

## Uncle Harri in Belgium

Text written by Louise (Regehr) Wiens, Leamington, Ontario, September 2013

"Tell me again about those relatives you have in Belgium," asks my inquisitive, long-time friend, who is not only just a proud descendent of Empire Loyalists, but one who can also trace her roots back to the Huguenots of France. "And how is again that they also speak German?" My rehearsed rhetoric again leads to a puzzled look on her face as once more she tries to assimilate a few more pieces of vital information to store in her memory bank. She then tells me she has been looking into taking a course in Mennonite history.

In 1945, my mother's younger sister Ida, who had also been exiled with her to Kazakhstan from 1945-1955, came running towards down a barren hillside from a neighboring collective farm near Martuk, Kazakhstan waving a letter high in the air, calling loudly, "We're going home, we are going home!" What a momentous and triumphant day that must have been as emotions ran high and tears flowed like a river. In 1945, they had been resettled in Germany from their native Bessarabia, when my mother, with child; sister Ida, with child; younger, single sister Hulda; and their mother Julianna Neumann found themselves on the move again as they were deported from Germany to Russia. With quick insight, an anxious Ida had the forethought to leave word with the minister and his family, whom she had been staying with in Grossmachnow, Germany, that they were being sent away, and that if her husband at some point in the future were to come looking for her, to please let him know. Arriving in remote Kazakhstan the deportees soon realized they would have to utilize every survival skill they had to try and stay alive, and then some. Tante Ida had Russian neighbors who bluntly greeted her on arrival with the statement, "It cannot be any worse in prison than it is here." Hope of reuniting with their lost families dimmed as the years passed without a calendar to count down the days. Seasons predictably changed but the bleak circumstances did not, until rumors suddenly began circulating around the collective farm in 1955 that ethnic Germans were being allowed to return to Germany. "Was it really true, or was it just propaganda? And if so, how could it be possible?" In the village of Martuk lived a Mr. Martens, an educated man, a Mennonite teacher from the Ukraine who had also found himself in the same unfortunate and dire circumstances. With fear and trepidation, he was requested to secretly come one evening to the limestone shack where my parents lived, and with the dirty windows covered with dirty paper and in the dim light of an oil lantern, he wrote a letter applying for immigration for my parents and their siblings. Tante Ida then secretly gave it to a Russian soldier whom they had heard was travelling to Germany, and she petitioned him to please, once he arrived in Germany, to mail it to the Pastor they had left behind. Not knowing if the soldier would betray them or not, they were all keenly aware they could be severely punished if he chose to do so. By the grace of God he turned out to be a faithful ally, and many months later a letter arrived from Moscow granting permission to the Bessarabers to return to the fatherland. Promptly, they were all called to see the authorities of the collective farm, who challenged their desire to leave by stating, "What's the matter? After all these years, is it now not suddenly good enough for you here?!" Undeterred, my parents prepared for their departure, which could not come fast enough.

They all arrived in Friedland, Germany in December 1955, where intense investigations were still ongoing to reunite millions of fragmented families. My mother was in active labor and the men had gone for a leisurely

walk in the nearby woods when a call came for my father to report to the office that evening at 7 pm. My nervous father was informed that his mother had indeed been located, and that she was alive and living in Belgium, along with his sister Maria, both of whom he had not seen in almost 15 years. "How could this possibly be? The war is over!" he thought as he paced back and forth. "In Belgium?"

Oma Regehr was happily married and living in Kleefeld, Ukraine in the 1940's as the dark clouds of war loomed once again. Already having faced great persecution for their beliefs, hundreds of thousands of Mennonites had been immigrating to the Americas for decades, and although they had also applied for visa in the 1920's, they had been denied. One of the children had contracted trachoma, which had become widely spread throughout the Mennonite colonies, and the child was declared unfit to travel. Leaving their prosperous life in the Ukraine was now an impossibility. They had already survived the great famine of the early 1930's which had killed millions of Ukrainians and Cossacks, and now the future was uncertain once again. The Soviets were rapidly advancing as village officials gathered to devise a plan and share the limited information which they had with their people. They strongly encouraged them to flee as soon as possible, but unfortunately time was not on their side as the arrests appeared to escalate with a renewed frenzy. As the enemy unleashed their fury on the innocent victims by storming into homes in the cover of darkness, so it was that they also soon came for my grandfather Regehr, one of the respected village leaders. He was never heard from again.

Over the years, my beloved uncle Harri Donne visited us in Canada more than a dozen times. He bore an uncanny resemblance to Dagwood Bumstead of cartoon fame, and as my friends and I sat and watched him roll his own cigarettes, he then would predictably flip one inside of his mouth and puff smoke out of his nostrils as we roared with laughter. He was also a great story teller, and in fluent German. As we would sit out on our front porch late into the humid summer nights discussing my latest teenage fling, he repeatedly reminded me how I bore an uncanny resemblance to his late wife, both in speech and in action. He was also the first, I believe, to relay to me that night of my grandfather's capture, when after a few weeks a parcel was delivered to my grandmother with a few of her husband's personal belongings. In that parcel was his cap, and in the brim of the cap he had smuggled a handwritten note to her which stated, "What they have accused me of I have not done." Uncle Harri was a young Belgian soldier stationed in Germany when he met my father's sister Maria, who was living there with her mother, having been separated from everyone else in the family. They were married within weeks, and when the war ended they settled in Belgium and raised their young family. His wife was killed in a tragic bicycle accident in 1976.

As I get on my bike to go for my regular evening jaunt along the picturesque Lake Erie waterfront, my husband closes the garage door behind me and admonishes me as always to "be careful." At the lake the serene blue waters meet the clear blue sky and the evening sun still shines brightly in the west as I squint while navigating around groups of teenagers and couples out for an evening stroll. Screeching seagulls circle overhead ready for a battle with the hungry mallard ducks gathering at the shoreline. Dozens of empty boats sway gently and silently in their berths in the gentle ripples. They will soon be moved for the winter months as the ice moves in and the fishermen once again flock to this protected harbor.

I see an acquaintance fishing from the boulders along the shore by the walkway and I stop to see if he has anything in his pail. "Yep, the fish aren't as plentiful as the used to be, that's for sure," he says, as undeterred he casts again. I continue west and squint again as I stop at the main dock, my uncle's favorite fishing spot. The

older portion is now crumbling and barricaded with a high wire fence sporting bold "no trespassing signs."

As I finish my ride, I circle our block and again pass an attractive brick ranch style home on the far side of our crescent. It belongs to a distant cousin of Mr. Martens. I park my blue bike in the garage and reflect on another blue bike of the past, the one I owned as a teenager. "Where's my bike?" I ask my mother, as I run into the house from the back shed. "Oh, Uncle Harri took it to go fishing down at the dock. He should be back soon. He left already at 4am. Hopefully he catches something today..."