

SUSANNE REMEMBERS

Now 95, Susanne Thielman has written a book about her family's experience fleeing from Russia to Canada

Susanne's parents, Susanne and Henry Wilms, in 1913.

Rochelle BAKER
Abbotsford News

Communist revolution.

Villages that made up the Mennonite colony of Molochna, north of the Black Sea where the Wilms family lived, were besieged by religious persecution, poverty and anarchy. Farms were raided by thieves or soldiers, and landowners were no longer permitted to hire workers.

Wednesday became the day of rest, and people were afraid to sing hymns or religious songs, even inside their homes.

Her father had acquired a permit to try to sell the farm's goods. But on the day of the auction, few came, and fewer bought.

However, that same day, a former employee arrived and warned the family to flee, saying the secret police, or GPU, were on their way to arrest him.

With just hours' notice, Heinrich told his wife to divide the family into groups and leave home at different times. He immediately departed for the village where the family would reunite before embarking to Moscow.

Susanne's mother bundled up the three youngest children and left next. Susanne and Margarete followed hours later, while their two eldest brothers would leave last.

Susanne was 15 years old when her family was forced to flee their village and abandon their farm to escape falling into the hands of Russia's secret police, and possible exile to Siberia.

It was a beautiful clear November day in 1929 when she clambered onto the wagon with her older sister Margarete.

As the cart pulled away, she turned to get a last look at the brick farmhouse where she and her three brothers and three sisters had spent their lives. The family's belongings which her father Heinrich had unsuccessfully tried to sell were scattered in the front yard.

There was the organ Susanne was fond of playing, her dad's carved writing desk, and a chest of drawers her father had handcrafted for his wife, also named Susanne.

The furniture looked forlorn standing sternly outside the empty house. Heinrich had been hoping for some time to leave Russia for Canada or the United States to escape the turmoil that followed the



JOHN VAN PUTTEN Abbotsford News

Susanne Thielman came to Abbotsford with her parents and sisters in 1931. They were the fifth Mennonite family to settle here.

The family took only what they could carry — clothing, food, and the most basic of possessions. Loaded on the wagon with Susanne and Margarete was their grandmother's, or Oma's, hope chest. The wooden box with brass handles — in addition to being practical — was lined with the pages of her father's diary so the writings could be smuggled out

of Russia safely. Alja, the family dog, insisted on following behind the wagon, whining pitifully. The next morning the reunited family embarked on the four-day train trip to Moscow. The scenery was dreary, and so was the mood. Upon arriving in Moscow, they had to share an apartment with another Mennonite family hop-

ing to escape Russia. For close to a month, 18 people lived in three small rooms. But Susanne never heard a single complaint, nor did she offer any herself. Their farm and worldly possessions gone, all her family had were each other, and that was enough. The Wilmses were on one of the last trains permitted to leave Moscow.



Susanne Wilms (standing) with her sister Mika (right) and a friend the day before they left Russia.

Russian authorities would force thousands of Mennonites who had fled to Moscow back to their villages or into exile.

By Christmas the Wilms family had landed in a refugee camp in Germany.

In March 1930 they undertook the long sea journey via Hamburg and Liverpool, to Canada. The family spent their first year in Coaldale, Alberta just trying to survive. Susanne and Margarete worked as maids, her father and older brothers bent their backs digging for sugar beets.

Later, Heinrich got the opportunity to travel farther west. He ended up in the small farming community of Clearbrook, and decided it would be the Wilmses' final destination.

In the spring of 1931 the remainder of the family boarded a train to cross the Rocky Mountains.

On the train, Susanne's mother approached a pastor and asked if it was "all right" that she pray for a new home. He gave his blessing and her wishes were soon fulfilled.

To the amazement of the family, Susanne's father was able to buy a 20-acre farm on Huntingdon Road from the Thretheway family with no down payment

— just a handshake and a signature.

The fifth Mennonite family in Abbotsford, the Wilmses put down permanent roots.

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Now 95, Susanne Thielman (née Wilms) has written a book about her and her family's experiences, entitled *Susanne Remembers: A Mennonite Childhood in Revolutionary Russia*.

The book was sparked years ago by an observation made by Susanne's youngest son Gerry: "Mother, you're not like other mothers," he said. "He thought I wasn't quite normal," says Susanne.

"But I'd lived in a different country and had different experiences. I thought I'd better write it down, and tell my children what I was all about."

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For more information on the book *Susanne Remembers*, phone Judson Lake House Publishers at 604-854-3387.

Two book signings are scheduled for: today (Saturday) Dec. 5 from 2 to 5 p.m. at The Beach Gallery Museum, Abbotsford, 32388 Veterans Way; and Wednesday Dec. 9 from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. at Garden Park Tower, 2825 Clearbrook Rd.