

Johann and Maria (Loewen) Eitzen, 1865 – 1933

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Johann & Maria (Loewen)
Eitzen, 1891

Johann Eitzen, (1838-1915), was born in Berdyansk, South Russia. He married Helena Eitzen, Orekhov, where they settled initially and where Johann was partner in a flour mill with Peter Eitzen¹, his brother-in-law. Their children were all born in the vicinity, with Schoenwiese being the place common to most of their family events – births and baptisms.

In 1905, Johann and Helena Eitzen moved to the village of Suworowka in the newly-established Orenburg colony. The 1923 Orenburg Census states that only Daniel and Anna joined them in this move. Their son, Johann (1865-1933), with Maria and family moved to Saratov², where he is believed to have possessed a respectable-sized estate.³ Maria and Margaretha moved to Pretoria with their husbands and families at about the same time. Helena, Aganetha, and Katherina either remained in or moved to the Ukraine with their spouses and families.

In the fall of 1926, Abraham and Maria Eitzen Loewen emigrated to Canada. Both left siblings behind, some of whom vacillated on whether or not to join them. One of those was Johann.

In a letter received from Johann Eitzen, in July 1927, it was apparent that he and his wife were seriously reconsidering emigration, even though there appeared to be slight hesitancy. His letter indicated that they had come to the realization that they may have waited too long; that a degree of uncertainty had delayed a more timely decision. Perhaps they may not have felt an urgency to leave.

As expected, we were on the trip south, from 9 June to 15 July. After a two-year delay, the desire to visit our homeland (Old Colony), my wife and I took this trip. In addition, we hoped to find more potential buyers for our farm, which also was part of our reason for making the trip, allowing us to make a more informed decision as to whether to emigrate or buy something here.

Reading on in his letter, Johann expressed feelings that leaves one with the distinct impression that they regretted not having made a decision to emigrate as early as 1925.

If I assume and believe that what we are experiencing now will continue into the future, I must conclude that this place is not our home, despite so many ties that should keep us here. It is and remains our homeland, but we have been alienated from it, and everything is stacked

against us; that's why we want to leave, because it's still possible. Much is already lost by leaving, but now it is still possible; so forward before it is too late.

We are waiting for buyers, and as soon as the buildings are sold, the work begins; we will have hope. Too bad we didn't leave in 1925; but with God it is not yet too late. We expect to make our decisions within a short time period.

Johann Eitzen's comments turned to the paperwork he was engaged in completing, and the process involved in securing permission to emigrate to Canada.

One more question: Are you aware that the Board has a competitor, Mennonite Immigration Aid, in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada? I have a letter promoting British Columbia through the company mentioned. It is supposed to be an association, and under the protectorate of the Canadian government, but operated by Mennonites. The president is a Doctor Gerhard Hiebert in Winnipeg, and the Secretary is a Mennonite advocate, Abram Buhr.

This is the letter, and it is signed by N. Banman. This society does not involve itself in missionary work but is organized for the purpose of settling Canada. And is a competitor of the board in Rosthern, of which you write that it is English politics. I ask for clarification in this.

The letter contained the usual updates on common acquaintances, family activities, the weather, the harvest just completed, and a few questions out of curiosity about life in Canada. A large part of this letter related their experiences and the people they visited on their five-week journey to southern Russia – the old colony. He made a comment about the impressions he had been left with, and it would appear that they had begun to separate themselves, mentally and emotionally, from life in Russia, in preparation for the hoped for emigration.

In Niederhortitz, we stopped in to visit Mrs. Funk. Peter Loewen, who lives with her, drove us via Ebenfeld to Heubuden. My wife and I visited Ebenfeld's churchyard and examined everything. The whole cemetery was in disarray; only the gravestone of my oldest ancestor was still standing, but our graves were even then, in somewhat better condition. The mass grave is 10 steps long and 3 steps wide. Pain pierced my breast. How that place was once so dear and precious to me, but now I could not bear to stay. I cast one last farewell glance before I left, probably never to see it again. At Blumenhof I still gave a sermon,⁴ as we were staying, and it was requested by old acquaintances.



Johann & Maria Eitzen, with three children, ca. 1925



Johann & Maria Eitzen and family, 1927

Standing: Abram, Helena , Peter, Maria, Daniel, Anna, Johann.

Sitting: Minna (Klassen) Eitzen, Maria & Johann Eitzen, Margarete (Kroeker) Eitzen, with Margrete.
Maria, Peter, Liese

My general impressions of our journey, I would say, "We have come to the conviction that the South (Old Colony) offers us Mennonites nothing more than the remembrance of the past, now and hereafter."

Finally, we arrived home on July 15, happy. We thought we would still be in time for the harvest; however, they were already threshing and had been interrupted by the rain. Saturday, July 23, at noon, we finished the threshing.

As for the harvest in the South, people hoped for a medium harvest. We have harvested curlew rye 45 poods⁵ per dessiatin⁶, common rye about 15 poods, and wheat on average at 15 poods per dessiatin. Potatoes are fine. We did not plant much because we expected to emigrate.

What about the disagreement⁷ between you and your companion? Can you separate? What does "Fenz" mean? Is it meant to fence the cattle pasture? Do you also have a Shepherd? What about English and German innkeepers? How is it that the farmers sell the farm and

move to the city? Surely they also have children who are able to farm there, or is the farm not profitable?

We have no letters from Orenburg. Martin Loewen⁸ is doing well. He also has children who want to emigrate. He writes and tells us where we should go (in Canada) if we were to emigrate. We are depending on the Board in Rosthern. As I write, my wife is in bed. She has pain in her body. The Lord be with you. Greetings to all Eitzens⁹.

No record of any further correspondence between the Loewens in Canada and the Johann Eitzens in Orenburg until 21 months later – a letter dated 18 April 1929. Johann does state in this letter, however, that three letters have gone unanswered (they may have been “lost” along the way).

A lot had changed in the Soviet Union. The period of 1924, (Lenin’s death) to the early 1930s was a time during which Stalin consolidated his authority, marked by the initiation of his Five-Year Plans, the first of which commenced in 1928. The repressive and unforgiving de-kulakization policy resulted in mass dispossessions of land and forced relocation eastward to provide the cheap labour force required to accomplish Stalin’s goal of rapid industrialization.

Much had also changed in Johann Eitzen’s life. Based on correspondence, it would appear that he had not been dispossessed of his land. He does, however, make reference to the use of a tractor for seeding, and rumours that suggest it may be taken from them. This is very likely a reference to tractors allocated to collective farms. Were they also allocated to “private” farms? Based on the following excerpt from his letter of April 1929, it appears so, and furthermore, it does suggest that Johann Eitzen had not been dispossessed of his land.

There is no excuse for such a tractor being taken away. We miss it very much. We don't want to keep workers this year; we have to do everything ourselves. And yet many are crying out for work.

The main subject of this letter revolves around the question of emigration and the securing of permission to leave. The letter also contains a tone of resignation to the fact that they may well have to remain, and at the same time, a faint hope that not all is lost.

We also received a reply from Moscow today regarding my enquiry of 26 March about freedom of entry. They report that they have not yet received an entry permit from the board for us, but that they will send it to us as soon as it arrives. I fear something is wrong again, so I'm writing to you right away to ask you to be so good as to check what's wrong.

It seems that we are to stay here, but we cannot afford to do so. And as long as there are any possibilities, we will manage, because staying here is nothing but a loss of time and work. But we are afraid that our resources will not suffice for the journey, due to a sharp downturn and new laws. And then what? But hopefully we will still be successful.

Johann signs off with:

A letter to the Board is also going out with this letter. I have not yet finished writing to Herr Klassen. I will write to him when I get home. Greetings from us to acquaintances and relatives.

Those may have been the last words that Johann Eitzen shared with his sister, Maria Loewen.

The next we hear about him; he is in the village of Zentral. Living at No. 2, along with his wife and five family members – Daniel and Peter, with his wife, Maria, and two children.¹⁰ In her book, Susanne Isaak states that Johann Eitzen must have been a latecomer to the village, and that he was hard-of-hearing. Family sources confirm that various Eitzen family members had experienced hearing loss. In fact, a granddaughter of Johann's sister whom I recently interviewed, depended on hearing aids.

Isaak writes,

"They (Eitzen family) are said to have come to Zentral very late, according to old-timers. It could have been as early as the collective farm period or just before. The many beautiful pictures of the private farm of the Eitzen family (threshing machine, cattle, hackney carriage with horse and cart, etc.) have been left to the "Mennonitische Forschungsstelle e.V." so that they can still be of use for later generations. I myself can still vaguely remember "Onkel" Eitzen. I remember that he visited our father. Since Onkel Eitzen was hard of hearing, my father spoke into a rubber ear trumpet when he talked to him."

Based on Letkemann's book, it appears they arrived at the end of 1929. Isaak also recalls that Johann Eitzen arrived in Zentral with camels.¹¹

According to Johann's correspondence of April 1929 with his sister, Maria Loewen in Canada, the Johann Eitzen family was set on emigrating. Six months later, in early November 1929, the Eitzen family - Johann and Maria with three daughters, three sons, as well as Johann Jr. and his wife, Margareta (Kroeker) and five children – travelled to Moscow. Johann Jr. had arrived earlier to begin the process of securing travel documents. Margareta's two sisters and their families, Lena (Jakob Krause) and Liese (Jakob Schellenberg), joined the Eitzens. Margareta's parents, Peter and Elizabeth (Thiessen) Kroeker and children were there waiting in Moscow as well.

Plans were put on pause as both Canada and Germany appeared unwilling to take the refugees waiting in Moscow. On November 20,¹² Johann Eitzen and his son, Johann, were both arrested. A week later, their families were rounded up and reunited with their husbands at the train station, where all but Johann Jr. and his wife Margareta were sent back to Saratov. Margareta had gone into labour with their sixth child, and was taken to a nearby hospital, along with Johann Jr., who stayed with her for the night. Their five children, all sick with the measles by now, were returning to Saratov with their grandparents.

Then, as if the sea had parted, approval from Germany came. In the midst of this melee, Johann's children, Abraham and Minna (Klassen) Eitzen, their daughter Helena, and the Krause and Schellenberg families had managed to depart for Germany, and eventually found their way to Saskatchewan, Canada. Within days, Johann Jr. obtained his exit visa. Within days, Johann Jr. obtained his exit visa.

Johann Jr. managed to meet his Kroeker parents-in-law, who were waiting onboard the train, also ready to depart for Germany. He agonized, with them, on whether to join them and expect his

family to follow, but realizing that emigrating was for the benefit of his children, he bade the Kroeker family farewell. They succeeded in exiting the country and found a home in Paraguay.

Johann followed his five children by train, hoping to retrieve them and return to Moscow where his wife and baby Abram would be waiting. After finding his children at a station near Saratov, permission to take them was denied. Johann was imprisoned and his travel documents and money and valuables were confiscated. His brother Daniel was dispatched to Moscow to get Margareta and her baby. Johann was only released after his exit permit had expired. Emigration was no longer an option.

Once he was released, Johann's first priority was to ensure the safety of his parents, Johann and Maria Eitzen. Because of his father's status as a former estate owner and a minister, it was decided to relocate them to another province where he would not be known, out of concern for their safety. As a result, Johann and Maria Eitzen, along with their children, found their way to Zentral in late 1929. They were among the first settlers to arrive during the early years of collectivization, fleeing dekulakization and possible arrest. From a large estate, east of the Volga River, they moved into a small shack at the entrance to the village.¹³

It is in Zentral where Johann Eitzen Sr. was living at the time of his second arrest and imprisonment in Borisoglebsk. He was arrested for the crimes of being a minister and having had contact with the German embassy.¹⁴ Johann was arrested 28 February 1933, following which he was imprisoned and tortured according to family sources.¹⁵ On the reverse side of the photo of Daniel and his father, Johann, a time span for Johann's imprisonment is given - "1933, 1 March, to 1933, 20 June." Johann was the oldest of the prisoners.¹⁶ In "Das Dorf Zentral", Isaak states that Johann's son, Daniel, had been instructed to fetch his father from the prison. He died within days of being released from prison, on 17 June 1933,¹⁷ at the age of 68. His wife, Maria, died one month later.

His children Maria, Lena, and Peter were eventually deported - like all the Zentral Germans - possibly to Siberia or Kazakhstan.¹⁸ Daniel was arrested within days of Germany's invasion in 1941, likely suspected of "espionage" or "treason", due to his German ethnicity. Of the 10 from Zentral that were arrested, one was executed, one released, and the other eight sentenced to a five to ten-year term in a GULag labour camp.¹⁹ Daniel Eitzen was one of only two who survived. At some point, he married brother Peter's widow. He eventually emigrated to Germany, where he died.



Johann Eitzen being released into the care of his son, Daniel Eitzen, 1933.

After getting his parents settled in Zentral, Johann Jr. gathered his family and moved into the Kroeker house in Arkadak, Village No. 6. At the time of saying their last farewells aboard the train in Moscow, his father-in-law invited Johann and Margareta to move into their house.

*"Just move into our house, which we left with everything except that which we could put into our suitcases. There are still smoked hams hanging from the ceiling, and there's plenty of flour."*²⁰

But when they got there, everything had been emptied. There was nothing left. In Arkadak they joined the kolkhoz, where Margarete worked first as a milkmaid and then promoted to inspector, as she was fluent in Russian. Johann was given administrative duties. In 1937, Johann was arrested a second time.

*"We had settled in quite well when one night in 1937 the police came to the house, arrested my husband and put him in prison. I was allowed to visit him in 1938 and again in 1939, each time only for a short time in the administration office. I had to travel about 6 hours by train."*²¹

A fourth son, Jakob, was born shortly after Johann's arrest, but he never saw his father. Johann Eitzen died in exile in 1944.²² In 1941, Margareta and her children were "moved" to Tyuminsk in the northern Urals, where she and her children survived against all odds.

Here we lived very poorly and starved for almost three years. Our main food was herbs, nettles and onion leaves, which grew wild everywhere. We mashed it, boiled it and poured a little milk on it, which we were given. Due to the hardships and hunger, many people died here.

In the mid-1950s, she and her children were able to move, as long as they remained in Asiatic Soviet Union. They opted for a more pleasant climate and settled in Frunse, near the Afghanistan border, where other Mennonites had also chosen to live. They joined a Collective and were able to purchase a house. Life became much more comfortable. In the late 1980s, she joined family members in moving to Germany, and when asked why she chose to move again amid the uncertainty of another move, Margarete replied,

The constant uncertainty, also the uncertainty for the future, drove us, because as Germans we were always disadvantaged.

In 1989, Margarete travelled to Paraguay for a reunion with her Kroeker siblings, and three years later, Margarete Eitzen died in Pfungstadt, Germany, at the age of 93.

Author's Note: The story of the Johann & Maria Eitzen family would have remained incomplete without the invaluable research done by Susanne Isaak and Peter Letkemann. Their books are rich in content and honour the memory of so many, including the Eitzens. Their research has revealed information about the Johann Eitzen family that was unknown, at least to most. I would appreciate any new or additional information, including photos, on this family. I can be reached at: dfloew33@gmail.com

Notes:

1. Peter Eitzen obituary, *Ancestry*
2. Another source indicates that Johann was living on a 'Gut' in Samara, which would be approximately 400 km from Saratov. However, both references to Samara and to Saratov may be to the respective regions (Oblast), which border on each other. This may explain confusion about location of his residence, especially if he lived on his own private estate (Gut). We know, from his correspondence that he was trying to sell his property in anticipation of emigrating, and another source (Das Dorf Zentral) indicates photos of a beautiful private estate (Wirtschaft). Lending further credence to the fact that Johann was affluent, his letter to his sister in 1927 states that they returned home from a month-long trip, to find the harvesting almost complete, implying that he had employees who did this work for him. The same letter states that several days were spent in Saratov, enroute home, for his wife to have dental work done.
3. In her account given to "Mennoblatt", Margareta Eitzen states: "He (Johann) was the son of the landowner Johann Eitzen. Father Eitzen was a preacher. Since he had enough land and also housing, we moved to the estate of my parents-in-law and worked together with them. Here we had five children: Maria, Peter, Liese, Grete and Hans."
4. Johann Eitzen was also a lay minister.
5. Pood: an Imperial Russian weight measurement, equalling 36.11 lbs.
6. Dessiatin: Imperial Russian land measurement, equalling 4.04 acres
7. Abraham Loewen entered a partnership with another family in purchasing a farm in Simons Valley, Alberta, in 1927. It failed very soon thereafter.
8. Abraham Loewen's older brother, who was dispossessed of his large landholdings and exiled to the Ural Mtns., where he starved to death in 1932. (Abraham was Johann Eitzen's brother-in-law)
9. Some of the extended Eitzen family that had emigrated earlier.
10. Johann Eitzen Jr. settled his parents in Zentral because officials there would not know that Johann Sr. had been a former estate owner and a minister (Letkemann, pg. 243).
11. Email exchange with Susanne Isaak's daughter, Helena; June 2022.
12. "Aus Moskau zurueckgeschickt", Margareta (Kroeker) Eitzen, Mennoblatt, No. 10 (16 May 1989), pgs. 7-8
13. A Book of Remembrance, Letkemann, pg. 282
14. A Book of Remembrance, Letkemann, pg. 273
15. Email exchange with Anne (Eitzen) Regier, Nov 2021 – Johann's son, Daniel, eventually emigrated to Germany and visited his Eitzen relatives in Canada in 1972. He shared with his nephew, Abe Eitzen (Alberta), how his father (Johann Eitzen) had been tortured in prison.
16. A Book of Remembrance, Letkemann, pg. 275
17. A Book of Remembrance, Letkemann, pg. 275
18. Email exchange with Susanne Isaak's daughter, Helena; June 2022.
19. A Book of Remembrance, Letkemann, pg. 301
20. "Aus Moskau zurueckgeschickt", Margareta (Kroeker) Eitzen, Mennoblatt, No. 10 (16 May 1989), pgs. 7-8
21. "Aus Moskau zurueckgeschickt", Margareta (Kroeker) Eitzen, Mennoblatt, No. 10 (16 May 1989), pgs. 7-8
22. A Book of Remembrance, Letkemann, pg. 346

Sources:

Eitzen, Johann, Correspondence with Maria (Eitzen) Loewen, July 1927, April 1929

Eitzen, Margareta (Kroeker), "Aus Moskau zurueckgeschickt", Mennoblatt, Vol. 10 & 11, 1989

Isaak, Susanne, *Das Dorf, Zentral*, 1996

Photos: Personal copies; “Das Dorf, Zentral”

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Johann Eitzen's last letter
to his sister in Canada.