

News Release

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Memoir of Revolutionary Russia “Detailed, Intimate, and Spontaneous”

In November 1929, fifteen-year-old Susanne Thielman hitched up a wagon and fled for her life, leaving behind her home, her childhood, and the only life she had ever known. The Soviet secret police were after her family and to stay meant almost certain deportation to one of Stalin’s new gulags. Her escape a success, eighty years later Susanne is telling the story of those turbulent early years in the just-published *Susanne Remembers: A Mennonite Childhood in Revolutionary Russia*. The book launch and a signing will be held on Saturday, 5 December; 2 – 5 p.m. at The Reach Gallery Museum in Abbotsford.

Now ninety-five, Susanne Thielman (née Willms) started work on her memoirs about thirty years ago. “When my two boys were young, they were always telling me how different I was from the mothers of their friends,” she explained, “and they were right — I *was* different. I grew up in a conservative Mennonite settlement in southern Russia in the years immediately following the Revolution. We endured civil war, anarchy, famine, religious persecution, and never-ending poverty — a world that most young North Americans like my sons couldn’t conceive of. As time went on I realised that I wanted them to not only know about my beginnings, but also how fortunate I was to escape. Thousands of Mennonites didn’t, including many relatives and most of my friends. And so I decided to write about it all.”

That in itself proved a challenge as Susanne’s mother tongue is German. But with the help of some creative writing classes and sympathetic instructors, Susanne fashioned a highly readable memoir of her childhood years. The project seemingly completed, the manuscript sat in a drawer until a few years ago. Then, encouraged by friends who believed that her story appealed to a much wider audience than her immediate family, she contracted with locally owned Judson Lake House Publishers to edit and publish it.

John Toews, Professor Emeritus of Church History and Anabaptist Studies (Regent College), praises the finished work, describing it as “detailed, intimate, and spontaneous.” In the foreword he observes, “Though an adult memoir that encompasses war, revolution, and economic ruination, it in part sees the world through the eyes of a child . . . The child in Susanne detects beauty and joy amid a world of violence and impoverishment. . . . Here is a portrait of optimism, courage, and a life well-lived.”

While *Susanne Remembers* is largely a memoir, it also contains several previously unpublished contemporary accounts of life in the Molochna colony, where Susanne grew up. Philip Sherwood of *lifewriters.ca*, a local freelance editor who edited *Susanne Remembers*, credits the book's readability in part to the excerpts from the diaries of Susanne's father and sister. "Her father's writings make for a sobering but riveting contrast to Susanne's child-like recollections," Sherwood says. "Through his eyes we glimpse the almost continual state of terror in which they lived, and of what it was like to be part of a social class — the *kulaks*, or middle-class farmers — that Stalin had targeted for extermination. Arrest, torture, banishment to labour camps, and death were ever present. One can only marvel at how they persevered and survived."

It is not by chance that *Susanne Remembers* is being launched in Abbotsford, according to Neil Klassen, co-owner of Judson Lake House Publishers. "Susanne's family has deep roots here. The Willms were one of the first Mennonite families to settle in the community in the early 1930s. Her father, Heinrich, was soon involved in all sorts of projects, such as organizing the South Poplar cooperative store. He also helped build the South Abbotsford Mennonite Brethren Church and get the present day Mennonite Educational Institute (M.E.I.) going. For decades he ran the family farm on Huntington Road, near the present-day airport. Many of the Willms' descendents still live here."

Klassen feels that the timing of the launch of *Susanne Remembers* is in some ways auspicious, as the beginning of December marks the eightieth anniversary of the last large migration of Mennonites from Russia before the Second World War. "Some such as Susanne escaped, but many more did not," Klassen explains. "It only lasted a few weeks and then Stalin slammed the doors shut and began sending the Mennonites to labour camps. Families were ripped apart, communities destroyed, thousands killed, and the Mennonite settlements in southern Russia ceased to exist. We hope that the launch will in some way commemorate this event, remembering both those who escaped and those who perished."

Susanne Remembers: A Mennonite Childhood in Revolutionary Russia
Book launch and signing at The Reach Gallery Museum, Veterans Way, Abbotsford B.C.
December 5, 2009. 2–5 p.m.
Light refreshments will be served.