

Valley of Tears

The Johann Gerhard and Helena (Loewen) Funk Family Story

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Johann Gerhard & Helena (Loewen) Funk Family, 1911

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

Johann Gerhard Funk (1860-1932), born in Schoendorf, and Helena Loewen (1863-1938), born in Schoenhorst, were founding members of the village of Katerinowka in 1888, 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. Their house was new, marked by a white picket fence and an arched gateway. 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 house¹ and built their furniture in his well-equipped workshop. The house was quite large with six windows facing the street.

Johann Funk maintained a small, but well-stocked 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. All the children were well educated², and Johann subscribed to journals from America and Germany, including a German monthly magazine for women which contained ideas on crafts.

Helena Loewen's father, Jacob Loewen, died when she was 12, and her mother when she was 18. Helena had little formal education³, 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.

In Katerinowka, only the Funks were members of the Mennonite Brethren Church, situated in nearby Milloradowka. The other villagers were members of the General Conference Mennonite church. 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). Over the entrance doorway, Johann painted the following inscription as a testimony to this faith:

*Whoever passes through this door,
Shall hereby be reminded,
That our dear Saviour Jesus Christ
Is the door to eternal life.*

Although the law forbade Mennonites from proselytizing, they were permitted to testify to their faith if asked questions, which the Funk family 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 in 1930, and where he died. In a letter⁴ to their daughter, Anna, in the Congo, she had written:

"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."

Then came the Revolution and the Civil War, and the havoc wreaked by Machno's men. Even though the village of Katerinowka was on his 'black list' (villages to be destroyed and lives to be decimated), the Funks survived that storm, although they were severely harassed, threatened, and abused, and their home and farm repeatedly ransacked and pillaged. By then, five of the Funk children had moved out of the home. The others would experience the harrowing, and perhaps, miraculous 'escapes' from the clutches of Machno's men. On more than one occasion they greeted morning light after a night of terror, thankful that they were still alive. Anna writes⁵:

We were tried beyond measure so that we began to despair of life and often believed that we would all die."

By 1927, Johann Funk's financial resources (which would have 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 gladly 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 memoirs⁶, 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"⁷. 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 to the "North" and was never heard from again⁸. 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 situated about 50 km north of Wologda.⁹ Here, he and Helena, who had voluntarily joined him in exile, were accommodated with many others in a nunnery situated eight km from the railroad. This resulted in them making that last journey by foot through deep snow. Local residents were forbidden from selling provisions to these prisoners, thus forcing them to rely on the government-operated store, where prices were doubled.¹⁰ Johann Funk died here, 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, who, by this time, was 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 (Funk) Dyck, in Miloradowka, at the age of 75.¹⁰ One account indicates that she never fully recovered her health after the three starvation-filled years living in the Gulag with her husband.

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. Jacob and Margaretha (Klassen) Funk emigrated in 1924 and settled in Coaldale, Alberta, where they raised a family of eight children. Helena emigrated in August 1927. In 1948, she married Peter Nickel and they lived most of their married lives in Chilliwack, British Columbia. Margareta and Peter Unger emigrated in 1926 and settled in Chilliwack, British Columbia, where they raised a family of eight. Anna emigrated in August 1927, with Helena. She married Heinrich Bartsch the next year and they spent many years as missionaries in the Belgian Congo. After their missionary service they settled in Chilliwack, British Columbia. They had a family of four. Cornelius emigrated in 1927, initially to Mexico, and within a few years to Canada, where he settled in Manitoba and married. Following his wife's death, he married a second time. He had six children by his two wives. Cornelius retired in Penticton, British Columbia.

Of the five sons who remained in Russia, Johann was “drafted” into the army on Sept 4, 1941¹¹ and disappeared without a trace. He had five daughters from his two marriages, three of which lived into adulthood: Lydia, Frieda, and Anna. Isaac and Abram were arrested and sent eastward. Isaac was arrested in 1929 and was not heard from again. Isaac's widow and two sons managed to emigrate to Canada after the war. Abram, a preacher, was arrested in 1935/36, sent into exile and also never heard from again., Heinrich, out of despair, took his own life in 1934,⁶ leaving his wife, Maria, and two small children. Maria died in 1943.

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.¹² Her husband, Franz Funk, had been conscripted into the German army and at war's end, found himself in Germany from where he was able to emigrate to Canada. Maria's husband had been a victim of



Aron Funk Family, 1967

Back, L-R: Maria, Katharina, Aron
Front: Margarete, Lydia, Katharina, Anna,
Elizabeth

the 1937-38 terror, and disappeared.¹³ Susanna and Maria, like so many other Mennonites who evacuated westward with the retreating German army, were captured and repatriated (mid-1944) to Siberia by the Soviet authorities where they both died in 1947 under severe conditions.

Katharina, along with her husband Jakob Unger and their family, made their way eastward to Zentral¹⁴, which is situated just west of the Volga River. Here, the family lived until 1941. Jakob was arrested in 1941 and was not seen again; he died in captivity in 1942¹⁵. Katharina, along with her remaining family joined all the German residents of Zentral who were exiled, en masse, to Kazakhstan when Germany invaded Russia. She died in Karaganda in 1968¹⁵.

Johann and Helena Funk's second oldest son, David, was the only son living in Russia who 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 Elisabeth were driven from their home and were able to find shelter in a pig barn. Realizing the challenges of remaining in Ukraine, they managed to secure train tickets¹⁶ for their family of eight and moved to the Caucasus region. Here they were able to live with a greater degree of peace than



David and Elisabeth (Klassen) Funk, ca. 1954



David and Elisabeth (Klassen) Funk Family, 1954

Back Row, l-r: Abram, Gerhard, Johann, Aron, David.

Front Row: Anna (Johann) & daughter, Anna, David's mother-in-law, David, Sr., Elisabeth, Anna (David) & son, David.

what they had experienced in Ukraine. They were one of two Mennonite families that lived in a village named, Michaelsdorf.¹⁷ This was their home until 1941, when the German forces invaded the Caucasus region. At that point, all German residents were rounded up and moved by train to eastern Kazakhstan. The Funk family was dispatched to live with nomadic Cossacks near Buras. Within a short time the men were conscripted into “work armies” and dispersed in various directions, permanently scattering the family. The youngest remained, until sometime later, 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.

Aron was released in 1954 and was able to reunite with his parents, in Karaganda, before their deaths. Aron's brothers, Gerhard and Abram, had been summoned to work in the coal industry in Karaganda after the war. David and Elisabeth Funk had been living in Buras, where they were joined by their son, Jakob, after his release from the Trudarmee. In 1954, David and Elisabeth were invited to move to Karaganda, and sons, David and Johann then also moved to Karaganda with their families. Jakob travelled from Buras for the reunion.

David Funk died suddenly, of heart failure¹⁸, on 22 December 1955, and Elisabeth on 23 May 1957, of a life-long lung condition¹⁹. Upon the invitation from his oldest daughter, Maria, Aron and his family, except for daughter, Katharina, emigrated to Germany in 1976. Aron and



Jakob & Katharina (Funk) Unger Family, ca. 1941

Back, l-r: Jakob, Lena, Greta, Johann

Front: Peter, unknown, Jakob, Jr., Katharina, Tina

Katharina, along with their daughter, Margarete (she had Down's Syndrome), lived in Espelkamp for a few years and then moved to Frankenthal, Germany. His other daughters married and lived elsewhere in Germany. Daughter, Katharina, had stayed in Russia, where she married (and later divorced), but moved to Germany with her two children after her father's death. Katharina (Boschmann) Funk died of cancer June 20, 1990, in Frankenthal; Aaron died two years later, of heart failure, on April 25, 1992. He was buried in Frankenthal.

Notes:

1. A report from a visitor to Katerinowka in 1985 stated it was the only structure, from that time, still standing in the village. (Bartsch, *The Hidden Hand*)
2. A number of the Funk children attended Bible School in Crimea. (Bartsch, *The Hidden Hand*)
3. Helena had only three years of formal education
4. Anna and Heinrich Bartsch became missionaries to the Congo, and it was here that she received several letters from her parents, who were imprisoned in a Soviet labour camp.
5. Bartsch, *The Hidden Hand*
6. Aron Funk Memoirs
7. In the fall of 1929, thousands of Mennonites from across the Soviet Union descended on Moscow in a desperate bid to obtain permission to emigrate. Two thirds failed, of which many were arrested and sent to slave labour camps in the northern and eastern hinterlands of the Soviet Union.
8. Aron Funk Memoirs
9. EWZ50 B089 1714
10. Email from Elisabeth Funk Michler (granddaughter), 11/12/2023 (Johann, who had gone to stay with his parents shortly before his father died, relayed these details to his siblings in Canada, from whom Johann's daughter, Frieda, obtained them and relayed them to Elisabeth Funk Michler.)

11. EWZ50 B090 0686
12. EWZ50 B089 1717
13. EWZ50 B028 0674
14. Isaac, Susanne, *Das Dorf Zentral*, pg. 156
15. Email from Elisabeth Funk Michler (granddaughter), 15/12/2023
16. They had received money from relatives in Canada, which was sufficient to purchase the train tickets out of Ukraine.
17. Within three days of the Funks arrival, they were joined by the David Fast family, also from Katerinowka.
18. Email from Elisabeth Funk Michler (granddaughter), 11/12/2023
19. Email from Elisabeth Funk Michler (granddaughter), 11/12/2023

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
- Isaac, Susanne, *Das Dorf Zentral*, Meckenheim, 1996
- Michler, Elisabeth (Funk), email 6/12/2023
- GRanDMA
- Photo Credits: Personal, Elisabeth Funk Michler, Susanne Isaac (Das Dorf Zentral)

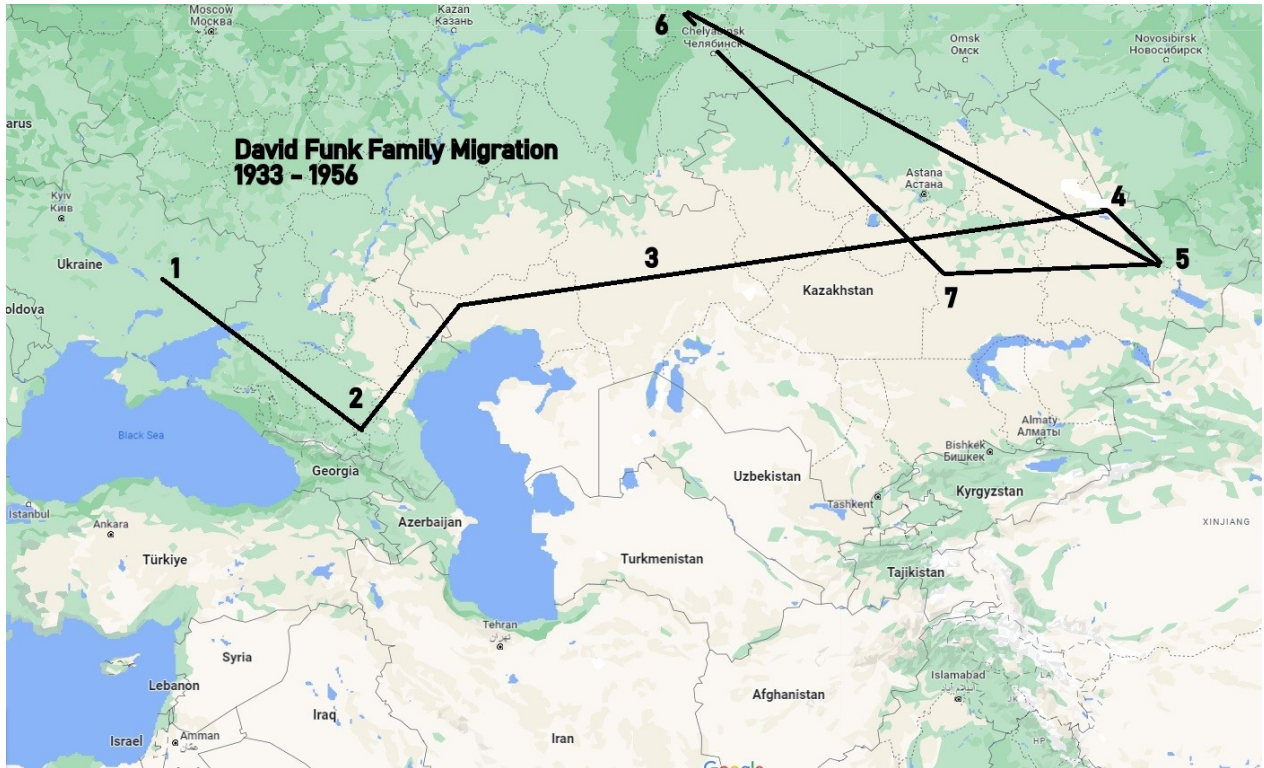
Parents:

Johann G. &	- 1860 – 1933	arrested in Moscow in 1929, exiled to hard labour in Siberia where he died of starvation
Helena (Loewen) Funk	- 1863 –1938	died at home of Maria (Funk) Dyck in Miloradowka (her daughter)

Children:

Johann	- 1884 – 1941	drafted into the army and not seen again
David	- 1886 – 1955	died in Karaganda
Isaak	- 1888 - 1930	arrested in Moscow, sent to work camp, not seen again
Jacob	- 1890 - 1973	emigrated in 1924
Maria	- 1892 – 1947	evacuated with German army; arrested & sent to Siberia, died in 1947
Helena	- 1892 - 1961	emigrated in 1927
Katharina	- 1894 – 1968	died in Karaganda
Margaretha	- 1895 - 1972	emigrated in 1925
Anna	- 1897 - 1989	emigrated in 1927
Heinrich	- 1898 – 1934	took his own life out of despair
Susanna	- 1901 - 1947	evacuated with German army; arrested & sent to Siberia, died in 1947
Abram	- 1904 - 1936	arrested, sent into exile and not seen again
Cornelius	- 1906 - 1973	emigrated in 1925

Five children died in infancy.



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| 1. Katerinowka, Ukraine | 5. Buras |
| 2. Michelsdorf, Caucasus Region | 6. Kyshtym, (in Ural Mtns; Aron's 12-year Imprisonment) |
| 3. Evacuation by train, 1941 | 7. Karaganda (David & Elizabeth Funk's place of death) |
| 4. Semipalatinsk | |

Note: All points on map are approximate locations.