

Historian



Essex-Kent Mennonite Historical Association

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(Hours are 9:00 a.m. until 12 noon, Monday to Friday, holidays excluded)

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Edited by Luise Taves

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Letters from Jacob P. Driedger to his grandchildren

Introduction: Our father Jacob P. Driedger was born in Schoenfeld, South Russia the first child of Peter A. and Maria (Dick) Driedger on October 11, 1901. The Driedger family came to Canada in late fall of 1924, arriving in Waterloo, Ontario for the winter and one of the first families to move to Pelee Island in the spring of 1925.

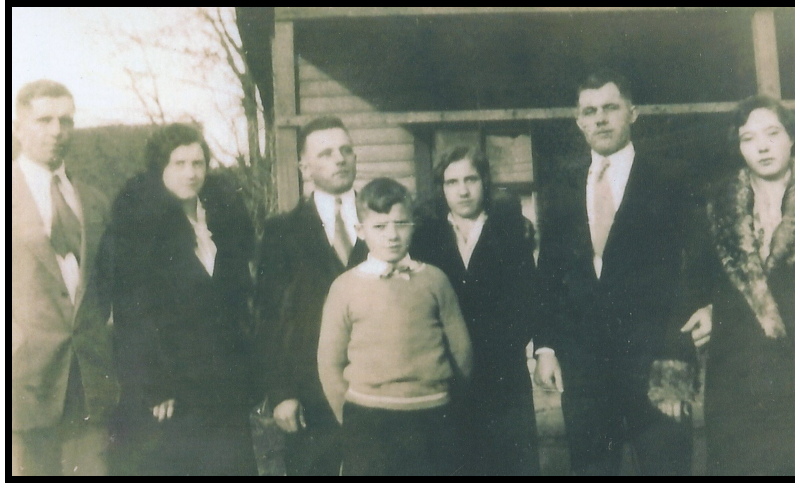
Our father completed high school at the Ohrloff " Zentralschule " and later was drafted into the military but was rejected into active duty because he was the son of a large landowner. Dad accepted this "gladly" because by faith and personal conviction he was a conscientious objector. He did his term of military duty on a horse breeding farm.

Our father began writing his memoirs on February 11, 1974 and completed them on February 14, 1989. Sometime later they were typed and compiled by his daughter Elfrieda Driedger into a booklet entitled "Letters to my Grandchildren by Jacob P. Driedger "

submitted by son Arthur Driedger, February 11, 2016



Back Row: Peter, Mary(Regier); 2nd Row: Jacob P., Agatha, Maria and Peter(parents) & Abram; in front John and Annie. This is for the immigration picture



Siblings on the Mainland: Jacob P., Mary, Peter, John, Agatha, Abram and Annie.

Sept. 27, 1978

Dear Grandchildren

1918 was drawing to its end and in November of the year the Great War also came to its end. Germany, totally exhausted, had lost the war and the allies were getting ready to divide up the spoils. The German occupation forces had to leave the Ukraine, leaving us to the free will of the marauding bandits. Among the many Bandit leaders, was especially one that became quite infamous by the gruesome deeds left in his path. His name was "Machno" or "Batjko Machno" as his followers called him. Now, with the German army withdrawn, they came right into the open and robbed and killed at random. During the previous summer some of us had to stay awake through the nights, to watch for approaching danger, but now with the Germans gone, the nights were fairly safe. The bandits had nothing to fear and did their work in the daytime. The winter of 1918-19 was the longest I can remember, expecting daily to be robbed, beaten or killed. We did not go anywhere but stayed close to or in the house at all times. To shorten the time and to occupy ourselves we started to make toys. Christmas was at hand so we began to make our own gifts. Our father, a gifted drawer, put designs of different animals on sheets of plywood, and we boys cut them out with our fret-saws. Then the pieces were sanded and polished, glued together and painted in different colours. Our prize piece was a beautiful carriage, painted in black, with yellow stripes and red wheels – drawn by two white horses in shining harness. In this way many hours were spent, that helped us forget for a while the hopeless and dangerous situation we were in.

Nov. 26, 1978

Dear Grandchildren:

The winter of 1918-19, as already mentioned previously, was the longest and hardest to bear that I can remember, with almost daily visits from the marauding bandits. Often we came very close to being murdered – each time through some insignificant circumstance we were saved. We knew it was God's grace and leading. One day 4 heavily armed men came into the house and requested a good meal. Mother and her maids hurried off into the kitchen to prepare what they had ordered. My father and I were left in the room with the four bandits. Their dark eyes and facial expressions did not foretell anything good. Later we heard from friends that they had come to kill our father. An organ was in the room. When they noticed it they wanted music. I, being the only one who could play sat down and started playing hymns, dances, whatever came to my mind. More, more they cried, whenever I hesitated. And wonder of wonders, their faces cleared up, they started talking and the whole dismal atmosphere became friendlier. Meanwhile a delicious meal was prepared and brought in. The four of them sat down to eat while I was encouraged to keep on playing – and the more they ate and the more I played, the more they changed to ordinary, likeable people. When they finally were finished, they got up from the table, thanked us for the meal and the music and went out to drive away. We looked at each other in amazement and thanked our God for delivering us from something that could have ended in some violent debacle. This time we were saved – but hardly a day went by that we did not hear of some gruesome murders and violence. A time of no law, no government, no authority to turn to.

January 1979

Dear Grandchildren:

In April of 1919 the so-called White Army, under the command of General Denikin, finally made its appearance from the south and freed us from the yoke of the Reds and the Bandits. Some of the Bandits, however, that weren't caught went into hiding and continued their work from there, mostly at nights. Many a night my father and I sat up, watching and listening to every sound. We were spared these nightly visits, but many of our neighbours were robbed, beaten and some murdered. The newly installed police could not handle the many cases and was too weak. When spring came we tried to put as many crops in as we could, with the few horses and implements they had left us and with what seed we had. A good part of our land was given to the surrounding peasants and was seeded by them before the White army came. We were supposed to have it back again, but we didn't care too much either as nobody was sure as to whether or not the Whites would be able to secure their hold on the country; and if they didn't it would be much better and wiser if we would leave things as they were and not aggravate the people. We had a fair crop that summer and were able to take it off and store it in our barns with the help of hired help. As the summer drew to a close and the unrest and robberies wouldn't diminish, our parents had made up their minds not to spend another winter in this bandit infested region, but to rather move into one of the Mennonite villages, where there was more protection and where it was much safer. Father was successful in securing a Russian family to move into part of our house and to sharecrop the land and livestock. He was a good man who had worked for us for several years already. It was not easy for our parents to leave everything and go. (To be continued)

Much love to you all from Grandpa

February 26, 1979

Dear Grandchildren:

And so in the second half of September of 1919 we, as family, left the place of my birth and happy childhood, never to return, never to see it again. Up on the hill I turned around to have a last look at the house, surrounded by shade- trees and a large orchard; and the many other buildings lying so peacefully in the valley. When my

grandfather, Abraham Driedger, came here in the 1870's there was no bush, no trees, no house, - nothing but emptiness. Through hard work and good management by him and later my father, this beautiful estate was created.

I never saw it again, but in my memory it is as clear as the day we left it. As we heard some years later, the buildings all had been taken down piece by piece, windows, doors, all the lumber, all the bricks (all the buildings were built of brick made in our own brickyard) everything was carted away by our Russian neighbours of the surrounding villages. The trees were cut down, the garden uprooted and in not too many years, one can imagine, everything looked much the same as when my Grandfather bought the land.

It took us about two days before we reached our new destination, the Colony Molotschna, and the village of Ohrloff. The place my father had rented seemed rather small after the large and roomy accommodations we had left behind. We brought four horses, four cows, some pigs and chickens, besides all the household articles. The owner who had reserved for himself a couple of rooms and also some barn and stable room, stood wide-eyed at the gate when we pulled in with our stuff. We filled the house and barn to bursting and I think he was deadly afraid that we might crowd him out altogether. So it wasn't too long before relations between us began to deteriorate and we began looking for something more suitable. But to find something was easier said than done. Due to many refugees leaving their homes and looking for accommodation in the villages, housing was at a premium. Then at that point a terrible happening came to our rescue, of which I'll tell you next time around. Much love to you all from Grandpa.

April 4, 1979

Dear Grandchildren,

As promised I want to tell you about the terrible happening I mentioned at the end of my last letter. Yes, a terrible and dreadful experience it was. The white army had advanced far into the northern part of the country, leaving the South unprotected. Machno and his band had joined the Red Army previously and together with them had been driven back. But a man like Machno could not for long take orders from his Red superiors and was looking for a chance to separate from the red forces and be on his own again. This chance came when his scouts detected a weak spot in the frontline of the white army. Machno concentrated all his might at this spot and broke through the lines, like the spring waters of a mighty river break through a dam, leaving death and destruction in its wake. The first fury hit the Mennonite villages of Sagradowka, which lay far north of the Molotschna Colonies. Several villages were razed to the ground, killing the people and burning the buildings. Others were partly saved, depending on the mood of the killers. Like an avalanche, Machno and his followers rolled into the

open unprotected land, killing, burning and robbing. They finally reached the Chortitza Colony, where they decided to stay over winter. What those lived through that winter is recorded in a book, titled "A Russian Dance of Death" by Dietrich Neufeld and translated into English by Al Reimer. A large group of them came further south until they appeared at the outskirts of the Molotschna Colony in Altonau in Nov. 10, 1919. They shot several people there and moved on to Orloff, the village we lived in. They came on wagons, 3 and 4 to a wagon. Many were on horseback, all of them armed to the teeth. A rifle over the shoulder, one or two revolvers behind the belt, a long sabre hanging on the left side. They wore all kinds of clothes, stolen from the people. Some had black tailcoats on, the kind that men wore to communion or some

festivities, weddings, funerals, a high black hat on the head, a regular masquerade. One could have laughed if the situation had not been so serious. Mr. Huebert, my friend's father, saw them coming and was hurrying home, when a rider stopped, took aim at him with his rifle and shot him dead right there on the sidewalk. Mr. Janzen across the street was beaten, robbed of his money and then shot. Two elderly men, father and son, the father a widower, the son a bachelor, were killed in cold blood, leaving the house empty. Much love to you all from Grandpa.

To be continued

(Note: Jacob P. Driedger was 18-19 years old when these events took place.)

Summers of Tobacco Harvest (Circa 1955)

Luise Taves

We children are playing as the neighbourhood farmers pool the work of priming tobacco. We are living on Hwy #3; four families, John and Mary (Froese) Tiessen, Jack and Hazel(Mathies) Tiessen, Ralph and Margaret(Froese) Tiessen and Rudy and Helen(Winter) Dyck have pooled together to prime tobacco. East of us the Jacob and Helen(Tiessen) Founk family and the Bill and Johanna(Funk) Schellenberg families form another pool. It is late summer and school has not yet started but the work will go on even in September and the harvest is flu tobacco grown widely in this area. Flue tobacco is lighter than burley tobacco and used for cigarettes. The men form a gang and walk forward along the rows picking the bottom leaves first. They are the "sands" and worth the least. This is the hardest work as bending to the bottom all day is back breaking labour. When each man has harvested a large bundle under his arm it is packed into a stone boat drawn by horses. They keep pace with the men and sometimes a young boy sits astride the broad back of one of the horses but the horses know what to do. (Horses carry such names as Dick and Nell, King and Queen, Peggy and Dot etc.....). The sun beats down and the day turns hot. When the stone boats are full they are hooked to tractors and pulled to the yard and brought to the shady side of the kilns. When Henry Dyck and Larry Tiessen are old enough (eight) they drive the tractors from the field. Here the women tie the tobacco by the handfuls onto tobacco sticks. When a stick is full it is laid down onto a pile ready for hanging.



Women tying tobacco: from left Helen (Neufeld) Funk tying leaves and Sally (Henderson) Honey, Jackson handing leaves.

Everyone is glad when noon arrives. We children have been playing together all morning. We are dirty and happy. There is a creek running through the back of the John Tiessen farm and spring rushing waters have subsided to quiet pools. We slide our feet into the clear still water and send up puffs of silt. After this the waters remain muddy all day as we wade and play. We run back to the edge of the field and make hills and rivers and canals, then bring in little pails of water to fill our new rivers-or try-for the dry ground absorbs the water almost as fast as we can pour it. We too welcome lunchtime. All go home quickly, wash and eat. Small cranky children are soothed by mothers and the afternoon work begins.



Rita Dyck ; niece to Jacob and Helen (Tiessen) Funk who stayed with them for one summer.

(Note: The pictures are from the family photos of Helen Funk)

The afternoon is a repeat of the morning. Finally shadows grow longer and it is time to finish. Men hang the sticks into the kilns. A chain is formed passing them up and hanging them from the top down. It is the last job of the day. Everyone has thick crusted black hands and clothes hang heavy with tar from the tobacco leaves. When we are done here the work rotates to the other farms. There will be a second pass through the fields to harvest the “body” (middle) leaves and finally the “tips” (top) leaves.

When all the fields have been harvested there is a sigh of relief. This is a major part of each year,s income. However the work is not finished for now the delicate balance of curing the leaves is begun.

Bill Funk remembers:

In fact the curing began right away. The kilns were heated with natural gas and to begin with it was set on low to yellow the leaves. The curing process continued by gradually raising the temperature and in its final stages the temperature was up to 160-180 F. When the stems at the top of the kiln were withered and showed no signs of swelling, the many vertical narrow doors where opened and the heat was turned off. The open doors let moisture in to soften the leaves. This was important since dry leaves shatter when handled. The right amount of moisture to the leaves was referred to as “in case”. When tobacco was “in case” it was taken down and stacked in the unheated barn and covered with tarps.

Now in the winter time the leaves where stripped from the sticks and graded by weight and colour, then baled into paper lined wooden boxes. Bales were tied and stacked. The more uniform the leaves the better the price. Conversation or listening to the radio helped pass away the time. Children helped after school and on Saturdays.

From the raising of seedlings and planting, hoeing, suckering to bringing in the crop and selling it was arduous work. It seemed as if there was little time to rest between selling the crop and starting seedlings in the spring.

But if the price was good a feeling of satisfaction underlined the promise of next year’s crop. Working with neighbours when harvesting made for good community and many memories remain from that time.

Ukraine city honors Mennonite history with street names

Mar 14, 2016 by [Tim Huber](#): [Mennonite World Review](#)

The rise of communism a century ago in Ukraine greatly diminished the Mennonite presence there. On Feb. 19, the city council of Zaporozhye took a step to reverse what

previous governments erased by changing five street names to honor Mennonites.

Most of the names remember families who were part of the Chortitza and Molotschna Mennonite colonies now incorporated into the southeastern Ukrainian city.

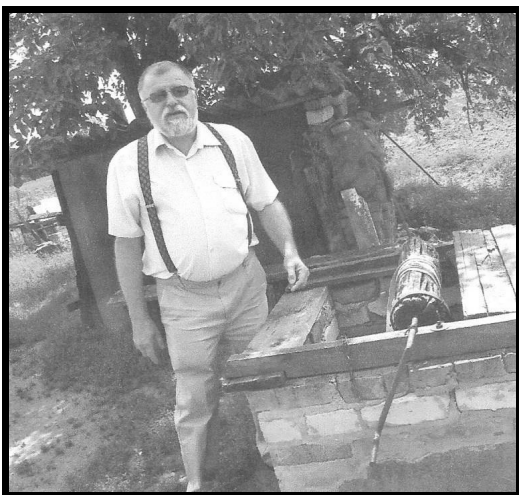
Chortitza was the first Mennonite settlement in what was then Russia, founded in 1789 by Low German-speakers of Dutch descent from Prussia. Molotschna followed in 1804.

Due to conflict and upheaval from the late 19th century to the last days of World War II, virtually all Mennonites either emigrated or were deported from the area, which became populated largely by Ukrainians.

“They were killed, exiled or fled. A land that once supported thousands of Mennonites was cleared of these and other German-speaking people,” said Conrad Stoesz, archivist at the Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies in Winnipeg, Man. “Mennonite homes, factories, churches, even tombstones, were repurposed.

“The result was that not only the people were gone, but so was much of the evidence of their presence. The Mennonite existence in southern Ukraine was erased from the landscape and grew dimmer each passing year, existing only in living memories.”

Victor Penner of Zaporozhye, a Mennonite history enthusiast, said by email that Ukraine is a nation of individualists who never wanted communism or collective farms, and especially in the west there has been resistance to Russian intrusion.



Victor Penner

In spite of this, Ukraine preserved many of the ubiquitous monuments to communist leaders such as Lenin after the collapse of the Soviet Union. As an influx of Russians — especially in eastern Ukraine — increased sympathies for Russian history in some regions, communist names

remained for towns, streets, schools, libraries, parks, theaters and other venues.

“We were talking about it a lot all those 25 years of independence, but we renamed only a few,” Penner said. “To do this legally, the Ukrainian Parliament issued a special law.”

After several unsuccessful attempts beginning in 2002, in May Parliament passed a decommunization law: “The Law on Conviction of the Communist and National-Socialist (Nazi) Totalitarian Regimes in Ukraine and Prohibition of Propaganda of their Symbols.”

Ukrayinska Pravda reported that implementation will result in new names for 22 cities and 44 villages, almost entirely in the East. It officially renamed the “Great Patriotic War” as the Second World War. A few months later the nation’s interior ministry stripped communist parties of the right to participate in elections. “This law demanded that local communities are to change those names and demolish, or move, monuments in six months,” Penner said. “If they fail, the Parliament would do this in three months. The deadline is March.”

For Zaporozhye, that meant multiple discussions and archival research before a commission offered the town council a choice of one to three names for each street or other item to be renamed.

The council accepted five Mennonite street names honoring prominent families and rejected two. The streets are mostly clustered in the area where the Chortitza Colony once existed.

Fadeev Street became Mennonite Street. Lezhenko Street is Schoenwiese Street. Schadenko Street is Nieburs’ Street. Komintern Street is Rosenthal Street.

Dybenko Street now bears the name Gerhard Rempel Street. Rempel was born in Chortitza Colony in 1885 and helped design the first tractor produced in Ukraine. He engineered other significant agricultural developments before being accused and convicted of spying for Germany and plotting an independent Ukraine on Christmas 1937 and being executed the next day in Odessa.

Two proposed street names — Thiessen and Lepp streets — were rejected.

“None of the so-called national minorities — no other German religious group — has five streets named after them in Zaporozhye,” Penner said. “I feel very proud of it.”

Stoesz agreed that it was significant for local authorities to commemorate the Mennonite presence.

It speaks to the historical importance of the Mennonite experience, but also the positive relationship of the Mennonite aid offered through agencies such as the Mennonite Centre in Molochansk, Ukraine,” Stoesz said. “The naming of a place is a significant marker in the Ukrainian-Mennonite relationship that will be a signpost for the local population to not forget their former neighbors.”

Burley Tobacco Barn



Burley Tobacco was harvested as a whole plant, spudded onto a stick and then hung. It cured naturally without heat. The structure of the barn was different from a kiln. It was wider and longer. There was no frame but rather the scaffolding was the barn's support. These pictures reveal the scaffolding as the barn is being dismantled.



Kurt Martin, Gerhard Taves, William Taves and George Driedger stand on the site of the barn located on the 5th Concession of Romney Township.

Publications Committee: Gisela Schartner, Luise Taves, Harold Thiessen

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Memberships are valid from May 1st to April 30th of the following year.*