

Pretoria During Civil War and Famine

David F Loewen

Many years ago, as I began collecting information on life in Russia for the Loewen family, I had the foresight to solicit input from my uncles and aunts, all of whom have since passed away. For the most part, they accommodated my request and shared their memories of life in Pretoria. This account is extracted from those recollections.



Abraham J Loewen

Following the October Revolution of 1917 and the infamous Treaty of Brest-Litovsk with Germany in early 1918, Russia was consumed by a civil war. Initially, it did not affect village life in Pretoria, as the village was too far removed from the war zone. The lull did not last long.

Soon, the impact of civil war on Pretoria and on individual families began to be felt. In 1918, Abraham Loewen was ‘Schulz’ (village head) of the village, which meant he was responsible to accommodate the demands of the bandits and of the army groups. This often meant food and lodging, horses, or transportation to another village. Because of the preceding years, Abraham Loewen was in no position to offer much; all that he could offer them was coffee (postum, or “prips” as they called it) and dry bread. He told the visitors they were welcome to whatever he had, for which he came under criticism from another aspiring village head. The next year, this critic became village head and since he was more affluent, more was expected of him - geese, milk, etc. He had more, so they demanded more.

In the fall of 1918, the Orenburg District was under control of the White Army, and once the Red Army attacked, Pretoria found itself in the war zone. Farmers were forced to serve in the transport of war materials for the army, a distance of 20 to 30 km. Pretoria became the centre where horses were exchanged, and Abraham Loewen was in charge of this work. They brought war material into the Loewen yard, and he was expected to move it on. The commanding Cossack army captain was very strict. If anybody dared not to obey, he was punished. Among the war materials were rifles and grenades, which the young village boys were very interested in. Consequently, some had access to rifles with ammunition, which were being fired for entertainment. The parents appeared not to mind or were just afraid to voice their objections.

Particularly troublesome for the Loewens was that Johann, the oldest son, had been conscripted into the Red Army. At the start, he was fighting with forces near Petrograd (St. Petersburg), but later he was sent to the south to fight against Deniken’s army. It was there in Sochi, that he died of typhus, in 1922, a fact not known to the family for many years (see note).



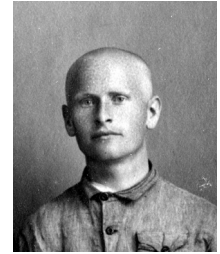
Johann

Jacob Loewen describes the last months of the Civil War:

“The war front remained in the Pretoria area for quite some time,

and the village changed hands several times. In the evening of December 31, a long transport of military equipment and men entered our village and occupied almost every home. They did not touch anything, but only expected to be fed. They traded one of their riding horses (it was wounded) for one of our horses. The horse was wounded in one leg, but not seriously.

After the White Army retreated, the Red Army took over. The main Red Army by-passed us to the south, trying to stop the White Army from entering Orenburg. This move saved our village, and we did not suffer too much from this conflict. In the spring of 1919, the Red Army retreated, and several Red Army men ran through our village to save themselves, throwing away their rifles and trying to cross the Gusicha River. Soon the Red Army advanced again, and small groups of their army came into our village. They behaved very orderly. They did not rob, but paid for everything, which surprised us. The White Army never paid. This is how the Civil War ended in our village.”



Jacob

The period of war, from 1914 to 1918, coupled with crop failures and government policy resulted in famine. Crop failures had occurred frequently, with failures in 1901, 1906, 1911, 1916, and 1921; Orenburg was not spared this disaster. Bad weather and bad crops were only part of the reason why people were starving. Lenin's policy, known as "War Communism", was designed to take the surplus produce from the country to support the Red Army, which was fighting for its survival against the disorganized White Army. In addition, an army of industrial workers in the cities, whose efforts were vital in supplying the materials needed for the economic survival of the Revolution, also needed to be fed.

The Loewen family managed to live through 1921, when there was a severe crop failure. The winter of 1921-22 was particularly harsh. In addition to the crop failure, the government demanded that the farmers pay "voluntary" taxes in the form of produce. As a result, Abraham Loewen started to ration their bread already in the fall. They had enough potatoes until New Year, after which the pieces of bread became increasingly smaller, and the soup became thinner. Jacob writes, "We would leave the table hungry". In the spring, when the fieldwork started, according to Jacob, they could hardly walk, and the livestock suffered even more. They would often have to help the horses and cows stand up in the morning. A rope was put under their bellies and then they were lifted up so that they could stand. All the buildings with thatched roofs were gradually stripped, as they were fed to the livestock. In the spring, corpses could be seen along the roadside.

For we youngsters, things began to improve after the snow. The gophers started to wake up and come out of their holes, and we had many of them. In the morning, one or two of us would go out and hunt them. We poured water into their holes (there was plenty of water after the snow) and when the gopher came out, we grabbed him by the neck, pulled him out and killed him. At home we would skin him and fry him in his own fat. It is astonishing that he had lived through the winter and still had enough fat to be fried in. The meat of the gophers tasted excellent. Since the number of gophers depended on us, we soon gained weight in the spring, after the starvation. – (Jacob Loewen)

“Our family also did not have enough to eat. That’s when the first American help came along. A kitchen was opened in our village and a family from our village was chosen to cook the noon meals with food sent from America. Specific children were invited to the kitchen to receive one meal per day. I remember going to this place. I remember the white buns, the milk, and the noodle soup. There was one kind of porridge that none of us liked, even though we were hungry. During this time many people died of starvation.” – (Tina Loewen)



Tina



Henry

Henry Loewen’s recollection was that anybody under age 15 could get a meal, usually a big bun and cup of milk or chocolate milk.

“We were sometimes allowed to trade with people who had food for their children at home. We would go to their home, and they would take our place so that they could experience what we were going through. This lasted until spring, and then we were able to trap gophers for eating. They tasted very good!”- (Henry Loewen)

That first spring after the winter of 1922, farmers found that the seed intended for spring sowing, had been used up in most cases. Therefore, whoever was able, donated items that could be spared – harnesses, wagons, and a variety of other items, and took them to the market in Siberia to trade for grain. They were on the road for about one month and returned with grain for a few hectares. Sowing the seed was difficult because the horses had very little strength. Usually, they would work one hour and then give the horses two hours to graze. In this way they managed to put in the spring crop.

The Orenburg district was on the receiving end of tractors sent from America. The horses had suffered during the famine and therefore, farmers couldn’t plow the fields without the tractors. Village men were chosen to operate the tractors and Abram Loewen was one of the trained operators. Instructions were minimal but fuel needed to be checked before starting the day. Quick action and his hat saved the day when he naively lit a match to peer into the dark fuel tank. The operators were paid with food and clothing.



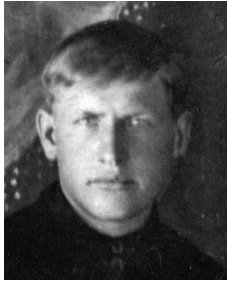
Abram Loewen (back, left)



Abram

Soon, conditions began to improve again. In the summer, Abraham Loewen, who was the only blacksmith in the village, began to find work. He was paid in produce. At the end of August, the starvation ended, and Jacob remembers it well:

The rye had ripened, and I will never forget that day. Father took one bag of rye to the mill in the next village and came back with a sack of flour. Mother, at once, baked pastry with cheese in it. At supper, this pastry was given to us, and father declared, 'Now you can eat as much as you want.' Today I would not eat such pastry. But then it tasted like delicious chocolate. That is the way we appreciated it at that time."



Martin

Martin Loewen was 14 years old at the time and recalls that the feeling of hunger left a lasting impression on his mind. In fact, he indicated that were it not for this relief food provided by MCC, he might very well not have survived. Years later, when he married, he promised his bride that she would always have a nice-looking table and adequate food to put on the table, a promise he was able to keep.

As difficult as the previous eight years had been, presumably, their last years in Pretoria were not quite as stressful, and adequate food not as scarce. The next recollection any of the Loewen children (my uncles and aunts) spoke of was the events surrounding their departure for Canada. Furthermore, my father, Martin, spoke only positively about his years as a youth in Pretoria, which would have been the years between 1922 and 1926. He expressed a deep yearning for those days during his first years in Alberta, leading me to believe that at the time of their departure in 1926, their thoughts of life in Pretoria were not as dire as one might have suspected. This also underlines the difficult choice Abraham and Maria likely had in deciding whether or not to apply to emigrate – a decision some chose not to undertake, with dire consequences, including Abraham and Maria Loewen's siblings.

Note: It is difficult enough to lose a son, but it must have been even more difficult emigrating in 1926, not knowing for certain, if Johann had in fact died, and if so, where and under what circumstances. The answer came almost 30 years later, when one of the censored letters exchanged between son, Jacob (in the USSR), and his parents in Canada, arrived at Jacob's home with an inserted note from the censor. The censor had personally known Johann, and revealed for the first time, to the family, how Johann had died.