

My Heritage

We all have a heritage, and we are all a part of our past. I can trace the Willms family back to 1730 and the Neufelds, my mother's family, to 1697. Both families came from the Danzig area. In 1842 my great-grandfather, Jacob Willms, then a sixteen-year-old lad, immigrated to the Molochna River Basin in the present-day Ukraine along with his married brother, making the nearly fifteen-hundred-kilometre trip on foot with a pushcart. Once settled in the Ukraine, he married Justina Bärghmann and together the young couple tilled the virgin soil even after the birth of their first child, my grandfather. Each day they wrapped the baby in a blanket and laid him in the grass at one end of the field, stopping their work every so often to tend to his needs.

My ancestors lived and prospered in Russia for almost one hundred years. Their work on the land was rewarding and they saw the colony develop from the barren, treeless steppes of the early years into a thriving agricultural region with a distinct culture. Russian royalty was aware of the success of the Mennonites and the Czar and several princes visited the Molochna colony. One prince had dinner with my great-uncle and aunt, Gerhard and Agatha Neufeld, in Lindenau and gave my great-aunt a set of earrings as a token of his appreciation. On another occasion the Czar awarded my great-great-grandfather, Johann Neufeld, a gold pocket watch with his name engraved on it in recognition of the progressive business leadership that he had shown. This watch was handed down to my grandfather and later to an uncle by the same name.

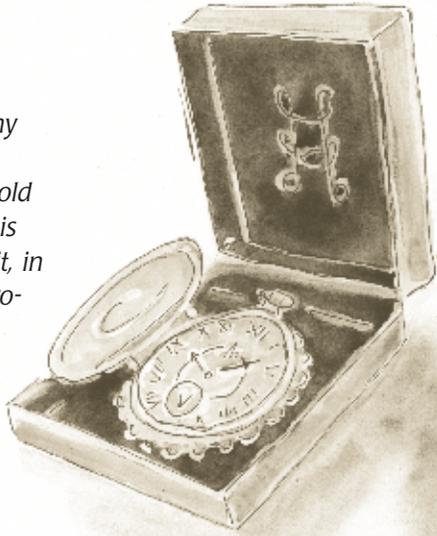
Although some of my forefathers worked as merchants and business people, most were farmers. They loved the soil and felt a closeness to the earth, sensing the strong bond between the Creator and his creation. As their fields were their pride, they took the long difficult days for granted. Hour after hour they walked behind the plough, holding it firmly with calloused hands and guiding the horses so that they ploughed a straight furrow. They cultivated the fields until the earth was loamy, free of weeds, and ready for the seed. In due time the seed sprouted and they rejoiced to see thousands of blades of grain waving gently in the wind. And what satisfaction when the sun and rain came at the right time, for they knew that after their labour was completed, the rewards and yields depended on the weather. All of this they took as a gift from God and thanked Him for their answered prayers.

My heritage was reflected in the manner that my parents raised me. Few books on childrearing were available and none were used in our family. Instead, the Bible guided my parents both in their faith and everyday lives, and this included parenting.



My great-grandfather Jacob and his wife Justina were some of the first Willms in the Mennonite settlements. While working the fields they wrapped their first baby, my grandfather, in a blanket and laid him on the grass at one end of the field.

The Czar awarded my great-grandfather, Johann Neufeld, a gold pocket watch with his name engraved on it, in recognition of his progressive business leadership.



As a child, I knew that we were all descendants of Adam and Eve and that I had a multitude of relatives! Mother always impressed on us that we all belonged to the human race and that everyone needed to be loved and understood. She would tell us, “Love even your enemy, as we are all children of God.” This caused me to wonder whom my enemy was. Although I was born a few months before the outbreak of World War One and had lived through the “restless times” of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution and the civil war that followed, my immediate world was small, and I could not think of anyone who could possibly be my enemy. Maybe the gypsies were—I had learned from

storybooks that they kidnapped children. If this were the case, then loving my enemies posed no problem, as it was easy for me to love these fascinating, colourful nomads who visited our village frequently. I am thankful that Mother taught me to love all humans as when my world later expanded, I came into contact with people much less lovable than the gypsies!

I also knew that we were Mennonites, and that most of the people among whom we lived were of the same faith. During my childhood, the few people I knew who were not Mennonites were communists or citizens who had moved into our village from other places. Most were shepherds or labourers.

Farming, Christianity, and the Bible; along with Russian Mennonite history, faith, and culture are all profound influences that cannot be shed and have helped make me who I am.¹

¹ For readers who are unfamiliar with the history, faith, and culture of the Mennonites in southern Russia, I suggest that you read the Overview on page 157.

My Grandparents

My maternal grandparents, Johann (21 July 1849–1 January 1906) and Susanna Fröse Neufeld (?–1924), lived in Halbstadt, the administrative centre of the Molochna Colony, where Johann operated a water-powered flourmill on a stream. Susanna's family had been tailors, and apparently Johann first met Susanna when he was having a suit made in her home. By all accounts she was a beautiful young woman. Grandfather Neufeld died before his grandchildren were born, and Grandmother Neufeld died in 1924. A small woman, in her later years she was hard of hearing and could not walk. One day she told me that she had had the most pleasant dream: she could walk again. As a little girl I thought it strange that someone would appreciate such a normal activity.

My paternal grandparents, Jacob (20 February 1850–15 November 1931) and Maria Walde Willms (2 November 1851–5 May 1915), were successful farmers who lived first in the village of Ladekopp, on the northern edge of Molochna Colony, and later in nearby Petershagen, about a mile east of Halbstadt. Grandfather was the only member of the Willms family who was born, lived, and died in Russia. Only five of Jacob's thirteen children reached adulthood, one daughter dying of tuberculosis at the age of sixteen. Grandmother Willms (Maria) died when I was about a year old, so his second wife, Helena Heide (11 November 1860–1939), was the only grandmother I knew. However, my older brothers remember that Maria had long, red hair and though physically frail, appeared saintly and sang well. Both grandparents possessed a strong faith that was apparent in their daily lives and enjoyed singing religious songs together. Mother spoke well of Grandmother (Maria), saying that she was kind and that she hoped Maria, her namesake, would resemble her.

Grandfather Willms was a stately man with a well-kept beard and neat appearance. He stood erect, but not nearly as tall as his son, my handsome six-foot father. Helena was a reserved woman. Later in life, when I saw photos of Wallis Simpson, the American socialite whose relationship with King Edward VIII of England in the 1930s caused a scandal, I was struck by the resemblance to Helena. Whenever we visited them at home, they always greeted us at the front door in a very



My maternal grandparents, Susanna (Fröse) and Johann Neufeld with their first child Katarina (centre). 1876.



My paternal grandparents, Jacob J. Willms and Maria Walde Willms. 1915.

proper, formal fashion. Slender and erect, Grandmother would be well dressed, wearing a high, lace-collared blouse and a lacy tuft or coif with fine ribbons and tiny feathers on her hair. After greeting us, she would sit by Grandfather's side while we talked. I never saw her do any housework as Father's sister, Aunt Maria, along with her husband, Heinrich Epp and their children, lived with Grandfather and took care of the domestic duties.

Everything about Grandfather's home reflected his relative wealth. The house itself

was larger and more distinctly designed than most of the other houses, boasting several larger-than-average rooms as well as a central gravity heating system in the basement, probably the only one in the district at the time. In the Mennonite villages, tradition dictated that the main entrance of each house face the same direction—in the case of Petershagen, this meant east. Grandfather, who never shied away from controversy, altered the building plans so that his entrance faced west. (If Mr. Cornies, one of the original planners of the colony had seen it, he probably would have chided Grandfather!) The furniture was evidence of their wealth as well—they were the only people we knew who owned a *Himmelbett*, a four-poster canopy bed surrounded with heavy curtains. Attractive ornaments and kerosene lamps filled the house.

Grandfather was first and foremost a master farmer, overseeing two farms, or *Wirtschaften*, one in Petershagen and the other in neighbouring Ladekopp. As a farmer and sometimes businessman, he was known for his management ability and good business sense, his sometimes-controversial actions, and his frugality. This latter quality permeated his business dealings and is evident in one of the maxims that guided him: "Save on the less important things but spend on the good, essential, useful, and meaningful articles."

As children, we constantly witnessed his commitment to thrift. Matches were quite expensive, and Grandfather calculated that in the long term it was cheaper to buy a large crateful rather than a smaller amount that would just

last for a few months. He regulated their use carefully, making sure that all the lamps, candles, and barn lanterns were cleaned and gathered on the kitchen table so that they could be all be lit at one time with only one match. Once lit, the flames were turned down right away so as to conserve both coal oil and wicks. As a result of Grandfather's frugal use of



My great-grandparents, Maria and Aaron Walde, with their daughter Maria (standing), my grandmother. 1865.

matches, he had a sufficient supply during the “lean years” following the 1917 Revolution, while others had none.

When it came to farm equipment, however, Grandfather did not scrimp—his machinery and tools were first rate. He imported the most efficient Otto Deutz motors from Germany as well as McCormick’s binders and threshing machines from the United States. His Droschka, or wagon, a light but sturdy four-wheeler drawn by two horses, took him on frequent inspection tours of his property and fields.

Grandfather saw to it that his properties remained in tip-top shape. Hired workers kept the garden weed-free and the fruit trees properly pruned and in healthy condition. They even swept the garden path once a week. My father and his siblings often supervised the workers, always mindful of Grandfather’s policy that “You don’t have to do the labour for the hired help, but you must know what they are supposed to do and make sure that they meet all my requirements.”

In addition to being a successful farmer, Grandfather performed the duties of a civil judge in Halbstadt. He also studied to be a preacher and although he never formally entered the ministry, his faith played an important part in the life of his family. Few seminary-trained clergymen lived in the settlements and so Grandfather started studying the scriptures on his own. Under the supervision of the elders and preachers, he would prepare sermons and then deliver them from the pulpit on the Sundays allotted to him. This training went on for several years and he seemed to be doing quite well. However, after the service where he preached his final “test” sermon, which Father, Mother, and Jascha attended, he abruptly resigned from the ministry. Why, we don’t know, but Jascha believed that Grandfather felt he made a better farmer than a preacher. Father was disappointed, and apparently Grandmother later said that she considered this time of preparation for the ministry to be the best period of their lives together because they had done so much “knee work”—praying daily. Nevertheless, Grandfather’s strong faith



The Willms family portrait, 1923. From left to right: Heinrich and (seated) Maria (Willms) Epp; Jacob and Lena (Janzen) Willms, step-mother Helene (Heide) Willms and father Jacob J. Willms (both seated), Heinrich J. and Susanne (Neufeld) Willms, David and Anna (Epp) Willms, Abram and Susanna (Epp) Willms.



My mother’s youngest brother, Jasch Neufeld (right), and his wife Liese. Undated.

remained evident in his daily life. On our frequent visits to their home, when it came time to leave, he would gather us in the first living room, which Jascha called the “holiest room,” and in a silent subdued prayer, ask the Lord to bless and guide us and give us a safe trip home.

Much has been made of how some Mennonite settlers treated their Russian workers badly before the Revolution. It is possible, but as a child I was too young to notice. However, we knew that the Ukrainian peasants generally liked to work for the Mennonites as they paid higher-than-average wages and treated them fairly. Far from denouncing and turning on their former employers after the Revolution, many peasants actually defended them. This was the case with Grandfather. For years after the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, the authorities tried to strip him of his wealth. This, combined with hyperinflation, ruined him financially. Finally, in 1931, they tried to evict him and Grandmother from their home in Petershagen. A former employee intervened on their behalf and they were able to remain for a few more months. At that point the peasant confided to my grandfather that, “It’s time to leave because we can’t protect you any longer.” Shortly afterwards, he moved out of his large house into a worker’s cottage on my uncle Jacob Neufeld’s property. The loss of his long-time home combined with old age took their toll on Grandfather and a few months later on 15 November 1931, he died, a very poor man.