistance of the soldiers during a treacherous night-time crossing of the Dnieper River and said, "Our fathers,

brothers, and sons having been robbed from us, in this critical moment the Lord sent other brothers and fathers.”³¹

While not all the refugees interpreted the allocation of resources or ability to surmount obstacles in a gendered way, most were well aware that women were having to assume new and unasked-for roles. They recognized that in surmounting the obstacles that faced them daily they were by necessity undertaking tasks that in other circumstances they would have left to their menfolk. As Katie Friesen stated simply, “We women had to endure innumerable difficulties and assume many new responsibilities” on the trek.³² In her memoir, Helene Dueck described the multiple tasks and roles that women without men had to assume on the trek:

[Women] learned to drive horses. They fetched feed for the livestock, as well as water, [both of] which were often hard to come by. When the trek stopped for the night, they cooked the meals and cared for the children, the old, and the sick. Even while driving, they had to...watch the children. The children complained often because of thirst or hunger. Squabbles among the children had to be mediated. Frequently the sick or the elderly cried or groaned back in the wagon, in need of medical help....If one had difficulties, one couldn't stop the wagon because that would force the entire Trek to stop.³³

Adult women travelling together shared and exchanged the roles required to feed, shelter and care for their children and also manage the wagon and relate to the military officials in charge of the trek. Agnes Thiessen and her sister-in-law, with seven children between them as well as a grandmother, shared duties much as a husband and wife would have in a family that was intact. Agnes recalled the following: “My sister-in-law and I took turns in our special duties. One day she would do the driving while I would look after the needs of the children and the next day we reversed our positions.”³⁴ Rather than remain fixed in their roles of driver and caregiver as a husband and wife might have, however, these two women shifted roles on a daily basis.

Women who were especially competent in managing a team of horses were described as driving “like a man.”³⁵ Their actions were thus seen as abnormal in a framework in which altered gender roles were a matter of temporary expediency. Jacob A. Neufeld offers a typical characterization of these events, similarly portraying the heroic acts of women as outside of the normative abilities of their gender:

The fact that the trek can be viewed in any kind of favourable light at all is attributable to the services and hard work of the women. One can become lyrical in praise of their practical work, courage and tough endurance. Quietly and heroically, they ‘stood as men’ while discharging all their duties.³⁶

That women are described as ‘standing as men’ points to the irregularity of their situation, as interpreted by the writer. Furthermore, that they performed their services ‘quietly’ suggests that even while doing men’s duties, women were behaving in a properly gendered manner.

Women were indeed making choices and devising strategies to accomplish

the immediate goals of obtaining food, shelter, and safety for their families. In the absence of adult men who would normally be expected to undertake the heavy physical tasks and take leadership in family decision-making, women were compelled to take on roles traditionally allocated to both genders. They had to be brave and strong “physically, emotionally and intellectually” and also be nurturant and caring of their families. For their children, women had to be both mother and father.³⁷ As wartime refugees, these women were sometimes disadvantaged by their sex when it came to the allocation of the resources needed to survive. At the same time, groups of women and children travelling with few or no men were less likely to be objects of suspicion and might, as a result, more easily climb onto trains, scavenge for food, and pass through border crossings. Women’s advantages as protagonists of survival were offset, however, by their vulnerability as targets of rape and molestation, dangers which became acute during the second phase of their escape from the Soviets.

The ‘Flight’

The second phase of the Mennonite refugee movement across wartorn Europe occurred in the last six months of the war. The ‘flight’ westward to escape the Soviet army advancing into eastern Europe in the winter of 1944–45 drew another population of Mennonites into the refugee movement. These were Mennonites numbering close to 12,000 in 1939, born and raised in Poland, East and West Prussia, and the City of Danzig. The Mennonites of eastern Europe experienced little direct destruction of property during the first years of the war. But with the advance of the Soviet army into East Prussia in October, 1944, life changed forever. The advance of the Soviet army westward into eastern Germany in the winter of 1944–45 was accompanied by brutal destruction of property and the killing of civilians, described as “possibly without parallel in European history” in its devastation.³⁸

News of the atrocities which followed the first thrust of Soviet troops into East Prussia prompted a panicked flight of Germans from the eastern territories of Germany, from Danzig, and from central and western Poland. Although a counter-offensive on the part of German forces delayed the Soviet takeover, by January, 1945 the residents of Danzig and West Prussia found themselves desperately trying to flee the Soviet onslaught. Since the Soviet westward advance had been more rapid farther south, Germans in Danzig and in the northern parts of East and West Prussia had little choice but to attempt a northward escape by sea. Thousands of evacuees died trying to reach German rescue ships in the Gulf of Danzig and Baltic Sea, where the dangers of crossing treacherous ice-covered lagoons were compounded by strafing from Soviet bombers from above and the threat of Soviet submarines and mines below.³⁹

Soviet Mennonites, many of whom had remained in the Warthegau for close to a year, became part of the same hurried flight from the Red Army. The

departure this time was more panicked than that from Ukraine a year earlier and fear was certainly heightened by the knowledge that the consequences would be dire should the refugees fall into the hands of the Soviets. Thousands of refugees, citizens, and German soldiers competed desperately for limited spaces on westbound trains. One family of women believed itself to be at a definite disadvantage in this flight, as the youngest daughter recalled:

There was no way that the three of us “my shy mama, my sister who had been quite ill on and off for many years, and I just a schoolgirl!” had a chance to get on that train. We must have looked like chickens in the rain. A soldier came by and he said, you will never get on this train if you just stand there. We didn’t know that man. He had never seen us before. He pushed his way to the train, he knocked on a window and somebody opened the window from the inside, and he lifted us one by one, all three of us, through the window into the train. Shortly after, the train left.⁴⁰

Many people clung to the outside of trains for hundreds of kilometres, despite the severe cold of winter. Individuals and families who were unable to obtain transport by train, truck, or wagon, simply fled on foot in a direction that would take them away from the sounds of approaching Soviet tanks and aircraft.

Once again, the refugees were travelling in the bitter cold of mid-winter. Many narratives contain stories of frostbitten limbs, bread too frozen to eat, and snowstorms which obscured any sense of direction.⁴¹ Thousands of people were overtaken by Soviet troops and killed in the ensuing flight. Memoirs recall Soviet tanks rolling over everything in their path, leaving behind a wasteland of human and animal carnage, and property destruction.⁴² Some Mennonites were among the 100,000 killed in the firestorm that destroyed the city of Dresden in February 1945. Others who found themselves in Berlin during the Soviet takeover were subjected to some of the most brutal violence of the war. This was the case for Marga Siemens and her son Heinz. She reported the following:

I lived through [such] heav[y] bomb attacks over Berlin that I thought the world was coming to an end. I carried away bodies, which in the heat were becoming small like dolls, on my arms. Heinz and I were buried under[rubble] for three days. I lay in the middle of the front lines, then crawled until my knees were sore but fell into Russian hands anyway. Then I lost all my things. But I thank God that I was allowed to keep my Heinz.⁴³

Numerous other families who, despite the odds, had managed to stay together thus far, were separated in the chaos of the Soviet advance. In a number of cases, young women and girls who were attending boarding school some distance from where their families resided in Poland, fled west with their teachers and schoolmates with no knowledge of what route their mothers had taken. While the girls successfully reached the west, although often in fragmented groups or even alone, some of their families were taken prisoner by Soviets.⁴⁴ Others were fortunate to be reunited with family members along the way.⁴⁵ And although the west was a goal for Mennonites and others, few had any idea of their final destination. In the flight ahead of the Red Army, the single desire of many refugees was to keep moving.

Sometimes, when some family members were unable to travel, difficult decisions were made about who would be left behind. In one case, a Mennonite woman joined the flight west, leaving her elderly mother, blind brother and a cousin behind, thus choosing to separate her family group in order that her four daughters not fall into the hands of Soviet soldiers, which was her greatest fear.⁴⁶ Irene Peters chose to leave her mother and sister behind while she fled west with her employer, a German woman with three children; Irene said she could not nor did she want to leave them since the woman was ill and one of the children was paralyzed. Later when their train was destroyed in a phosphorous bomb attack one of the children was killed and she became separated from this family as well. Irene then continued on foot with a group of soldiers.⁴⁷ Some families, for whatever reason, chose not to join the hurried and chaotic flight to the west. Anna Heide Retzlaff chose to remain in the Warthegau rather than risk further separation from the people close to her. In her words:

I was very glad that I had all three of my children with me. I did not know the whereabouts of my husband Willy. I could have escaped to the West with my children at first, but there were the other women, my friends and relatives with their small children; they would not be able to run. So we decided to stay together.⁴⁸

Anna was sent back to the Soviet Union but later was able to immigrate to Canada to join her husband who had gone there after the war. Another woman remained in Poland because her midwifery and other medical skills were in great demand. She too was repatriated with her mother and young children.⁴⁹ These families were among 200,000 Soviet Germans “including about 23,000 Mennonites” overtaken by the Red Army and repatriated to the trans-Ural region.⁵⁰

Women became particularly vulnerable as news of mass rape by Red Army soldiers spread among the fleeing German population. Estimates of the number of German women raped by Soviet soldiers in the latter months and in the aftermath of the war range from 20,000 to two million.⁵¹ The ~~fear~~ of and actual rape of German women by Soviet soldiers was the most obviously gendered aspect of the flight and the Soviet occupation which followed. Aside from the physical and emotional pain that it inflicts on women, wartime rape has a societal function, which, as Ruth Seifert explains, “regulates unequal power relationships between the sexes: it serves to maintain a cultural order between the sexes or” when this order becomes fragile “to restore it.”⁵² For Mennonite refugee women, many without men and thus forced by circumstance to step out of traditional gender roles, the fear and reality of rape reinforced a gender hierarchy in which women were vulnerable in the face of male violence and also dependent on male protection.

Despite the horror that this episode in the war produced for women, both at the time and in memory, the incidence of rape has received little attention from chroniclers of the story of Mennonites in the Second World War. This is partly because women’s stories have not been central to most published narratives, but also because of the sensitive nature of the subject itself. Then, too, as long as rape is understood as a woman’s personal experience and an isolated phenomenon, it

remains excluded from the 'history of a people' type of narrative so integral to Mennonite historiography. Discussions of rape are also made problematic because of their link to the contentious moral issues of suicide and abortion, both courses of action that many women took in the aftermath of rape.

Where rape is mentioned in oral and written memoirs, a variety of narrative patterns emerge which are mainly indirect and oblique.⁵³ For instance, in recounting the arrival of Red Army soldiers in her West Prussian village in 1945, Elfriede Entz says: "The Reds came into our basement wearing white shirts. They covered our ears and often we did not know where our mother was."⁵⁴ Narrators describe the events typically as "too terrible to explain" and thus avoid direct accounts, saying that "words cannot describe the horror." Stories are also de-personalized and recounted in the third person. In the latter case, it is sometimes hard to believe that the narrator did not also experience that which she is describing. In 1951, a recent immigrant to Canada described in lurid detail the brutal attack by Soviet soldiers on a group of women. Although the narrator herself fits the profile of the women who were victims, the episode is told apart from herself. She switches abruptly from "they" to "we" however, when she moves on to the more benign subject of food rations.⁵⁵ Whether this woman was herself raped is not evident from her story, though it is highly likely given the circumstances.

Rape and repatriation were perhaps the two greatest fears of Mennonite refugees attempting to flee the Soviet army. Repatriation, however, became the dominant motif in the public narratives of this period, in part because it was a threatened reality for the entire Soviet Mennonite population, and was not gender specific. For those Mennonites who emigrated to the west following the war, awareness of the extreme suffering experienced by those who were 'sent back', caused them to experience a certain degree of guilt over their own fortuitous escape from the Soviets. Experiences such as rape and other wartime horror, were personalized, internalized and sometimes repressed as repatriation became the main force separating victims from survivors.

Conclusion

For some 12,000 Mennonites, the trek and flight took them permanently away from their Soviet homeland and to new homes in North and South America. For them, the trek had indeed been an exodus from oppression. Yet any sense of liberation was tempered by the fact that, almost without exception, families were fragmented in the process. The escape from the Soviet regime was bittersweet and separation from the past only partial when loved ones "especially husbands, fathers, and brothers" were left behind. Thus, even while moving forward, first in the slow trek from Ukraine, and later in the hurried flight across eastern Europe, Mennonite families were always looking backward as

well, both literally and psychologically. Those who successfully made it to the west rejoiced at their own freedom, but also harboured guilt that many more of their friends, neighbours, and family members, had not been so fortunate. Furthermore, the abrupt manner in which families left their homes in the Soviet Union, and the suddenness with which family members were separated throughout the war and earlier meant that grieving was postponed or repressed and lay dormant within the hearts of Mennonites for decades after. As Jacob A. Neufeld reflected, there was no place for “tender emotions” as the trek began. “The drive, the road, the team...must occupy our attention every minute of the way.”⁵⁶

Earlier Mennonite migrations from Russia, while also characterized in varying degrees by a sense of escape from hardship and oppression and by the sadness of loss, nevertheless also carried a sense of anticipation and hope for a better future in a new land. The refugees who departed from the Soviet Union during the Second World War, on the other hand, possessed more despair than hope, more sadness over their losses than anticipation over new opportunities, and a great deal more uncertainty over what lay ahead. The labels assigned to successive waves of Mennonite immigrants to Canada illustrates much about each group’s sense of identity. The Kanadier, the immigrants to Canada in the 1870s, had been pioneers in a new land. The Russlaender, the immigrants of the 1920s, had sought new freedoms and had brought with them the cultural remnants of the Russian Mennonite golden age. Those who arrived destitute in the late 1940s were, and remained for many years, ‘Fluechtlinge’, refugees. By definition they were homeless, uprooted, and in flight. Having lived through the disintegration of Russian Mennonite society in the 1930s, their cultural heritage was ambiguous, yet even after obtaining the rights of citizenship in Canada, their sense of an incomplete departure from the Soviet Union prevented them from becoming completely settled.

The trek and flight from the Soviet Union during World War II was distinguishable from earlier Mennonite exits from Russia. For the Mennonites who left in the 1870s or during the 1920s, migration had a plan and a destination. Despite the attempt at orderliness imposed by German authorities, the exodus of the 1940s was chaotic and fraught with despair and uncertainty. ‘Where will we go?’ and ‘where will be our home?’ are plaintive cries repeated in the memoirs of the refugees. Although Mennonites on the move is a significant historical motif, probably no other Mennonite movement is quite so tragic as the great trek.

Notes

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¹ A special 1993 issue of *Der Bote*, commemorating the “liberation” of Soviet Mennonites “from the bondage of communism” fifty years earlier began with a meditation on the liberation of the Israelites from Egypt, for instance. See: *Der Bote* 38 (13 Oct. 1993), 4.

² J.A. Neufeld, “Die Flucht “ 1943–46,” *Mennonite Life* 6 (January 1951), 12.

³ Helene Dueck, Letter to T.D. Regehr, 16 March 1989, 20.

⁴ Edith Annchen Berg, “Eine Reisebeschreibung,” *Die Vereinsglocke* (October 1948), 8.

⁵ Dueck to Regehr, 18.

⁶ Interview # 26. During the years 1992 to 1994 I conducted taped interviews with 35 Mennonites who immigrated to Canada and Paraguay after the Second World War. These interviews took place in Ontario, Manitoba, Alberta and British Columbia and were gathered as research material for my doctoral dissertation, ‘Women without Men: Mennonite Immigration to Canada and Paraguay after the Second World War’ (University of Toronto, 1996). To respect the requested anonymity of individuals who shared their stories with me, I will refer to interviews by number.

⁷ Susanna Toews, *Trek to Freedom: The Escape of Two Sisters from South Russia during World War II* (Winkler, MB: Heritage Valley Publications, 1976), 28.

⁸ Helene Dueck, *Durch Truebsal und Not* (Winnipeg: Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies, 1995), 57.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁰ Interview #9.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² See Ingeborg Fleischhauer, “Ethnic Germans under Nazi Rule,” *Soviet Germans Past and Present*, eds., Ingeborg Fleischhauer and Benjamin Pinkus (London: C.Hurst & Co., 1986), 101.

¹³ Interviews #2, 9.

¹⁴ Gerhard Lohrenz, *The Lost Generation and Other Stories* (Winnipeg: By the Author, 1982), 129–52.

¹⁵ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants: Resistance and Survival in the Russian Village after Collectivization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 221

¹⁶ Katie Friesen, *Into the Unknown* (Steinbach: By the Author, 1986), 52.

¹⁷ Toews, *Trek to Freedom*, 27, 34.

¹⁸ Interview #27.

¹⁹ Interview #8.

²⁰ Interview #28.

²¹ Erwin Strempler, “Uprooted, But Not Without Opportunity to go on,” in *Der Bote*, no. 38 (13 October 1993), 22–3.

²² Toews, *Trek to Freedom*, 28.

²³ Herta Janzen, untitled written memoir, 8. In this case, as in some others, the family received assistance from German soldiers accompanying the trek, rather than from other refugees.

²⁴ Dueck to Regehr, 16–18.

²⁵ These numbers are calculated from “Accounting of Former Residents of Gnadenfeld, Molotschna,” *Gnadenfeld, Molotschna, 1835–1943*, Agatha Loewen Schmidt, (Kitchener: By the Author, 1989).

²⁶ Dueck, *Durch Truebsal und Not*, 56.

²⁷ Dueck to Regehr, 15.

²⁸ Schmidt, *Gnadenfeld*, 36.

²⁹ Interview #13.

³⁰ Dueck to Regehr, 23.

³¹ Dueck, *Durch Truebsal und Not*, 59.

³² Friesen, *Into the Unknown*, 57.

³³ Dueck, *Durch Truebsal und Not*, 56

³⁴ Agnes Thiessen, “Our Deliverance from Russia during World War II” (unpublished manuscript, Kitchener, Ont, n d) I am grateful to Linda Huebert Hecht for giving me a copy of this memoir

³⁵ See for instance Interview #28

³⁶ Jacob A Neufeld, *Tiefenwege: Erfahrungen und Erlebnisse von Russland Mennoniten in zwei Jahrzehnten bis 1949* (Virgil, ON: by the author, 1958), 163 Translation by T D Regehr

³⁷ Dueck, *Durch Truebsal und Not*, 58

³⁸ Michael R Marrus, *The Unwanted: European Refugees in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 301

³⁹ These events are told in more detail in T D Regehr, “Polish and Prussian Mennonite Displaced Persons, 1944–1950,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 66 (1992), 247–66; and Horst Gerlach, “The Final Years of Mennonites in East and West Prussia, 1943–45,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 66 (1992): 221–46, 391–423

⁴⁰ Interview #16

⁴¹ A detailed recollection of the flight west in the winter of 1945, with many references to the severe cold and snow is, Elisabeth Wiens, *Schicksalsjahr 1945: Erlebnisse nach Tagebuchnotizen* (Niagara-on-the-Lake: By the Author, 1993); also, Elisabeth Wiens, “Flucht vom Weichseltal 1945,” *Mennonitische Geschichtsblaetter* 38 (1981), 7–22 See also the memoir of a Mennonite woman originally from Breslau, in eastern Germany: Margaret L Dick, *From Breslau to America* (Wichita, KS: By the Author, 1992)

⁴² See in particular the story of Katja as told in Pamela E Klassen, *Going by the Moon and the Stars: Stories of Two Russian Mennonite Women* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1994), 75

⁴³ “Schweres Schicksal einer jungen Frau,” *Der Bote* 24 (5 March 1947), 3

⁴⁴ Interview #6 The woman in this interview was separated from her mother and siblings when she returned to school after Christmas 1944 and was the only one of her family to eventually immigrate to Canada

⁴⁵ See for instance Interview #13 In this memory source, a young woman found her mother and sisters when she practically stumbled over them at a railway station, awaiting transport to the west The story of Katie Dirks Friesen is very similar, as told in her autobiography, *Into the Unknown*, chapter 5 Edith Annchen Berg was reunited with her family just prior to her evacuation from school See “Eine Reisebeschreibung,” 14

⁴⁶ Interview #13

⁴⁷ Irene Peters, “Meine Erlebnisse in Deutschland,” *Menno-Blatt* 18 (July 1947), 7

⁴⁸ Schmidt, *Gnadenfeld*, 72. Recollections of Anna Heide Retzlaff written at the age of 82.

⁴⁹ Interview #28

⁵⁰ Fleischhauer, "The Ethnic Germans under Nazi Rule," 101–2

⁵¹ Annemarie Trueger cites statistics of German women raped which vary from 20,000 to half a million See "Between Rape and Prostitution: Survival Strategies and Chances of Emancipation for Berlin Women after World War II," *Women in Culture and Politics: A Century of Change*, ed Judith Friedlander, et al (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 99 Barbara Jahr estimates that two million women were raped in the aftermath of war, 12 percent of whom died as a result See "Die Ereignisse in Zahlen," in *Befreier und Befreite: Krieg, Vergewaltigungen, Kinder*, ed Helke Sander and Barbara Jahr (Munich: Verlag Antje Kunstmann, 1992), 59 Included in Jahr's estimate are women in the German population in the expelled territories, the population in the Soviet zone of occupation and in greater Berlin Norman M Naimark acknowledges that Jahr's statistics are possible, but says the number is "more likely in the hundreds of thousands." See *The Russians in Germany: A History of the Soviet Zone of Occupation, 1945–1949* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995), 133

⁵² Ruth Seifert, "War and Rape: A Preliminary Analysis," *Mass Rape: The War against Women in Bosnia-Herzegovina*, ed Alexandra Stiglmeier (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 57

⁵³ A more detailed discussion of Mennonite refugees and rape can be found in my article, "The Memory of Violence: Soviet and East European Mennonite Refugees and Rape in the Second World War," *Journal of Women's History* 9 (1997), 58–87

⁵⁴ Elfriede Entz, "Der Winter 1945 in Westpreussen," *Der Bote*, 38 (13 October 1993), 19

⁵⁵ Cornelius Krahn interview with Mary Fast, ca1951, Mennonite Library and Archives, Bethel College, North Newton, Kansas

⁵⁶ Jacob A Neufeld, excerpt of *Tiefenwege*, 107, as translated and quoted in *Der Bote* 38 (13 October 1993), 16