

‘Valley of Tears’

The Johann G. Funk Family Story

David F. Loewen



Johann Gerhard & Helena (Loewen) Funk Family, 1911

Standing, L-R: Margareta, Helena, Katherina, Anna, Jacob, David, Isaak
Sitting: Maria, Susanna, Helena, Johann, Cornelius, Heinrich, Abram
(Oldest son, Johann, is not in the photo.)

Johann Funk (1861-1932), born in Schoendorf, and Helena Loewen (1863-1938), born in Schoenhorst, were married in 1883, and in 1888, became founding members of the village of Katerinowka, a daughter colony of Chortitza. The Funk's farmed about 450 acres and operated a mill, which was powered by an Otto-Deutz motor. Johann Funk had built his own brick factory at a nearby pond. In Katerinowka, only the Funks were members of the Mennonite Brethren Church, situated in nearby Milloradowka. Johann and Helena were pious followers of Christ, and raised their family of 13 children to become faithful followers as well (five children died in infancy). Although the law forbade Mennonites from proselytizing, they were permitted to testify to their faith if asked questions, which they did freely.

Their home was filled with singing praises and reading Scripture regularly. It was the memory of all those happy years together as family that sustained Helena in that remote wilderness to which she and Johann had been banished, and where he died. In a letter to daughter, Anna, in the Congo, she wrote:

“Memory is the best thing life has to offer. In my loneliness I vividly recall the beautiful songs which you as children used to sing.”

All the children were well educated, and Johann subscribed to journals from America and Germany, including a German monthly magazine for women which contained ideas on crafts. Johann Funk maintained a small library of classic literature and theology. He was ordained as a preacher in his fifties, and realizing his need to improve his language skills, registered for evening classes. In addition to being a successful farmer and a preacher, Johann was also a skilled craftsman who had done all the wood-related construction of their large house and built their furniture in his well-equipped workshop.

Helena Loewen’s father, Jacob Loewen, died when she was 12, and her mother when she was 18. She had little formal education, but enjoyed reading and had a sharp sense of humour. She appeared to possess boundless energy for all the work she engaged in and enjoyed doing. In her memoirs, Anna, describes her mother as a “very cheerful and good-natured woman”. Helena found her strength in her faith, and was often heard to say, “He who abides in me bears much fruit, for without me you can do nothing.” In her apron pocket one could always find a New Testament. Apparently, she knew the gospel of John from memory.

Then came the Revolution and the Civil War, and Katerinowka lay in the path of opposing forces, but Machno’s men would wreak the most havoc. Even though the village of Katerinowka was on his ‘black list’ (villages to be destroyed and lives decimated), the Funks survived that storm, although they had been harassed and threatened, and their home and farm ransacked and pillaged.

By 1921, five of the Funk children were married and had received their inheritance. It is unknown whether they escaped the raids experienced by their parents.. The others were not so fortunate, and in her memoirs, Anna Bartsch describes the harrowing, and perhaps, miraculous ‘escapes’ from the clutches of Machno’s men, attributing her escapes to the ‘hand of God’.

By 1927, Johann Funk’s financial resources (which had been considerable) were depleted and he was concerned about his two unmarried daughters, Anna and Helena. He offered to sell his threshing outfit to pay for their trip to Canada, which the two girls accepted. After 10 months of waiting, their passports suddenly came, giving them only four days to prepare their departure. In her memoirs, Anna writes:

Looking back, I can still see the train coming around the bend. My body trembles – can I bear it? I draw aside for a few minutes, alone and an inaudible groan wells up within me! I have made a free decision to say good-bye, which I sense somehow will be forever! A final embrace – there are no words – we are speechless, father, mother, and the others

who are with us. We board. We wave good-bye. Auf Wiedersehen! But this was never to be. We never saw each other again.

Failed government promises and the years of marauding bandits drove thousands of Mennonites to emigrate between 1923-1929. Those who had not left, were very ready to emigrate in 1929, including Johann and Helena Funk. In his memoirs, Johann Funk's grandson, Aron Funk, writes:

Almost all the Mennonites wanted to leave, our parents were among them, but it was no longer possible. Our grandparents (Johann Funks) also wanted to go, but they wanted all the children to leave first and then they would follow. Those who didn't take the first chance had to stay behind, and most of them perished.

Time was not on their side and the delay would cost Johann his life. In 1929, Johann and Helena, along with their son, Isaac and his family, made the decision to join thousands of other Mennonites at the "Gates of Moscow". It is not clear if he had been dispossessed of his property or if he had simply left it. In Moscow, Johann and Isaac were both arrested. Isaac was exiled into the "North" and was never heard from again¹. Johann spent 70 days in prison and because of his weakened state, he was released. Johann and Helena Funk found refuge with their son, David, in Katerinowka. Here, Johann regained some of his strength, but on 23 February 1930, he was arrested again and exiled to a wilderness workcamp in Wologda.² Helena voluntarily joined him in this exile, where he died of starvation on February 16, 1932, at the age of 70. His oldest son, Johann, had arrived prior to his death and remained until his passing. Aron Funk writes in his memoirs:

Our grandparents were also exiled to the north. Grandfather died in the banishment. Uncle Johann Funk went there while he was still alive, but already weak and ill, and stayed there until he died. After grandfather's death, grandmother was released, and Uncle Johann brought her back with him.

Anna Funk Bartsch, now serving a first term as missionary in the Belgian Congo, with her husband, Heinrich, recalls getting a letter from her mother in Siberia, dated November 1932.

She wrote that my father had died. I had seen my parents for the last time in 1927 when on their advice, my sister Lena and I had left them to go to Canada. They had planned to join us, but things hadn't worked out that way. They too had come to the gates of Moscow but instead of going to Canada, father was sent into a prison camp in Siberia and mother joined him voluntarily. He was already 70 years old. There they worked for three hard years in a slave labor camp and hungered. Finally even father's generally strong body gave way and he succumbed. News of this shattered me.

Upon returning to Ukraine, Helena lived alternately with her children, and on 23 December 1938, she died at the home of her daughter Maria, in Miloradowka, at the age of 75. One account indicates that she never fully recovered her health after the three starvation-filled years in the Gulag.

Between 1924 and 1927, five of the Funk children managed to emigrate to Canada – Jacob, Helena, Margareta, Anna, and Cornelius, who first migrated to Mexico, and then from there, to Canada.

Four sons, Johann, Isaac, Heinrich, and Abram were arrested and sent eastward, where they perished or disappeared without a trace³. Johann Funk had five daughters from his two marriages, three of which lived into adulthood: Lydia, Frieda, and Anna. In Sept 4, 1941⁴, Johann was “drafted” into the army and disappeared without a trace. As mentioned above, Isaac was arrested in 1929 and was not heard from again. Heinrich, out of despair, took his own life in 1934,¹ leaving his wife, Maria, and two small children. Maria died in 1943. Abram, a preacher, was arrested in 1935/36, sent into exile and never heard from again.

Two daughters, Maria and Susanna, evacuated westward with the retreating German army in 1943. Susanna had been imprisoned from 1935-39; her crime was stealing bread for her children.⁵ Her husband, Franz Funk, had been conscripted into the German army and at war’s end, was able to emigrate to Canada. Maria’s husband had been a victim of the 1937-38 terror, and disappeared.⁶ Susanna and Maria, like so many other Mennonites who evacuated westward with the retreating German army, were repatriated (mid-1944) to Siberia by the Soviet authorities where they both died in 1947 under severe conditions. Of the Funks 13 children, only Katherina’s fate is unknown.

Johann and Helena Funk’s second oldest son, David, outlived Stalin. In 1933, he lost his property under the same dekulakization policy that victimized his father. His son, Aron, writes:

Everything was taken away from us and we had to leave our house, which was demolished. When collectivization started, our father became an accountant in the Collective, and he always wanted to be very honest. But with this Soviet government that was no longer possible. The accountant was not allowed to record it accurately, but the way the superiors wanted it. For example, our father was supposed to write down working days for one of their own who, in reality, had not worked. Our father said: "That's not right!" And that was the cause for his dekulakization.

David and Elizabeth were driven from their home and were able to find shelter in a pig barn. They managed to secure train tickets⁷ for their family of eight and moved to the Caucasus region where they managed to live with a greater degree of peace than what they experienced in Ukraine. They were one of two Mennonite families that lived in a village named, Michaelsdorf.⁸ Here they lived until 1941, when the German forces invaded the Caucasus region. At that point, all residents were rounded up and moved by train into eastern Kazakhstan. The Funk family was dispatched to live with nomadic Cossacks. Within a short time the men were conscripted into “work armies” and dispersed in various directions, permanently scattering the family. The youngest remained with their parents, working on a Collective farm. In August 1942, Aron Funk found himself in a secret work camp behind barbed wire where he would spend the next 12 years. It turned out to be an atomic bomb testing site. David and Elizabeth were later sent to work in the Karaganda coal mines, where they lived out their lives with one of their sons. Aron was released in 1954 and was able to reunite with his parents before their deaths. David Funk

died on 22 December 1955, and Elizabeth, of starvation, on 9 May 1957.³ Aron and his family eventually settled in Espelkamp, Germany, where he died in 1992.

Notes:

1. Funk, Aron
2. EWZ50 B089 1714
3. Dick, Margaret
4. EWZ50 B090 0686
5. EWZ50 B089 1717
6. EWZ50 B028 0674
7. They had received money from relatives in Canada, which was sufficient to purchase the train tickets out of Ukraine.
8. Within three days of the Funks arrival, they were joined by the David Fast family, also from Katerinowka.

Sources:

- Bartsch, Anna (Funk), The Hidden Hand – The Story of Anna Bartsch's Life, 1987
 - Dick, Margaret (Funk), Memoirs
 - EWZ files, Mennonite Heritage Centre Archives, BC
 - Funk, Aron (1923-1992), Memoirs, 1987
 - GRanDMA
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Parents:

Johann G. &	- 1861 - 1933	
Helena (Loewen) Funk	- 1863 – 1938	(My grandfather, Abraham Loewen's older sister)

Children:

Johann	- 1884 - 1941	
David	- 1886 - 1955	
Isaak	- 1888 - 1930	
Jacob	- 1890 - 1973	emigrated
Maria	- 1892 - 1947	
Helena	- 1892 - 1961	emigrated
Katharina	- 1892 - ?	
Margaretha	- 1895 - 1972	emigrated
Anna	- 1897 - 1989	emigrated
Heinrich	- 1898 - 1934	
Susanna	- 1901 - 1947	
Abram	- 1904 - 1936	
Cornelius	- 1906 - 1973	emigrated

Five children died in infancy.

***Johann Funk GRanDMA No. - #216964**