"Peter Had Come Home"

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The story of how Dad found Mother's parents lost during the revolution drifted into conversation often during my childhood, yet it had so many little stories connected with it, it never came together in one solid lump, like butter comes at the end of the churning process. This story always started with the statement, "Peter had come home." Usually Mother would say it, standing by the oilcloth-covered table washing dishes. As a family we rarely sat back in our chairs to talk after a meal. When supper was over, you did the dishes at once — there was something sort of obscene to Mother about having forks scabbed with egg yolk or untidy piles of chewed bones disgracing the plates. Very little time ever elapsed between eating and doing dishes. The two were one smooth operation with every child pressed into duty to clear, wash, dry, or sweep the floor.

Maybe after supper, when we were sitting in our chairs staring at a clean table that would soon be littered with schoolbooks and crayons, she'd say the words, "Peter had come home." Then she'd stop and stare into space. She had probably finished a row of knitting on a sock, which had required counting stitches, and she needed a breather. Peter was Dad's younger brother. Then, because that statement didn't make much sense to us alone, Dad or Mother would start again with some other detail related to the story.

Eventually I realized the story about getting lost and the story about being found were actually two stories, maybe even three or more, that needed joining, and the short statement about Peter joined them like a bridge over troubled waters — at least in Mother's mind. Although the story was about Dad and her parents, it was actually her story, but she needed Dad's help with the telling of certain parts, because she hadn't been with him when he found them, but alone, with little Frieda, back in the village of Rosental, where they lived with his widowed mother and younger brothers and sister.

But then, of course, no one thought of it as being a story in the true sense of the word, which needed a real beginning. How could there be a real beginning to an event that didn't have a real beginning like "Once upon a time some parents and their children lived happily in the village of Rosental...?" Life during the Russian Revolution of 1917-19 was not decisive like the scythe that brought a swath of hay to the ground in one swift stroke. Each day was a tangled mess of worries, fears, small joys and troubled hopes amidst the trauma of absent sons, fathers in prison, death, disease, hunger, and a whole family lost in the darkness of a land disturbed by revolution and anarchy.

The story was about her family, a family we didn't know much about, except for letters like the one that brought the news of the grandmother who had died lying on the dirt floor of her unheated house and who, in the last moment, had jerked erect to say something about the milking rope and where to put it. The story was about this grandmother and what had happened a few years before her death.

The story of how Dad found Mother's parents could be considered as having a beginning in the fall of 1917 when the Russian Revolution ended Russia's involvement in World War I. The Bolshevists overthrew the government and murdered the Tsar and his family, who were related to the British royal family. One night the Tsarist family was murdered — butchered — men, women and children — everyone. The thought made my skin clammy cold as I imagined the deep cuts gaping and widening, pouring forth their precious load of lifeblood; then suddenly the pain breaking through in quick stabs and longer waves, hurting, hurting, hurting, until finally strength was gone and death brought relief.

The Bolshevists wanted to take over the entire country of Russia. It was a big country to take over — I could see that on the map, but I guess they figured they could do it if they wanted to badly enough. The war continued for about two years between the Red and White armies all over the country, even where the Mennonites lived in the Ukraine. Yes, even where Dad's family lived near the noisy windmill with the big blades at the edge of the village of Rosental.

The war front shifted back and forth through the villages in the area about nineteen times. How could anyone remember how many times the soldiers raged through the town with cannons, horses, and other kinds of artillery and then were forced to retreat? Wouldn't such moving back and forth get confusing? But nineteen times was the figure. History books now give that

figure also. But whether the Reds or Whites were in control, the villagers went to bed each night with fear, uncertain what the night and the next day would bring.

Dad came home from the Russian army in the spring of 1918, having finished his service as an orderly on a Red Cross medical train. Because he was not needed at home to help with the work in the mill, he volunteered to work as an orderly for several months at Bethania, the mental hospital located about seven miles from Chortitza. Here he met and fell in love with a decisive, forward-looking red-haired woman in a broad-brimmed green hat.

So if it was early in the evening while the story of how Dad found Mother's parents was being told, we usually listened to a few funny stories about life in a mental hospital or during the revolution first.

After a few of these stories we never found out how Dad found Mother's parents—at least not that night—or even how they got lost. At ten o'clock it was always time to put out the lights and go to bed.

* * *

In early September, Peter, Dad's younger brother had joined the White army. Although most Mennonites were opposed to taking up arms for any reason, a number of zealous young men — about forty or fifty of them — upset with the war situation and under considerable pressure from a recruiting team, which had at least one Mennonite in it, agreed to enlist, but only for guard duty. They joined General Wrangel's White army. Only a few actually carried rifles, but the fact that pacifist families had sons in the opposing army angered the Red army leaders. They blacklisted each family and vowed to punish them.

To add to the Mennonites' troubles, fierce roving bands of anarchists under the leadership of Nestor Makhno took advantage of the unsettled conditions and the suspension of government control and burned, plundered, murdered and raped in what they spoke of as "acts of revenge" against the rich Kulaks of the area. The Makhno bands made Chortitz their headquarters the fall of 1919 from September 21 to the end of December, and that meant, of course, that Rosental, the adjoining village was affected also. From these two communities the bandits worked the area, terrorizing and subduing with bloody acts of violence.

For over three months the peaceful villagers lived in close daily contact with these swaggering, ruthless bandits always armed with rifle, revolver, sabre and handgrenades. They entered any home that had anything of value in it and took what tickled their fancy without questions, "liberating" these items from their former filthy owners. What they didn't value, they destroyed or spoiled so it could not be used by others. The villagers suffered emotional and physical abuse, first threats and then beatings, torture, murder and sexual assault.

Such terrible goings-on were not mentioned to us children while we were growing up in the usually peaceful, and occasionally brawling, community of

Blaine Lake. I only sensed that buried deep in my parent's past were hurting experiences too difficult to speak about.

Then, one evening, usually a bitterly cold one in winter, when the winds were whipping around the corners of the house where the drifts were piled high, and the nails in the siding popped loudly from the cold, and the fire in the big potbellied stove had been crackling brightly for some time, causing us to pull back from it, the mood was set for the next episode.

We'd probably had our fill of bread dipped in cocoa for our evening meal and were now munching McIntosh apples brought up from the cellar. Maybe the family closeness as we sat together around the table or near the stove, maybe the feeling of security of being in a war-free country would trigger the memory of another family that had been lost during another chapter in their lives in another country. Dad would begin and Mother add details he raced over, correcting and explaining. Dad never had patience for long stories. He preferred the short funny ones.

About September 1919 Dad came home from Bethania Mental Hospital where he had been working for about seven months as a volunteer orderly. His father was sick with stomach trouble and Peter was in the army, so he was needed to run the mill. Before he left the hospital he and Mother agreed to marry as soon as the situation calmed down.

A few week's later, in October, his father was arrested by some Red soldiers. The family could do nothing to stop the men from taking the ailing man. They burst into the house without knocking and banged around the kitchen and main room.

"Dark men, dirty—rough. I didn't like them," my father said.

Dad's father had harmed no one, but this small quiet man had to go to prison. He was being taken hostage for having a son in the White army.

The soldiers butted him down the street in front of them with some other men they had picked up in the village. His mother and young sister cried, while the younger boys watched with frightened faces at what was happening to their father. But all were helpless to do anything.

The soldiers shoved the men they had gathered down a cold, dark cellar at the other end of Rosental, closer to Chortitz. The room had no heat and the weather was getting bitterly cold outside. In the unventilated room the stench from body wastes became unbearable. Family members were allowed to bring their fathers and husbands food—bread, dried fruit and milk—from time to time.

After several weeks, one evening the soldiers, half-drunk, called down into the cellar for Johann Funk to come up. Dad's father, weak from the imprisonment and earlier illness, staggered up the narrow stairs, sure his end had come. The soldiers pushed his face against the wall of the barn, always an indication of their evil intentions. He begged them to let him go, for he had a wife and children at home who needed him. They only jeered. "Your children can look after themselves, and we'll look after your wife." As he stood trembling, the

leader called out in his booming baritone, "All right, let the runt have it!"

A terrible crack of rifles sounded and bullets whizzed past him, hitting the soft wood of the barn. Then followed laughter, raucous obscene laughter, and cursing. He heard the men's booted feet stomping off in the heavy darkness. Lastly, silence.

His father turned around slowly, with trembling. He was alive. The soldiers had left. Where were they? Waiting to shoot him again? Without stopping to find his cap, he ran around the barn and into the orchard behind it as fast as he could, and then through the back fields of the village homes until he arrived at his home near the mill. He stumbled into the backdoor of the house, crying like a baby, at first unable to explain what had happened to the family gathered around him. He told them about the shooting and how he had been left standing. Knowing the soldiers might return any moment for him and repeat the episode to torment him, the family packed a few belongings into a wagon and fled to Kronstal, nearer to Osterwick, and about eight miles away, to the home of my father's grandparents.

The vacant house in Rosental was an open invitation for the anrchists to move in and make themselves at home. Dad came back from Kronstal to check on the house periodically. "I looked in the window of the kitchen," he said. Cupboards were open, drawers emptied and all household goods of any value gone. Chests had been broken open, broken dishes and chairs had been strewn over the floor, always kept so immaculate by his mother. Feathers from the bedding formed a layer over everything, including the straw the bandits had been using to sleep on. He could see they had used the corners of the house as a latrine. Mud clung to everything. The livestock had disappeared. Only a few stray chickens scratched the dirt outside.

He returned a second time. The house looked deserted so he walked in the open door thinking the bandits had left it for a better place. While he was pushing the debris aside in the kitchen, looking for items of value, several bandits returned, sabres swinging, gleeful they had found someone to harass.

With a revolver sticking in his ribs, they urged Dad to tell them where he had hidden valuables. Many people had buried money, clothing, dishes and keepsakes in the hope of saving them for a better day.

"I knew they had cruel ways of making people talk, and I didn't think the torture was worth what I was trying to save, so I led them to the garden where I had buried, under the corncobs, a fur coat and some boots I had brought back from the army," Dad said. He had planned to use them when the war was over. He was tired of Schlorre, the type of footgear which had a wooden sole with a leather piece over the toe section, which poor people wore.

The bandits made him dig up what he had buried and carry it into the house for them. Then a dark-haired man with a heavy moustache, dressed in gaudy pants and shirt, and wearing high polished boots, decided he wanted the fur coat. A feisty little fellow with fur cap cocked over his head and sabres and pistol dangling from his belt thought it should be his, for it matched his

headpiece. They argued and then fought, shoving each other around among the debris while Dad headed for the back door, jumped the ravine, and dashed off. One bandit fired alongside as he fled, but missed. Dad didn't go back to Rosental for a long time after that.

By December 25, 1919, the Red army had defeated the White army and driven them into the Crimea, and by the end of that disturbing year the Makhno bands, though weakened by disease, also moved out, realizing the Reds no longer needed their unacknowledged support. Though the village of Rosental was fairly safe to live in now, for some measure of peace and order had been restored, the Funk family still couldn't return, for the typhus had spread to Kronstal as well. Various members of the extended family took sick, and Dad, who had had the disease in the army helped nurse them.

On January 8, 1920, shortly after the New Year, his father, Johann Funk, weakened by his imprisonment in fall, died of typhus. He was the first to go — still quite young — only 52. Before he died he whispered to his own brother Peter, still living at the parental home, he had buried some money in the barnyard by the strawpile "third post from the corner." But everyone in the household, crowded with the refugees from Rosental, had too many other concerns to think about buried money.

The same day Dad's grandfather also died of typhus. These two men and a younger man of the village were buried in one T-shaped grave three days later. Two days later his grandmother died and was buried with a man and woman in the same grave. Then his uncle, who had received the message about the buried money, whispered it to Dad and died on January 21. Four corpses in the house in two weeks — and he, as the oldest male, had to be strong for everyone. He carried the scars of those weeks when Death walked through the family and picked out the members he wanted for the rest of his life.

All funeral arrangements were Dad's reponsibility — getting the bodies washed and prepared for burial, coffins built, graves dug, and funerals arranged. His brother John was married and not living at home, so there was no one he could turn to for help. His usual venturesome spirit suffered as he washed the bodies in the customary way and placed them on boards in the summer room, where they often froze stiff. At the first graveside service he asked an elder of the church to pray over the bodies before he filled in the grave, but the man wanted payment — half a load of manure for fuel, for he had sick family members in his own home. Dad had no manure to sell or give away. Where would you get manure at such times? So the deacon came instead, free of charge.

When the next two family members died, he asked a relative to help transport the coffins to the graveyard on his wagon. The man still owned some horses. Dad had built simple coffins from slats ripped from the fence, for even lumber was unavailable, and had given another man a pail of wheat to dig the grave. But the man with the horses said, "I'm too busy." Maybe he was.

But the bodies had to be buried. He placed them on a homemade wagon

built with the wheels of an old plow — his younger brothers helped — and pulled the wagon to the graveyard, fearful each step of the way someone might have buried another body in the grave before he got there. At the graveside he lowered the coffins into the waiting hole, took off his cap and recited Psalm 73: 25,26 more for himself than for the dead: "Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee. My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion forever." Then he filled in the hole, which now held its full quota of bodies and went back to the land of the living.

That story often ended there, with the comment muttered to himself, "Yeah, that's life — as long as a person doesn't have to suffer before he dies." With the story of the coffins in the grave, Dad would get up quickly, check the doors, pull the weights on the clock in the parlor and move in the direction of the stairs.

"We shouldn't have talked about it," he'd say on his way up. The hurt was too great to dig around in often without opening festering wounds related to the unkindness of humans to those who suffered alone. To take with him into the waiting night the memory of how four people close to him had died within two weeks and how he had had to be undertaker, comforter, minister and mourner was a test of his spirit each time he told the story. That and the memory of the weeping coming from the bedroom of his mother as she faced a dark uncertain future now that her husband, the wage-earner, was gone. Where was the Defender of the afflicted, the One who had promised to save the children of the needy and crush the oppression? Yes, where?

* * *

Dad sat at the dining room table surrounded by bits of cardboard, some sewing machine needles and an envelope.

"What're you doing?" asked Mother.

"Wait . . . just wait." Impatiently. Dad's method was to do first and explain later, and if his plan didn't work, not to explain at all, but throw everything into the kitchen stove.

That afternoon another of the scrawly letters had come from one of Mother's sisters exiled in Siberia explaining that the last needle of her sewing machine had broken. She sewed for others to provide a little more money for much needed food. She had no money to buy another needle. The letter had only one message: Now even hope is gone.

The Russia letters came more irregularly during the thirties, and, when they arrived in our home, it usually meant Mother would cry silently for several days, and we children would talk more quietly and try to help more. Mother'd tell us that life in Russia was becoming more difficult for her relatives. Food was hard to get. Preachers and landowners and others were being sent into

exile, often into forced labor camps, sometimes into prison, never to be heard of again. Among these were some of her close family members — sisters (whom we never thought of as aunts). Mail to Russia was becoming uncertain, and she feared to harm them by sending large packages, which the Russian government frowned upon.

For a number of years Dad had become interested in pyramidology, drawing large and complicated diagrams of these huge burial places and adding figures and measurements. Another local man, a British Israelite, had introduced him to this study, which promised to reveal facts and dates related to the end-times. Obviously he had forgotten about his pyramids tonight. This evening he pushed the needles into the cardboard and retrieved them. Then he pasted them between two small sheets of cardboard and felt the little package. He was still not satisfied.

Then he got up and rummaged through the box of snapshots until he found one of our family beaming at the camera, folded it in half just where the heads of the little children came, and glued two needles in the crease. He had found the solution to his problem. He stuffed the folded picture and the letter Mother had written into an envelope and sent it off the next day. Months later word came her sister had received the needles. They had saved their lives.

When another letter came stating they had been without sugar for several months, Dad brought home a small bottle of saccharin tablets he had purchased at the drug store, then worked at the problem of how to smuggle these in a letter without arousing the attention of the postal inspectors. He spent the evening fiddling with paper and the little tablets, while we children sneaked quick licks to find out how they tasted.

I watched as he crushed the tablets to fine powder, then sprinkled the dust on the back of a picture smeared with mucilage, and topped it with another piece of cardboard. That, too, reached the Russian relatives. Sometimes he enclosed a dollar. If it got to Russia, it meant rye flour for two months. But Mother worried what they'd eat after that.

Her family in Russia had been lost once before and found. Would they be lost a second time in a different way? It seemed that way for the letters became fewer and fewer during the Stalinist years, so it seemed all the more important to Mother that we know something about these relatives whom we might never meet, but yet who were part of our past.

So the story started once again, "Peter had come home." We now knew why he had been gone and where. But not much more. The story still wasn't ready for the telling.

Mother and Dad had been thinking of getting married while they both worked at Bethania Mental Hospital, Mother as cook, Dad as an orderly. But times were unsettled. The Makhno bands, troublers of the land, made marriage plans impossible. They roamed the country. They were everywhere — at Bethania and also at Rosental. At the hospital the kitchen staff sometimes fed up to fifty or more bandits each day for at least one meal at the command of

their leader. Once during that long fall, because Mother and Dad hadn't seen each other several months, Dad walked from Kronstal to Bethania for a visit. The front was never far way. For a time one cannon was set up in the yard of the hospital grounds. Dad always told the story of his journey through no-man's land as if it had been a hilarious joke — cannon balls whistling between his legs as he ran across the steppes to see his girlfriend who had won his love with her broad-brimmed hat. They arranged for an early spring wedding, if "the Lord opened the way."

March 4, 1920, was finally moving day for Dad's family, without the father, back to Rosental from Kronstal, the place to which they had fled when the soldiers allowed his father to escape. The old homeplace near the windmill on the high elevation at the edge of the village was in shambles — even the windows were gone. Though there was little straw or wood to burn in the big wall oven, they rejoiced that at least the fences were still in good repair.

Dad, his mother, three younger brothers and a sister came to make a living here once again. Together they cleaned the house. They buried their clothing in the ground to disinfect it and unpacked the household goods and bed linens they had brought along from Kronstal, for with both grandparents dead, they weren't needed there anymore. The mill was cleaned and the machinery repaired so Dad could open it for business.

The following week Mother arrived in Rosental to visit and to make final arrangements for the wedding now only three weeks away. Because she didn't know where her parents were — she had lost track of them during the years of the revolution — the wedding would be in Rosental, Dad's home community.

On March 30, 1920, Mother and Dad were married in the Evangelical Mennonite Alliance Church by Mother's uncle, the housefather at Bethania. Nature provided a beautifully clear spring day as if to erase the memory of the horrors of the preceding winter. In front of a small congregation they vowed to love each other until death would part them.

What was most difficult for Mother to accept on this special day was the absence of her parents and brothers and sisters. Her father had once told her, "Anna, as long as I have a piece of bread, you have a piece of bread." Did he now have a piece of bread, even a small one, for himself and the rest of the family? Everyone — Mother, Father, Franz, Susie, Neta, Truda, Martha, Mariechen — all had disappeared into the unknown after the revolutionary forces swept through the area near the Black Sea where they had been living.

Her father, Franz Janzen, had been working as warehouse manager on a large Mennonite estate near Garletzky, near the mouth of the Dnieper river, but rumors had reached her that the estate had been razed and all workers had fled. No one knew where. She had had no mail from them.

This estate, familiar to her because it had been her first main place of employment before going to Bethania, employed almost a small village in summer — up to two hundred laborers and household helpers and fifty shepherds — so its wealth was a prime target of the revolutionaries.

She had last heard from her parents in 1917 at the beginning of the revolution. This was now 1920. She knew only that when the German army had crossed the Russian border during the war, her parents and family still living at home had fled elsewhere to save their lives. She didn't know where.

When she had told Dad her story while working together in the Mental hospital, he had promised to look for them when times got better, if they didn't show up beforehand, a promise which became the pattern of his life: "If you hurt and I can help, I will."

Mother and Dad's home during the early months of married life was a small room in Dad's parental home, for he planned to continue working in the mill and helping his mother with the younger members of the family. His brother John was married and Peter was still in the army. His father's death barely two months before the wedding was still a row wound.

The spring of 1920 the villagers had little seed for planting the their crops once again, yet they worked the ground as best they could and planted the usual watermelons, melons, potatoes, and other vegetables in addition to the field crops. They rejoiced that after the difficult winter, spring brought hope of better things. The blooming acacia and fruit trees were encouraging signs. In fall, perhaps the high school and teachers seminary could be reopened— yet all these thoughts were tempered by the growing evidence of collectivization and russianization. The country was changing. It was no longer like it had been even a decade ago. The Mennonites no longer felt quite as at home in this country which had welcome them warmly about 130 years ago. The whole land seemed to be sneering at them.

Mother's concern for the whereabouts of her parents increased with each passing week, for she had heard nothing but rumors about them for several years, and now that she had left Bethania, they didn't know where she was either. Where could they be? Were they dead or alive? How had they died? Had the sharp swords of the bandits found them all, as was the case with other families in the area? When the ruffians had broken through the fences on their horses and rushed the big house, the barns, the smaller houses, had her five younger sisters been very afraid? Where were they?

There was little that she, now pregnant, could do alone, nor could Dad leave the windmill now that his father was dead. His younger brothers were too inexperienced to take over. She waited and wondered as she worked alongside her mother-in-law each day, helping with the housework.

One morning in November of 1920 before she was about to go down the cellar for some potatoes for the noon meal, she moved toward the door to lock it to keep strangers out while she was below. Her mother-in-law was next door helping with the butchering.

As she was about to bolt the door, she saw a young man in army fatigues striding down the lane. She sensed something familiar about the way he walked. He kept looking at the house as he strode towards it. She stood by the window, wondering what to do. The young man walked resolutely down the

stone-lined path toward the door, lifted the latch, and walked in.

"This must be Peter," she said to herself, as he greeted her. Peter had been gone from home at the time of the wedding. Peter had been in the army. Now Peter was home.

She ran next door to get her mother-in-law, who was deep into the morning's work, cleaning sausage casings.

"Mama, Peter is home!" The word electrified everyone, for some neighbors never expected to see him again. Quickly her mother-in-law washed her hands with water one the girls brought her and rushed home to greet her son, tired, dirty, full of lice, but still smiling. Yes, Peter was home. The family rejoiced.

Now Dad could start looking for Mother's lost parents. But the middle of November was no time to wander to unknown parts of the country. Christmas would soon be here. The baby was not due until February, but the weather remained cold and unsettled. At the end of December, Dad was to be ordained as deacon and evangelist.

Peter's problems were not over with yet either. Within the month he was arrested and thrust into jail at Saporoshje. Before he left, his mother slipped a Testament into his knapsack, for she knew he wasn't a believer, and prison life was not easy.

Once again the waiting and praying for his release began. During the revolution Dad had done a favpr fpr a Jewish friend, member of the Red party, by informing him that the White army was moving into the village. "Hide," he had told his friend, "or the Whites will get you."

"Jake," said his friend, "I'll remember you some day," and left the area until the Whites were defeated. The Jews, bitter because of the White pogroms and confiscation of their lands, had joined the Bolshevists. Now that the Reds had imprisoned his brother, Dad decided to find out if his credit with his friend was still good, and came to him one night asking for the release of Peter, for no doubt he would be shot for volunteering for the White army. The Jew recalled his promise and engineered circumstances so that Peter was released.

So once again Peter came walking down the lane toward home.

"We thought it was an answer to our prayers," said Mother. That morning they had prayed once again for his quick release, and before they stood up from the table he was at the door, smiling his usual quiet smile, and ready to tell them that in prison he had read the Testament his mother had stuck into his bag. As he daily endured the screams and pleadings of other prisoners being taken out to be shot, he realized he had but a short time to live and had to settle matters between himself and God. In his prison cell he had placed his trust in Christ, the Son of the living God. When the soldiers called his name, he was convinced his time had come, but he was ready. Instead the officer said, "Funk, take your belongings and get out." Together the family thanked God for bringing Peter home a second time.

And usually, this then, too, was enough for an evening's story-telling. The cores of the apples we'd been eating were collected and thrown into the fire,

now barely glowing. Mother would throw on another hod of coal and close the dampers for the night. The finding could begin. It would begin. It only lacked the right moment for the telling. After all, Peter had come home.

I now knew many things about that distant past, not as far removed from the present as I had once thought. I knew why Mother shuddered if we talked about bedbugs or mentioned we had found a squashed louse between the pages of a borrowed book. That was the past—to be forgotten and left behind in Russia. It did not belong in clean, modern, progressive Canada.

I also knew why Dad saw a friend in every Jew or Russian, or any person who could strum a guitar and sing a Russian tune, pitched in the minor key, telling a sad tale of a lost homeland.

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Sometimes at suppertime in Blaine Lake, after a day of serving customers at the store, Dad would say, as he finished drinking his lemon tea from his saucer—something that disgusted me because I was sure no one else's father did that—he'd lean back and say, "Mama, do you remember that Hans Riesen from Rosental who gave me a ride back from Sagradowka after I found your parents and brought them there?"

He'd push the dishes to the center of the table. He was through with them, so why should he keep them near him? Furthermore, Dad never wasted time eating. Eating was a necessity to stay alive — not a social function. He joked about "English" ladies who stuck out a little finger when they drank tea. He had no use for them.

"Riesen?" Mother'd say. "Riesen? No, not a Riesen—a Penner, wasn't it?"

"That Riesen was in the store today—going to Mulingar. I thought he was the one—maybe not...."

Then, because he had time before he had to work on some store accounts, the next part of the story about the finding could begin.

One day in June, 1921, he sat on the steps of the windmill at the edge of the village and watched the heavy horse-drawn wagon of one of the richer Mennonite farmers creak down the road. The rear end of the man resembled the fat sacks of meal and flour piled on the wagon—overstuffed. He had brought ten sacks of grain to be ground. Few people brought that much grain anymore. He must have hidden it somewhere to escape the prying eyes and demanding voices of the Makhno bands.

As Dad watched him, he felt the anger rising in him. The man had treated him like a Laufbengel, ordering him around. Because Father needed the business, he had allowed the man to talk down to him. The frustration to be landless and uneducated hurt. There was no future for men like himself in this country where the prejudice came not only from the outside but also from his own people. At 24, he was a man with a wife and child, not a boy to be ordered around. His mother, three brothers and a sister depended on him. He wanted to

leave this country where his head bumped the ceiling everytime he stretched. But he had a job to do first—to find Mother's family.

As he struggled with his anger, he felt the saliva welling up in his mouth. Warm. Liquid. Potent. He resisted the temptation to swallow and spat on the ground with full force. Then he sat on the steps and watched the fine dust absorb the moisture. Before long it was gone. Only a wet spot.

He knew then it was time to go find Mother's parents in the Black Sea area — at least to learn if they were still alive. He had waited long enough. It had been a promise. His brother Peter would look after the mill. He went home to tell Mother he would be leaving the next day. Then, after that, they could think about leaving for America.

The summer sun had been warming the ground for several weeks already, making it possible to sleep on the ground, if need be. He pulled an old pair of pants over his good ones, donned a Russian-style blouse that hung loose, slipped his feet into his Schlorre—he still had no shoes—and put some bread into a knapsack. Mother added some ammonia cookies and a picture of herself to give to her parents. They said good-bye in the privacy of their room where the baby was sleeping. Mother had faith he would find her parents. He looked long into the cradle and then at the embroidered wall sampler, which said, "So nimm den meine Haende and fuehre mich."

"Did you take some money?" I asked as I listened.

"Money? Probably a few coins. Who had money then? We didn't."

Before he left the village he went to the local government office, now controlled by the Reds, where his Jewish friend worked and asked for a travel permit to allow him to move about freely in the Kherson district to the south where he wanted to begin the search. His friend gave him what he needed, and Dad pinned the paper into his pants pocket and started walking south, first to Kronstal, where he had buried his father and the others a year ago.

Many graves had been added since January of 1920, so he spent time looking for the graves with the small wooden stakes with the familiar names. Like other graves in which several people were buried, these had collapsed, making the graveyard look like a giant face deeply pitted by smallpox. He looked for something to shovel additional soil onto the sunken graves, but found nothing. After scraping a bit with a broken tree branch, he gave up and tramped on. His inner hurts and the outer wounds in this graveyard would have to wait for healing for a better time. He had more important work to do.

By early afternoon he reached the bend in the Dnieper river where small ocean-going ships came inland to take on cargo and where once again the local police were checking travel documents. The commisar, whose duty it was to examine each document and stamp it, was called out of the office as Dad reached his desk, so the man said to his clerk, "You look after this man." She, thinking her overseer had checked the papers, stamped them without examining them and sent him out. He left without saying a word, yet grateful for small mercies. At the dock he found a boat to take him on board in exchange for work

as it navigated down the Dnieper to Kherson.

Mother had given him some general directions where to go to look for her parents, for she had often made this trip to the estate while she worked at Bethania. The estate on which her parents had been working at the start of the revolution had been near the point jutting into the Black Sea, so Dad's first stop was Kherson, a large city of about sixty to seventy thousand people on the right bank of the river, about fifteen miles before the river opens into the Black Sea. He spent the first night with a Jewish student he had met on the boat and who invited him to his home. Before he left, the young man's mother gave him bread for the day's journey.

The next part of the journey wasn't quite as simple, for he was looking for Garletzky, the site of the Khutor, and trying to figure out how to get there. After a morning's walking, he stopped near an inn at Holoprystan, a place where Mother had often stopped while traveling to her parents' home for a summer vacation. The owner, a short dark Russian with a heavy beard, noticed this stranger sitting outside under the tree eating his dry bread. "Where are you going?" he asked.

"Garletzky," replied Dad. He was looking for some people who lived there before the revolution.

"All gone—no one there anymore. Who're you looking for?"

"Franz Janzen."

"Franz Janzen?" The man stopped to think. "Red hair, German-speaking?"

Dad nodded.

"I know him—he's been here. But don't go to the Khutor. Nothing there—everything gone—even the fences. When the Makhnovtsky came through, they burned everything—houses, barns, sheds—everything. Hard times."

"But the workers—where did they go?"

The innkeeper looked at him carefully and said nothing for a while. "You might try some of the villages on the other side of the Khutor. Terrible times there... on the Khutor... terrible times all over." His face looked pained.

Dad asked him for a drink of water from the well. As he walked away from the inn towards the road, the Russian called out, "Here, take some bread. You'll need it." With thanks, Dad put the dark ryebread into his knapsack and stepped into the afternoon sun to head in the direction the man had suggested. He felt troubled.

He met few people as he walked mile after mile into the setting sun. Towards evening he met an elderly woman, hair loose, eyes filmed by cataracts, wandering along the roadside, on her way to evening mass. He fell in step beside her, for he, too, was weary. She told him how her husband had been killed during the war, and her son, her only son, had long disappeared. He had wanted the adventures of being a soldier. She cried and scolded her lost son for deserting her as they walked together along the dusty road until they came to the church at the outskirts of the village. She knew her way well to the Christ on the cross in the niche outside the church. Dad stood there with her in front of the

dark-haired Jew on the cross, his head resting as if in sleep. The woman bowed in prayer, her prayers turning to sobs.

Her mood touched him. Everywhere he looked he saw signs of poverty and hardship. Houses had collapsed and fields were not being tilled. Tumbleweed, already dried out, piled up against the fences. An existential loneliness overcame him as he stood with the blind peasant woman. He knew no one. No one knew him. He could be killed within the next five minutes by someone who wanted the crust in his knapsack. What was more, when he returned to Rosental, it was only to more struggle to survive. Then he, too, wept and prayed.

The woman returned the way she had come, but he had to go on. His stomach told him it was time to eat that crust, and he thought of the way it used to before the revolution—attics filled with rows of dried apples, corn, beans, peas and blackberries. Between the windows of the house hung strings threaded with red peppers and onions. Big barrels of pickled watermelons and cucumbers and sauerkraut stood ready for winter use in the cellar. There, too, was the barrel of Kwass, which every Mennonite family found refreshing on a hot day like this. On the table would have been fried potatoes, ham, pluma moos, fresh bread and coffee. He pulled out his piece of ryebread which the innkeeper had given him and munched it slowly.

A man driving past on a low wagon pulled by two wasted animals caught up with him as he clopped along the dirt road and offered him a ride for a few miles. He, too, could offer no suggestion where the several hundred people who had lived on the Khutor had fled to. When he was about to turn off onto a small broken-down farm, he turned to Dad: "Join us for supper... not much... you look tired." Dad accepted.

As he entered the small clay brick house smeared on the inside with more clay, the smell of onions, cabbage and fat hung heavy in the air, but the man and his wife welcomed him, recognizing he was lonely for his own family. The buckwheat porridge and cabbage soup tasted good. He watched the mother feeding her young child, chewing the hard bread and then pushing the warm cud into the waiting open mouth. The child was a little older than his little Frieda. They urged him to take another glass of tea from the brass samovar standing on the table, looking almost out of place in that poverty-stricken home. They talked, skirting difficult topics. Both man and wife had lost during the revolution. A father, a brother. Others.

"Stay the night," said the man.

"No, I must go." He could make a few miles yet before dark, although his feet were tired. Their offer tempted him, but he turned to leave.

Later that evening he found a haystack in a field and spread a little of the hay beside the mound and lay down, his knapsack under his head, his eyes turned to the stars. How minute they seemed from here. Did a human being look that small to God? The loneliness of the afternoon overcame him again. He was like one of these stars. He could never spot the same tiny star twice. Did God

spot the same person twice? If he were lost, who would care? Yet Anna cared about her lost parents, and she would care about him.

A dog with one eye, hairless, tail wagging, came to him and licked his hand. He shoved it aside roughly. Then, suddenly, his mother stood over him, smiling as she used to in the old days when his father was alive, and brought him a great bowl of summer borscht with thick cream floating on top. She urged him to eat, then when he had finished one bowlful she appeared with another, and yet another, as if she didn't know the West wind was blowing hard, and he had to get up to go to the mill.

He slept until morning, when the cool breezes blowing over him off the Black Sea woke him. He heard dogs barking in the distance, and a cock crowing. A thrush sang boldly in the trees. It was time to move on.

He shook the straw from his pants, ate the last bit of bread in his sack and began the walk along the shore of the Black Sea toward the point. Today he had to find the Janzens. The sun beat on his head, forcing him to carry his cap. The wind blew off the water, whipping up sharp particles of sand, which stung and stabbed like the many-thonged whip of a demented master. The omnipresent Russian thistle caught up with him, pulled ahead, then stopped to taunt him. He trudged along, mile after mile, and never met anyone who looked even slightly familiar.

He looked into every passing face, but only the cautious eyes of Russian peasants returned his stare, their dark eyes set deep in their sockets, unwilling to yield their secrets. When he asked a question, they pushed words at him through blackened teeth, but without a smile.

In three villages strung out one after another, he asked shopkeepers on the main road if they knew any Janzens—a red-haired man with a thin, pock-faced and raspy-voiced wife and many children living in the area. Heads shook each time. He trudged on. Toward the point the farmyards looked even more neglected. No gardens, rickety fences. A pig, a few chickens scratched barren ground. Little houses with thatched roofs crouched low beneath the few remaining church domes. He saw uncared-for graveyards. He wanted desperately to turn back to the wife waiting for him in the house by the mill to assume his responsibilties as husband and father. What was he doing here in this God-forsaken place? Why had he consented to come on this impossible mission? Was this his responsibility as son-in-law?

Towards evening as the sun was setting he came to the village of Proghnow, which looked no different than any of the other villages he had passed with its rows of simlins, struggling flowerbeds in fenced-in yards. Whom could he ask about the Janzens this time? No inn, nothing looked like a store or public place. He was about to knock on the nearest door, when he saw a young girl of about ten or eleven with red braids flying, dart between two buildings at the far end of the street. Something clicked. Red hair like his wife's! He ran, calling out in Low German, the shibboleth of Russian Mennonites, "Is your name Janzen?"

The girl paused momentarily, looked at him, then abruptly turned and fled

as if she had seen a ghost, and Dad after her until he was standing at the door of the broken-down simlin into which she had disappeared. Part of the thatched roof was gone, and the mud walls were melting into the ground from the rains. He knocked gently. A tired, dark-haired woman, thin, with pock marks on her face, opened it cautiously.

"Are you the Franz Janzens?"

The woman looked at him. Dad knew that by now he probably looked like any Russian peasant, yet he hoped his words might get the response he had been looking for.

She waited a moment, looked at him again, as if trying to recognize him, then said, "Yes." But the word was a question.

"I'm looking for the Franz Janzens who used to live at Trubetskoye many years ago. I am the husband of your daughter Anna." He unpinned his pocket to produce the picture of Mother. The red-haired girl he had seen on the street stood behind her mother watching. Some other young girls dressed in coarse gunny sacks with holes cut in them for armholes moved closer to the door. Straw lay on the floor for bedding. He saw little furniture.

The woman spoke, her voice low and scratchy. "Truda came home saying a man had talked to her in the language we talk." She took the envelope, opened it and looked long and hard at the picture, then turned to Dad, unbelief written in every line of her face. "Is my daughter still alive?" she cried out. Her tears flowed.

In a short while her husband walked in, having finished his work for the day at a nearby mill. Once again Dad explained who he was, where he had come from, and why. His wife, their daughter Anna, was concerned about them. He had come on her behalf. After a while their son Franz, about fifteen, came home and Dad repeated the same words.

Like the brothers of Joseph, they couldn't hear enough. Anna was alive. Anna wanted them to come back. Anna, the short one with red hair, the determined one who knew her mind, who brought them presents when she visited. Anna was thinking of them. She had sent her husband, this strong, self-assured young man who knew what he was about to help them. Someone had come to rescue them.

After some time the mother sent a child next door with a pail of dried manure to get some fire. Supper, even if meagre, had to be cooked for their guest. They ate a simple supper of porridge and hard bread. Dad thought the food at the Russian peasant's place on the way here had been better and more plentiful. The woman apologized for the food, but it was all they had.

Dad looked around. Six children and two adults were living in this small shack on the meagre earnings of Franz senior and Franz junior, but it wasn't nearly enough to keep them fed well. They had managed to save one cow from the Khutor. When the bandits rushed into their home, they had lined them against the wall, even the youngest. A sudden scuffle had knocked the gun out of one ruffian's hand and blown out the lamp. The family had fled into the

darkness. The buildings had all been razed. They had been here now for over two years, and each week conditions grew worse.

"You can't stay here," Dad told them. They knew that. "You'll die of starvation."

Father Janzen agreed. Starvation or exposure would take them this winter, but he didn't know how to get the family away from this hidden spot back to the Mennonite settlements to the north. The little money he earned was never enough for food, let alone travel permits and travel.

They talked a long time that night before each one found a spot on the straw, which did little to soften the hardness of the dirt floor. By morning Dad knew what he had to do. He had slept little that night. He couldn't leave the Janzen family here at Proghnow. He had found them, but finding them wasn't enough. They had to be helped out of their situation. And apparently there was no one else to do it but himself.

* * *

"Did they get away from that place?" I'd ask Dad when he quit talking and was getting ready to go to bed. For him the story had ended. Mother's parents had been found.

"Yah, sure. I got 'em out. They went back to Sagradowka."

He wanted no praise.

That was my father, the one for whom I was embarrassed when he saucered his tea or spoke with the unlearned speech of an immigrant and not the careful way we were learning to speak English in school, the one who wasn't always most tactful, blundering in because his practical mind found little room for anything that didn't meet practical human needs. He was the one who sometimes made fun of the poems we learned at school or the classical music we wanted to listen to, more because it was the thing to do than that we enjoyed it so much. My immigrant father was the one who risked his life to save a lost family.

For years, during my growing up years I had a recurring dream that woke me with a terror I could not shake. I would clutch the bed covers for warmth while cold sweat covered my body. The sequence was always the same. Our family, all of us, was fleeing in the dead of night in a decrepit ladder wagon, horses stumbling along in the darkness. Each person clutched a few belongings, not much. I sat at the back of the wagon, feet dangling over the edge, sprinkling the road with my tears, for I was leaving my home and I didn't know when I would come back.

(The story of how the Janzen family was returned to the Mennonite settlements is lengthy and involved. My father's genius was to recognize that the unrefined rock salt, formed in this area by allowing sea water to flood the flats and then evaporate, was in much demand in the Mennonite settlements

where salt supplies were exhausted. Using this rock salt as money he brought the Janzen family to Sagradowka. Mother saw her parents and family once before she and Dad left for Canada.)