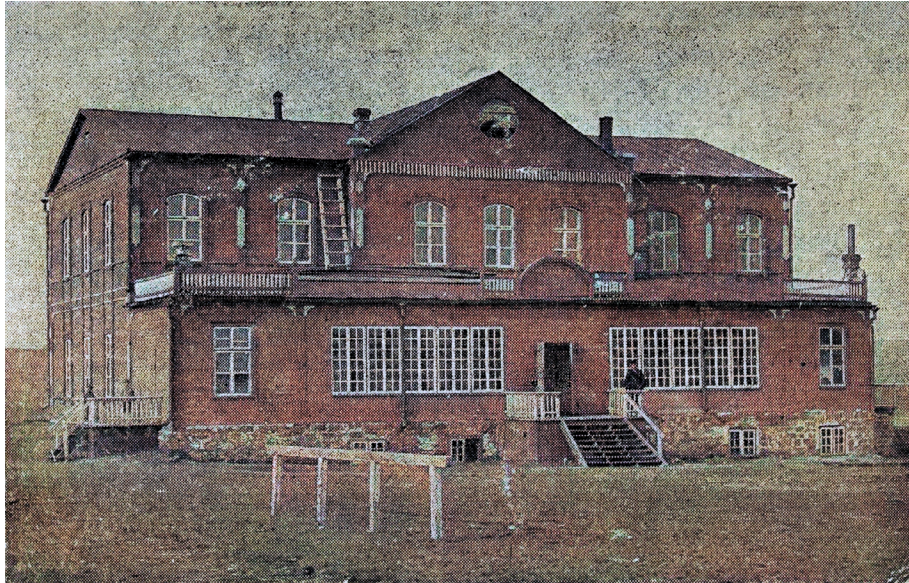


Education in Pretoria

David F. Loewen



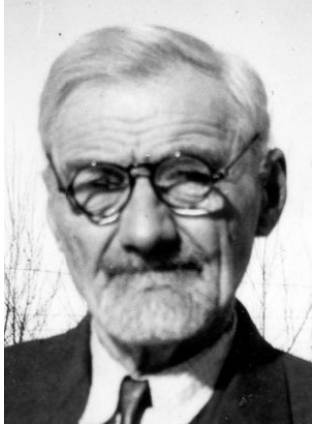
Die Zentralschule in Pretoria verdankte ihre Entstehung in der Hauptsache der Initiative und der Opferwilligkeit von Pred. Peter P. Dyck. Die Schule, die in vier Klassen etwa 80 bis 100 Schüler hatte, hat bis zum ersten Weltkrieg sehr erfolgreich gearbeitet und das geistige Leben auf der Ansiedlung stärkstens beeinflusst.

“The Central School in Pretoria owed its existence mainly to the initiative and willing sacrifice of Rev. Peter P. Dyck. The school, which had about 80 to 100 students in four classes, operated very successfully until the First World War, and had a strong influence on the spiritual life of the settlement.”

Public school was begun in 1904, shortly after the village of Pretoria was formed; the Abraham J. Loewen family had arrived two years earlier. The language of instruction was German, with Russian as the second language, and the children started school at age 7 or 8. Jacob Loewen began school in the fall of 1910. In his memoirs, he describes his early education experiences at some length, and for the most part, this account is based on his memoirs.

The school itself contained one big classroom and living quarters (three rooms with a kitchen) for the teacher. The teacher was hired and paid by the village. If his employment terminated, he would have to vacate the premises for the next teacher. Jacob was unable to say where the teachers were trained or whether or not they had any training at all, and during his school years, Kornelius Mathies had been the teacher. There were six grades, all in one room, and since Pretoria was a small village, the classes were also small, with 4 to 6 children per class. All children were seated orderly, with the youngest seated next to the teacher, and the oldest at the back of the room.

“As I grew older, I often had to think about the teaching methods,” writes Jacob. “As I remember, the program was planned right up to the minute. Just imagine, Monday - 8:00 to 8:20, 1st class; 8:20 to 8:40, 2nd class; 8:40 to 9:00, 3rd class; Recess, 10 minutes, and so on. If the teacher was occupied with one class, all the others had to have a writing assignment. During this time it was very quiet in the class. Anyone who finished his lesson early, would take it to the teacher, return to



Peter P. Dyck

his seat and sit quietly. Anyone making a noise would be severely punished - at times with a stick. Sometimes they had to stay in the corner or near the oven. At times they would have to hold a Bible up high over their heads. But those punishments were not given very often. If a student misbehaved too often during the classes, the teacher would tell his parents about this behaviour, and then the parents would discipline the child. Sometimes they had to copy something from the Bible or from a book.

During recess, there was strict order in the class. Every day, someone from the upper class was in charge of keeping order. Upon arrival of the teacher, he would report that everything was orderly, or he would tell the teacher who had misbehaved, and the student would be punished as noted earlier. Outside, one could run and jump - nobody cared - but not in the class. I am convinced that if any teacher were asked today if such teaching methods could bear positive results, they would surely all say that this is impossible. But I must say - we learned a lot. Attending other schools later, I was not behind in my knowledge. I did not feel poorly educated. For instance, I often noticed that adults, and later, students, did not understand important events in Russian history. My village teacher demanded that we should know the history of our emperors in Russia. I remembered them all my life. Grammatical rules, too, were expected to be known.

Until the Revolution, I was well-acquainted with the Bible. For instance, the teacher took the Bible and read a passage and then asked what text he had read, and who had written it. For the most part, we learned to know the Scripture quite well. A problem we had was that we had to know two languages, German and Russian. At home we spoke Low-German; at school, we first learned German using the Gothic script. In the third year we learned Russian, and some of the subjects were taught in that language. In spite of everything, we were quite successful. I often think that our first teacher was a hero. I am sure that if I would ask any teacher today to take over a school like ours, he would refuse.

Learning at school came easy for me. Before I started school, I had learned to read and write from my brothers, so I had very little to learn in my first grade. I quickly did my lesson and then I listened to what was taught in the second grade. It often happened that the teacher would ask something that nobody knew, so I would raise my hand and provide the correct answer. As a result, the teacher moved me from the first class to the third class. How proud I was to join my cousin, Helena Driedger's class. The learning in the public school was easy. In my first six years of school I never received a punishment, even though I was with the trouble-makers during recess. The ministers often criticized my family when the teacher reported, but I was never disciplined harshly."

Jacob's love for learning appears to have been insatiable. "The teacher gave me early access to the school library, but there was not much to read - parts from Gogol, fables from Krylov, and poems from Nekrassov. Besides the school library, there existed another private library at the Pries home. But there we had to pay, and I had no money. At Christmas, my father gave me a book (I forget the title). I read it at once and then there was nothing more to read. I then arranged with Pries that I would give him my book in exchange for giving me access to his library. I remember one book, *Thousand and One Nights*, which made a great impression on me. I often dreamt of what I had read. At times the bandits were chasing me and when they had approached me and tried to grab me, I would awake from the fear. Despite the horror, I enjoyed those dreams. I soon found out that eating a heavy meal at supper would cause me to dream. But often I would eat more than I needed to stop my hunger. My

last year in public school was the start of World War I.”

Tina, who was Jacob’s junior by at least 15 years, recalls, “I must have been 8 years old when I started. I finished grade two. There was strict discipline. If we were punished in school by standing in the corner or a strapping, we would also be punished at home. The lower grades did not have scribblers, but a slate and a slate pencil. This could be erased with a cloth and the slate could be used again. At recess time, children would play games like “Drop the Handkerchief”, “Hopscotch”, or “Klepky” (a game with a stick). In the winter we were mostly inside or maybe skating on the ice. We used our wooden slippers (“Schloren”) as skates.

At Christmas time we would have a program with plays or recitations and songs. We had a live tree and real wax candles and some shiny balls or paper chains, which the students had made. I remember one Christmas singing “O Tannenbaum” (O Christmas Tree) and receiving a few candies wrapped in paper, nuts, and a post card with Lenin’s picture,” writes Tina. “We were not spoiled by the receiving of many gifts. There were no Christmas trees in the homes, so we children enjoyed the tree in the school.” There were no spruce or fir tree forests in the Pretoria area so to get one for the school, one had to travel to Orenburg, about 70 km. away. According to Tina, the school had only male teachers; women were not wanted as teachers.

In the spring of 1915, after finishing public school, Jacob was confronted with the question of what next? A "Central School" had been established a few years earlier. It was similar to the second level in the Soviet school and had been called "Central" because it was in the centre of the Mennonite settlement, Pretoria.

“Men from our village had organized this school. It was a wooden, two-storey building. It had four classrooms and one bigger parlour for meetings. The other rooms were for the teacher and his family. The upkeep and salary was paid for by the Mennonites of Pretoria. This was the centre of Mennonite culture in this area. Students from the surrounding districts would attend this school by boarding in Pretoria, or in the next village, Karaguj. But I always hoped that when I finished public school, I would attend the Central School, which was only for boys from German villages. There was an unwritten rule that public education was sufficient for girls. During my years at the Central School we had only one Russian girl.

After finishing public school, I hoped to continue my education in the Central School, but the war years destroyed my hope. The reason was as follows: In the beginning of the conflict in Poland and the Baltics, St. Petersburg had many German citizens. They all had to be evacuated away from the war zone. Many came to the Orenburg area. In the beginning they were placed in the Ukrainian and Russian villages, but those evacuees soon obtained permission to settle in German villages. During 1915, Pretoria had many newcomers in their midst. Whoever had room took them in. They paid well for their rooms. Besides, the farmers also benefitted selling produce to the newcomers. On the decision of the Municipality, the Central School was closed to make room for the internees. We were not able to take anybody into our home since we lived in two rooms with one kitchen, but we had a shed outside, and one German offered he would rebuild it for living quarters. He managed to make two rooms which were occupied by two families.

When the school closed in 1915, I was devastated because I had had high hopes of completing my education at the Central School and then proceeding to higher education somewhere. I complained to my father about the threat of not being able to continue my education, and although he had shown little empathy for my aspirations in the past, he now intervened in an

attempt to find a way. He asked David Kozlovsky, who lived across the street, to provide me with some individual tutoring. He was not concerned about the content of his instruction, as long as I was appeased.

I forgot specifics of the program, but I remember the main subject was Geography, which I enjoyed. I learned about new countries that I had not known before – about people, animals, etc. I drew maps, which I was soon able to draw with accuracy, referencing longitude and latitude. The knowledge I obtained assisted in my future studies. I could draw the main rivers and mountains of far away countries from memory. The instruction I received was successful, but I remember nothing of the other subjects.”

In 1916, the parents in Pretoria and the surrounding villages decided to organize something to continue education for their children, so they approached a German intern and asked him to take on the task. They managed to get one classroom in the Central School. In the end, it appeared that this intern had never been a teacher. His attempts to teach anything of value was a failure and so the entire year (1917) was seen as a waste of time.

The youth started to form youth groups. David Koslowsky organized a choir and the Pretoria string orchestra resumed activity. It was also a great event when the village received a library with a large collection of German, Russian, and other European classics, at least according to Jacob Loewen. The library was given to the youth groups, giving them the opportunity to get acquainted with European classics in the German and Russian languages.

Jacob writes: “Now we had a fight with our father. Between 9:00 p.m. and 10:00 p.m. we had to turn out our lights and go to sleep. Kerosene for the lamps was limited. So we three brothers (Johann and Abram were his older brothers) went to bed as instructed and after the parents were asleep, we would get up, light the lamp, and start to read until morning. At times our father would catch us reading and we would receive a very severe admonition. I am convinced that in our village nobody read as much as we did. In our schools, nobody had such a library as we had. This had a very great influence on my education.”

The Central School had stood empty since 1917. Shortly thereafter (date unknown) the Soviet government stepped in and took over its management. It was decided that the new program (second class) would fit in with the Soviet system. Finding qualified teachers, however, could not be assumed, but very soon, nearby Samara appeared to have a supply of qualified teachers. Among the first teachers were two sisters, Helen and Mary Petrovna, related to the well-known diplomat, W.P. Potemkin.

The quality of instruction exceeded Jacob’s expectations by far. It was Helen Petrovna’s history lessons that steered Jacob in that direction in his first years at university. Teachers received a modest wage and in addition, students paid tuition with produce. The cost of living was more manageable in the rural regions as well.



One of the Petrovna sisters
(teachers) in Pretoria.

In the spring of 1922, Jacob graduated from the school in Pretoria. Jacob's assessment of education in Pretoria was, "Our teachers in Pretoria had prepared us quite well, so we did not fall behind those who had their education in the city". There was no question in his mind that further education would be his goal. Helen and Mary Petrovna had taken interest in Jacob's education and gave him the support and encouragement that set him on a path to a university education. They immediately helped Jacob make all the arrangements to enroll at the Technicum Lenin in Samara, and went to Samara themselves to arrange for Jacob to enter the third year in the Technicum Lenin, with a scholarship and room and board. Ironically, this assistance would also play a role in permanently separating him from his parents and siblings.

With his teachers' support and his solemn commitment not to ask for financial assistance, Abraham Loewen relented and allowed Jacob to enroll at the Technicum Lenin. "Father took me to Orenburg and paid my ticket, 3rd class, to Samara. Mother also gave me some pastry and also a few kilos of millet and I went out into a strange world 'to swim on an open ocean'.

When the Loewens emigrated in 1926, Jacob elected to remain in order to complete his education. The opportunity to emigrate would not come again. Jacob would go on to conduct geological field research and become a Geology professor at the University of Taskkent. After retirement, he moved closer to his children in Moscow and lived out a full life (age 99). An article on Jacob Leven's life can be found in Preservings, Issue 39, Page 47 – *'The One Who Remained Behind'*.