

# Martin Loewen: A Kulak at the Wrong Time and Place

By David F. Loewen



Martin & Susanna Klassen Loewen

Martin Loewen was the third youngest of 11 children. His father, Jacob Loewen (1829-1875), died when Martin was only five years old, and at the age of 13, his mother, Katharina Harder Loewen (1834-1883), died. It is likely he went to live with an older sibling, as did his younger brother, my grandfather, Abraham J. Loewen.

At age 24, Martin married Susanna Klassen in Schoendorf, and four years later, in 1898, they moved to Susanna's home village, Gnadental, where they settled and farmed. They had two children at this time, Jacob and Anna. Susanna Klassen was sister to Jacob J. Klassen, the local minister and leader of the 1923 group that emigrated to Blumenort, Manitoba,

Martin Loewen purchased a farm for 7000 rubles, and shortly thereafter, purchased another half farm.<sup>1</sup> He became quite successful as a farmer and employed Russian labourers on the farm, and inside the home, domestic chores were carried out by Russian female servants. In 1911, when the Orenburg colony experienced a devastating drought and crop failure, Martin sent a train carload of grain to his younger brother, Abraham, in Pretoria. There had been enough grain for six

other families and for seeding the next spring. In her memoirs, his grand-daughter, Katie Koslowsky, described Martin as a righteous and generous man.

In 1922, Susanna Loewen died of typhus, leaving Martin and nine children, four of whom were teens or younger. Later that year, Martin remarried to Katharina (Hildebrandt) Froese, whose husband, Franz Froese, had been murdered in Felsenbach in 1919. Katharina brought six children into the marriage.

As collectivization of farming under Stalin began taking shape in the late 1920s, Martin found himself being "taxed" increasingly more because he was regarded as a wealthy 'kulak'. Since he had a large family to support, out of necessity, he was forced into the position of having to sell personal belongings so that he could provide for his family. On his return from one of those dreaded visits to the city to make a payment, he had been visibly upset. Noticing this, a neighbour asked about his appointment. He replied that they wanted him to join the Kolchoz, to which his neighbour asked why he wouldn't when it only made matters worse. Martin replied, "Give Satan one small finger, he will take the whole hand, and later your body."<sup>1</sup>

For Martin, the question of emigrating to Canada was something he had given some consideration, but in 1926, he was still optimistic about the future in Russia, while raising the possibility of emigration in his letter. Abraham and Maria Loewen had been in Canada only two months when they received this letter from brother, Martin<sup>2</sup>:

*I often think about whether or not it is God's will if we should leave Russia. Do we move because we want to serve God, or move because it's in our own interest, pretending that it's because of our faith? But does such faith exist in America that the love of Christ is evident? When reading your letters it is not evident to me but only that the dollar plays a large role. But I'm not saying that we wouldn't want to move as well; far from it. But if I'm going to be truthful, I must say that these thoughts are often on my mind.*

*Harvest was very good. Wheat produced 68 Pud/Desatin; and barley and oats very similar. The price for wheat now is one ruble for 10 to 20 kg, barley 50 to 55 kg, and oats 90 kg. Butter one Ruble for 80 kg. If only the cows produced a lot of butter; but it is very little.*

*We have the following livestock: five old horses, three mares, two geldings, one stallion, and one stallion foal. We have five old cows, and 3 2-year-old heifers, three pigs and one butchered.*

*We have done some seeding and want to seed winter wheat of 25 desatin, Rye 4 ½ desatin, oats 9 desatin, barley 3 desatin, and fallow 6 desatin. We don't know yet what we are going to plant in that section. We harvested beautiful apples this year, and so we planted more, and we've also uprooted some. And if we're going to stay here in Russia, we will plant still more, and look for ways to branch out into other activities.*

*If you should write again please describe your home life, the work you do, as well as church life, describe the surrounding countryside. We've heard that in certain areas the land is not good at all, so that working that land robs a man of his strength and his work.*

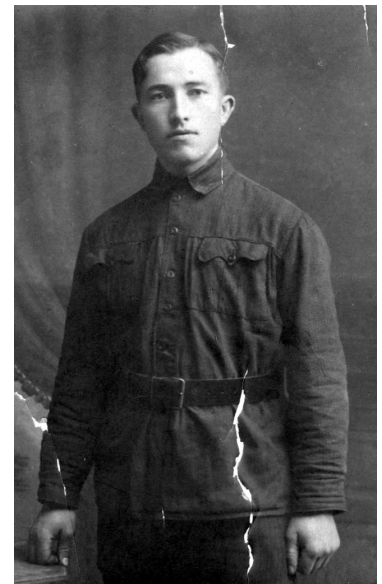
A little more than a year later, Martin had made the decision to emigrate. On March 22, 1928, Martin and son, Johann, travelled to Kriwoj Rog to get emigration papers<sup>1</sup>. Even though they paid 10%, they received nothing – emigration to Canada would not be in their future. Martin's son, Jacob, and daughter, Maria, had emigrated in 1925 and 1927, respectively.

Two years later, on March 10, 1930, Martin Loewen was visited by three men and ordered to vacate his house. He was stripped of his right to vote, to work, and to purchase necessities. No one was permitted to give them assistance. As Martin's son, Johann, and his family, were still in hiding, they moved into his house. Six months later, on September 28, 1930, Martin and his large family were ordered to leave the village within 24 hours. They were directed to a location 40 kilometres away, on the open prairie, on the other side of Sofiewka<sup>1</sup>.

Martin and Katharina were accompanied by Katharina, Martin, Isaak, Abram, Katja, Greta, & Liese. Franz had been conscripted into the army. The other children were either married or living in Canada at this time. Martin was allowed two horses and a wagon, and permitted to demolish their pig barn and summer kitchen (bricks), which they would use to build their house on the open steppe. They dug a zemlyanka, which resulted in the building being half underground. Their house included a false wall, behind which they hid extra possessions, protecting them from the regular police searches and seizures.

Martin managed to plant 1 to 2 acres of rye that same fall. The family gleaned fields and trapped gophers, the skins of which were sold. They had a few chickens, and the girls sewed for their Russian neighbours and the wives of local police. The boys made wooden slippers, baskets, and brooms.

According to daughter, Katharina, a silver lining of their situation had been that they had time, "...for singing, praying and having devotions. They had not had much time for this when they farmed in the villages."<sup>1</sup> Son, Martin, got a job as a herdsman, for which he was paid one ruble/day, and received one meal per



Johann Loewen, 1925



Katharina Loewen, 1928

day<sup>1</sup>.

In June, before a year had passed, Martin and family, along with other families living in the vicinity, were rounded up and loaded onto train cars and sent to Lobwa in the Ural Mountains. Life for Martin Loewen and family became increasingly difficult at this point. They lived in barracks and worked in the sawmills, but eventually were able to move into houses, with two families to a house. Their greatest challenge, however, would be access to adequate food.

On November 11, 1931, at the age of 15, son, Abram, died of starvation. One month later, son, Isaak, perished in the cold. He had been sent to fetch wood from a previous house they had lived in, but never returned. They found his frozen body nearby. One conclusion was that a frozen lock was to blame. Isaak was 19 years old.

In a letter<sup>3</sup> written to her sister, Marie Penner, in Canada, Katharina Loewen writes:

*Papa became sick in the beginning of November. He was very sick, the mouth open, high fever. We had only some bread and potatoes. We three took turns staying up all night. I prayed and cried a lot. He was unconscious. God did a miracle. He gave us our Papa back. Thank you Lord! He said he had been in Hell, and now he is still very weak. But he helps to bring wood in for our own use.*

*Our brother, Abram, did not eat. He waited so badly for a parcel which other families received. For us there was none. He wanted so very badly for some dry fruit or a biscuit or a candy for Christmas. Abram wanted four big potatoes with some kind of gravy. I went to the neighbours to put the bread in the oven and when I came back, mama said, "Look at Abram". He was 15 years old; his eyes did not see, and he lay this way for five hours, very peaceful. Papa unconscious; Abram dead.*

*Our house is 4 metres long and 4 metres wide, two doors, and four windows. We live together with another family. So far it was not too cold – 9 to 24 degrees. The snow is up to our knees. On our feet we have Laptje, made from the bark of the Linden tree. Sometimes I am so discouraged and in despair. I have no energy. Today I am happy, and I don't want to grumble, for there are people worse off. With the lighting, it is not very good; I am sitting in front of the oven to write. God will supply and I am hopeful. - Love Katharina*

That hope was not unfounded, as they did receive a food parcel from Martin's brother, Abraham, in Canada, in February 1932, shortly after sending the previous letter. Now it was Abraham's turn to support a brother in need. Unfortunately, that food package came too late for brother Martin, and his son, Abram. In a letter<sup>4</sup> written to Abraham and Maria Loewen in Canada, Katharina Loewen writes:

*Dear Uncle Abram, aunt and cousins in Canada,*

*Today we received a parcel from you. Thank you very much. May the Lord bless you. It contained sugar, rice, oatmeal, flour, some ham, a flannelette shirt, and a blanket. It was very good. Just too bad that our dear papa didn't live long enough to see it.*

*Papa got sick the second time. He did not communicate and ate very little. When he came home from the hospital, he asked if there was a parcel. When he was still in Gnadental and farming, he had helped the Ukrainian widows with grain and other things. He had also helped his brother. He told his family to pray aloud, and we do. We have devotions every day. On February 9 in the morning, he started to have cramps. I was working that night. He became peaceful and his breath was slower, and he became weaker. At 9:00 pm he passed away.*

*I am the only one working right now. It's not bad. I bring wood with a horse to the heating room where I can warm myself. If we had not been so sick, we could have earned money and food, but now there is almost nothing to buy. But God can help us out, even if no men can help. I don't want to complain; I would like to be thankful because some are worse off than we.*

*Katharina*

Two months later, Katharina writes again to Abraham and Maria Loewen. Her letter<sup>5</sup> is filled, both with hope and with despair. Hope that God will provide, and despair over the lack of anything to eat. Her closing remarks foreshadow her own untimely and imminent death.

*The first package we received on February 19. On the 20<sup>th</sup> I immediately sent a letter dear uncle and aunt. We are still living here in the distant Ural district. We long to return to our home; we are very lonely since we are the only Mennonite family here.*

*Papa is no longer with us to exhort us, so today, May 1, Sunday and also at Easter, we read a sermon which he would've liked. The text was from John chapter 16: 23 to 30. Very truly I tell you, my father will give you anything you ask in my name. That is a good word of comfort for us so we pray that he will bring us back to be among fellow believers. It would be a great blessing for us rather than to be stuck here with these drunkards.*

*Wages are okay. In the month of February we five earned 198 rubles, in March we earned 266 rubles, and in April, 107; we will get paid later. But there is nothing to buy so it really doesn't help us any, otherwise we would have enough to eat.*

*The material you sent I used for sewing trousers for my brothers. The shirt fits Martin just barely, in that it is too long.*

*Dear uncle and aunt please don't be angry; we want all the best even though I write that we are unable to satisfy our hunger. We have enough money. May God protect us all until we see each other again in heaven. Perhaps God will grant us that here on earth, that we might see one another personally.*

Left to fend for themselves now were Katharina and Martin Loewen, the three youngest Froese sisters, Katharina, Greta, and Liese, and their mother, Katharina. Within the next year, the mood had changed, based on a letter<sup>6</sup> from Marie (Loewen) Penner to her uncle and aunt, Abraham and Maria Loewen, in Alberta.

*And now I want to write you something that troubles me very much. Tina (Katharina Loewen) writes that she and Martin are so weak that they can hardly work, and their stepsisters (Froese girls) are 'round' and immediately eat everything. Tina serves the bread herself, but the Froese girls can hold out better. That's the way it was last winter as well.*

*So Tina has become envious and wishes that she and Martin leave mother and depart, because Martin still earns more than a girl. I am very saddened, so please pray for her as well that she will have a change of mind. Martin does not want to leave his mother yet. I'm not surprised that it bothers Tina this way.*

*Tina writes they have very bad clothes; it is perhaps already too late. Tina asked that I request on her behalf. I don't have anything more to write today; I have a heavy heart; if Tina would only believe, and not despair, because that is not what awaits them in heaven.*

One year later, Katharina died of starvation, and later that same year, on November 11, 1933, their mother, Katharina (Hildebrandt, Froese) Loewen also died<sup>6</sup>. Martin left the girls for a short time, but returned and later married his stepsister, Katje Froese in May 1935. In 1937, they fled the area for Felsenbach,

Ukraine, where they lived with Katje's brother, Aaron Froese.

On September 28, 1937, Martin was arrested<sup>1</sup> by the NKVD and sent to East Chabarowsk and then to Lenkoran, near Baku, Azerbaijan. He died October 15, 1941, in Azerbaijan. In October 1943, Katja joined a group of 20, evacuating with the German army to Germany. On October 23, 1945, they were repatriated to Kirov city, Slobodskoj.

Life for Katje and her daughter was "...very hard; nothing to eat; the only thing they found in spring was stinging nettle. They poured boiling water to kill the sting and then ate it like a salad, or cut up as a vegetable. They were assigned to difficult work in the forests, and experienced a difficult existence."<sup>1</sup>

Katje, daughter Maria and her husband, with 5 children, along with Katje's sister, Liese Froese Ens and her families, emigrated to Neuwied, Germany on April 11, 1989.

## The Older Children:

### Jacob Loewen

Martin and Susanna's oldest son, Jacob and Anna Redekopp emigrated to Canada in 1925, with three children. They settled and raised their family of eight children in Manitoba.

### Anna Loewen

Anna married Daniel Friesen in 1919. He was arrested on February 19, 1931, and sent to Archangelst. Anna lost her property and all rights as a kulak; she and her children went into hiding. In 1932, Anna and three children returned to Gnadental from their hiding, although their prospects were dismal. Her children went door-to-door, begging for food, and they tried gleaning in the fields<sup>1</sup>. She and her brother, Johann, received \$4.10 from Canada, likely from her Uncle Abraham Loewen. With that money, they were able to buy food in a "special" store (Torgsien). Unfortunately, this also tipped off the secret police as to who was getting help from overseas.

Anna's younger sister, Marie Penner, in Canada, provides the following news about Anna in her letter<sup>6</sup> to Abraham and Maria Loewen:

*We also received a letter from sister Anna this week. Despite all her struggles, she appears to be brave; God is her strength. She received 10 Marks from the Red Cross. She put some food aside -beans and corn and some milk from the cow. She writes: We have no income; have been milking a fresh cow since February 1; also collect cream for shipping but what I'll get for it I don't know.*

With that precious foreign currency, they were able to buy 20 kg millet porridge, 4 kg flour, and 2 kg of sugar. In March 1934, Daniel returned, and they moved to Gruenfeld. Daniel was arrested a second time on June 21, 1938, and never heard from again.

Their oldest son, Martin, was arrested in 1941, and was sent east with a tractor brigade, never to be heard from again. Their daughter, Anna, died in 1935, at the age of 11. Anna lived in Gnadental until 1943, when she and five children evacuated westward with the retreating German troops. They were repatriated to Kostrama, Siberia in 1945, by Soviet authorities. Here, Anna and her daughters, Susanna and Katharina, starved to death between 1947 and 1950. The two youngest, Anna and Margaretha, who were twins, were placed into an orphanage. Daniel, who was 17 years old, was sent to work in the gold mines at River Lena, Siberia. In 1954, the twins were reunited with their older brother, Daniel, and eventually, all three emigrated to Germany with their respective families.<sup>1</sup>



Jacob Loewen, 1916

## Johann Loewen

Martin and Susanna's third oldest, Johann, worked in the Bethania Mental Hospital, where he met his wife, Anna Sudermann. They were married in Gnadental in 1926, and November 1929 found them in Moscow, along with thousands of other Mennonites, anxious to emigrate. They failed. Johann had sold everything, so he and his family returned to Ukraine and went into hiding in larger cities, but found little work.



Johann & Anna Sudermann Loewen, 1925

Johann burned his passport because it identified him as a kulak. In its place, he obtained an official document with a church seal on it and returned to Gnadental from hiding. He was accepted into the Kolchoz, which had been encouraging, and they moved back into their house. Anna worked in the chicken farm and Johann did masonry work in Neu Chortitza. The \$4.10 received from Canada was of great assistance.

In 1936, Johann was instructed to report to the NKVD, and on June 1, 1936, he was formally arrested.<sup>7</sup> Anna was able to visit him a few times in prison. He was sent into exile to Maldyak, Magadanskaya Oblast, northern Siberia, known to be one of the coldest place on earth, where temperatures plunged as low as -50. Here he worked in a gold mine; his accommodations was a tent. In a letter received by the family, Johann made the following observation: "If you work hard it is okay, but if work is slower, the frost gets through your clothes. I have no mittens, they are lost or stolen. The food is not very much. If you send me care packets, remember it will take six months until it gets here."<sup>1</sup> The family was to learn many years later that he died of pneumonia on January 16, 1938, only 14 months after his arrest.

Johann and Anna had four children, all of whom married. One daughter emigrated to Germany in 1990. Anna was 32 years old when her husband was taken from her. She spent many of her years thereafter milking cows on a Kolchoz. She died in Kazakhstan in 1988, at the age of 84.

## Maria Loewen

Daughter, Maria and Heinrich Penner emigrated to Canada in 1927, initially landing in Saskatchewan, but soon settling in Yarrow, British Columbia, where they raised their family of eight.

## Susanna Loewen

Susanna Loewen married Abram Bergen in 1924, in Gnadental. Abram's parents had moved onto the Jacob Klassen farm in Gnadental. Jacob Klassen, who had led a large contingent of emigrants to Canada the previous year, was brother-in-law to Martin Loewen; Susanna was his sister. Abram and Susanna lived with their parents for a short while and then purchased an older house.

The Bergens, like everyone else, worked on the Kolchoz. In 1938, Gnadental began receiving visits on numerous occasions by the NKVD, each time leaving with newly-arrested men. In anticipation of his arrest, Abram had given Susanna advice on a number of details. On June 10, 1938, they came for Abram. Their daughter, Katie, describes the



Abram & Susanna Loewen Bergen,  
with Katie.

event:<sup>1</sup>

*It was a nice evening; the windows were open (no screens). A knock at the door and a voice said, "Abram are you home"? Dad went to the door. Mother was so shocked; she left the room and went to the barn. It was the Police and Mr. Ruff; he was dad's friend from Chortitza. They opened all the drawers and threw all contents on the floor. Pictures and letters were looked at very closely. The Bible and the songbook were hidden in the attic for a long time already. They went to the attic but there was no light. They searched the barn and looked in the chicken nest as well as the big box where we kept some feed for our animals, but it was empty now. They did not find anything. My brother, Abram, was up now. Dad had to sign a paper.*

*Dad said goodbye to us. We had no money to give him. He wanted to take the old jacket, but mother said, "Please take the better one". He took no change of clothes. He wanted to wake the other boys, but the police were angry. They took dad and we never saw him again.*

Abram was sent to Dnepropetrovsk where he was executed three months later, on September 26, 1938<sup>1</sup>. It wasn't until after Stalin's death in 1953 that the family learned the details of Abram's death, although Susanna continued to believe that he would return to her one day, saying that "the Russians have lied before". Susanna continued to live in Gnadenfald until 1943, when she and her children evacuated Ukraine with the retreating German army. Unlike so many other Mennonites who evacuated with the retreating German army, the Bergen family escaped the fate of being repatriated to Siberia. In October 1947, Susanna Bergen and her children set their feet on Canadian soil, settling in Manitoba.

### **Susanna Froese**

Susanna married Johann Neufeld in Felsenbach, Borozenko, in 1921. They had 11 children. Johann died in Kazakhstan in 1973, followed by Susanna, 22 years later.

### **Aaron Froese**

Aaron married Margaretha Ens in Felsenbach, Borozenko, in 1925. She died a month after giving birth to their fifth child in 1935. The next year, Aaron married Maria Froese, and one year later, in August, he was arrested. He died three weeks later, presumably executed.

Martin Loewen's story is the story of countless other Mennonites, including his siblings, who suffered the same fate, due to the fact that they owned land and a few animals. In short, they were kulaks who were targeted for elimination by Stalin. In Martin's case, he and his wife lost both their land and their lives, and half of their children suffered a similar fate. Of Martin and Katharina's 15 children, three emigrated to Canada, three emigrated to Germany in their later years, seven had their lives prematurely ended, either by starvation, forced labour, or execution, and two lived out a normal, albeit hard life in the Soviet Union.

**Author's note: The accuracy of this account is based on available sources. Please forward any new information to the author at: [dfloew33@gmail.com](mailto:dfloew33@gmail.com)**



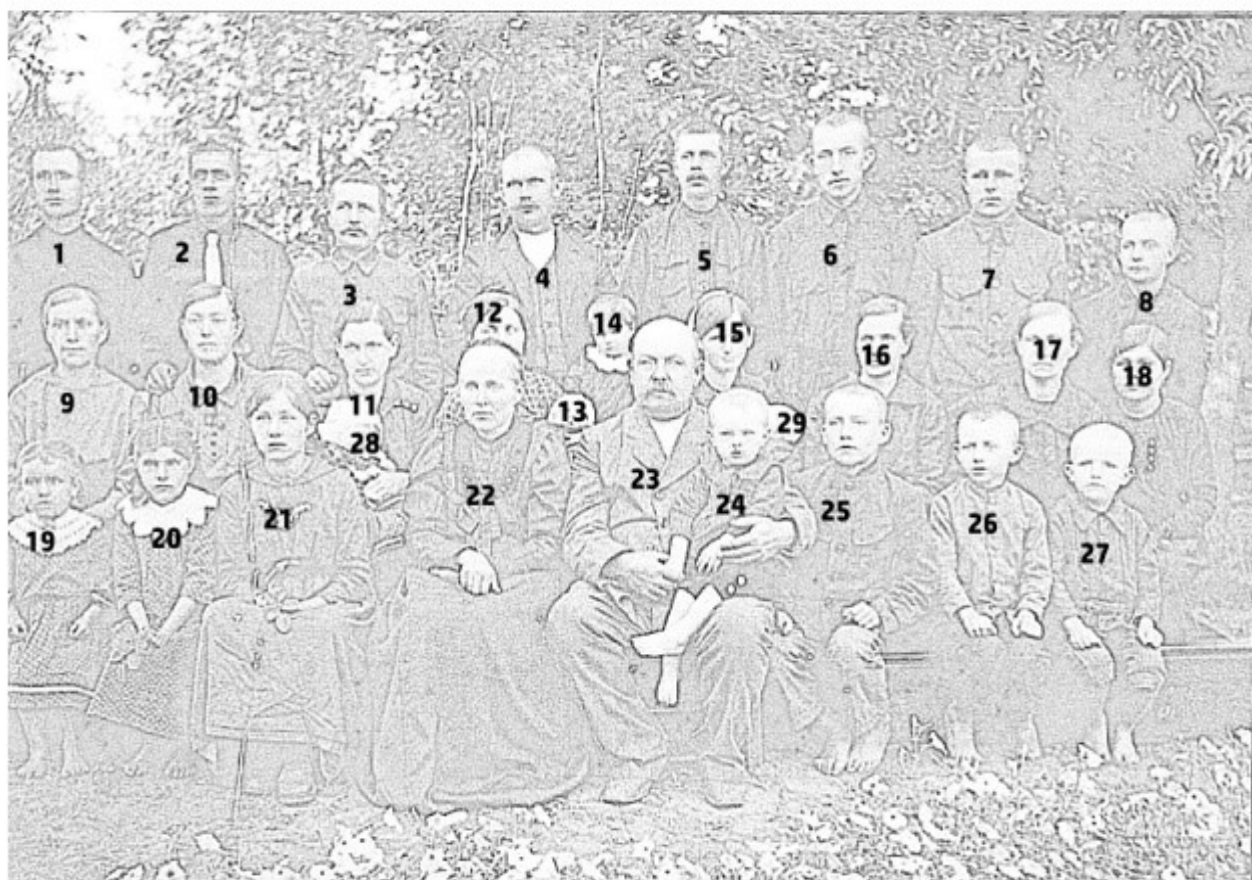


Martin & Katharina Hildebrandt/Froese Loewen Family, 1926

**GraNDMA Numbers**

Bergen, Abram	216305	Klassen, Jacob	214215
Bergen, Katie	417632	Klassen, Susanna	206719
Eitzen, Maria	409290	Loewen, Abraham	226755
Ens, Margaretha	216297	Loewen, Abram	216287
Friesen, Daniel	417589	Loewen, Anna	216280
Friesen, Anna	417593	Loewen, Isaak	216286
Friesen, Daniel	216302	Loewen, Jacob	216279
Friesen, Katharina	417587	Loewen, Johann	216281
Friesen, Susanna	417590	Loewen, Katharina	216284
Froese, Aaron	216291	Loewen, Maria	216306
Froese, Franz	216292	Loewen, Maria	216282
Froese, Greta	216294	Loewen, Martin	206712
Froese, Katja	216293	Loewen, Martin	216285
Froese, Liese	216295	Loewen, Susanna	216283
Froese, Maria	213330	Neufeld, Johann	216296
Froese, Susanna	216290	Redekopp, Anna	216301
Hildebrandt, Katharina	216288	Sudermann, Anna	216303





**Not on the photo:** Jacob & Anna (Redekopp) Loewen (emigrated to Canada in 1925)

1	Abram Bergen	x	2	Heinrich Penner	c	3	Daniel Friesen	x
4	Johann Neufeld		5	Aaron Froese	x	6	Johann Loewen	x
7	Franz Froese	?	8	Martin Loewen	x	9	Susanna (Loewen) Bergen	c
10	Maria (Loewen) Penner	c	11	Anna (Loewen) Friesen	x	12	Susanna (Neufeld) Froese	
13	Susanna Neufeld		14	Elizabeth Neufeld		15	Margareta (Froese) Enns	
16	Anna (Sudermann) Loewen		17	Katharina Loewen	x	18	Katja Froese	g
19	Katharina Friesen	x	20	Liese Froese	g	21	Greta Froese	g
22	Katharina (Hildebrandt/Froese) Loewen	x	23	Martin Loewen	x	24	Aaron Froese	
25	Isaac Loewen	x	26	Abram Loewen	x	27	Martin Friesen	x
28	Anna Friesen	x	29	Abram Froese				

**Legend:**

'x' – those who died as victims of government actions; 'c' – emigrated to Canada; 'g' – emigrated to Germany

**Note:** Franz Froese was conscripted into the army

## Sources:

1. Katie (Bergen) Koslowsky memoirs
2. Letter of 18 December, 1926, from Martin Loewen to brother, Abraham and Maria Loewen in Alberta.
3. Letter of 4 January, 1932, from Katharina Loewen (Martin Loewen's daughter) to Abraham and Maria Loewen in Alberta.
4. Letter of 19 February, 1932, from Katharina Loewen to Abraham and Maria Loewen in Alberta.
5. Letter of 1 May, 1932, from Katharina Loewen to Abraham and Maria Loewen in Alberta.
6. Letter of 17 February, 1933, from Marie (Loewen) Penner, in Saskatchewan, to Abraham and Maria Loewen in Alberta.

Correspondence with Jennifer Penner, 2022

Photos: Personal photos of Dave Loewen, Jennifer Penner

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