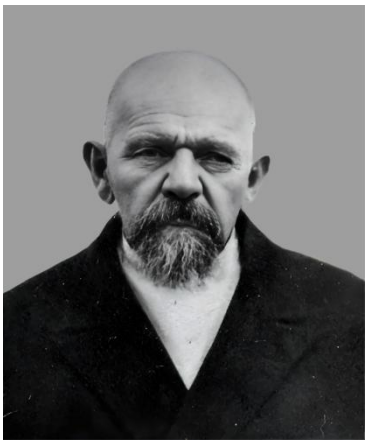
Isaac J. Loewen, 1867-1946

Minister and Poet



Isaac Jacob Loewen, the older brother of my grandfather, was born on April 12, 1867, in Schoenhorst, Ukraine, the eighth of eleven children born to Jacob and Helena (Klassen) Loewen. His childhood was marked by early loss: his father died when Isaac was just eight years old, and his mother passed away eight years later, when he was sixteen.

Isaac was baptized in 1887, and, on January 21, 1896, he married Susanna Giesbrecht of Neuendorf. In 1900, the couple moved to Petrovka in the newly established Orenburg Mennonite Settlement, located in the Ural Mountains region. On December 27, 1900, Isaac was elected as a minister in the Djejewer Mennonite Church and was ordained shortly thereafter, on January 17, 1901. He served in the Orenburg Settlement for more than forty years. Among his many gifts was a talent for writing poetry, which he shared generously with relatives and acquaintances, including family members in Canada.

The specific details of his years in Orenburg are largely unknown, but letters and other documents indicate that he lived in both Petrovka and Rodnitschnoje. His first wife, Susanna, died on June 10, 1917. Less than a year later, on March 4, 1918, Isaac remarried; his second wife was Anna Pries Enns, a widow residing in Rodnitschnoje. Both Isaac and Anna brought young children into the marriage. Following their wedding, Isaac relocated from Petrovka to Rodnitschnoje, although at some point they appear to have returned to Petrovka.

Isaac and Susanna had nine children, three of whom died in infancy. It is not clear whether Isaac ever made concrete plans to emigrate, although correspondence with his brother in Alberta suggests he may have considered it. The size of his family may well have deterred him from pursuing relocation more seriously. Their eldest son, Abram, was the only member of the immediate family to leave. He and his wife, Katharina, emigrated in 1926 with the Orenburg group led by Peter Dyck. Abram later entered the ministry in Saskatchewan and British Columbia and owned and operated a Christian bookstore in Clearbrook.

Based on photographic records and surviving archival references, Isaac appears to have been active in church leadership. One record indicates that in August 1913 – widely regarded as the last year of relative peace and prosperity for Mennonites in Russia – he attended the Russian Mennonite Church Conference held in Rudnerweide, in the Molotschna settlement.

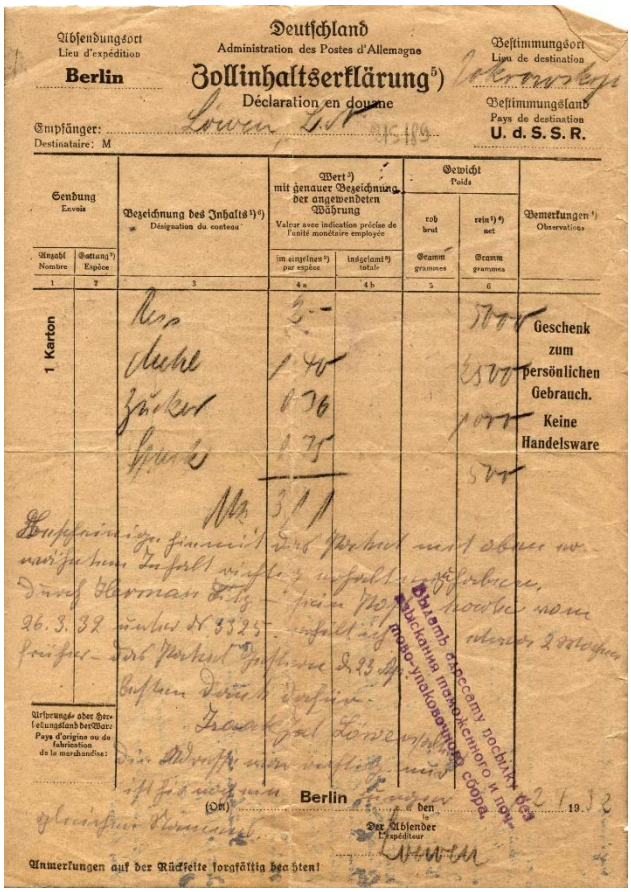
Like many others, Isaac and Anna endured significant hardship during the early 1930s. Letters from this period, received by my grandparents in Canada, speak of food shortages, failing health, and increasing anxiety. One letter expresses gratitude for a food parcel sent by Isaac's brother Abraham; another describes Isaac as being near death. Despite the upheaval of collectivization and dekulakization, Isaac continued to serve in ministry, travelling to as many villages as his declining strength allowed. In a letter to his brother Abraham, written in the early 1930s, he reports, "I'm still allowed to work in my department thanks to the grace of God. My

headaches seem to be getting less, also my feet are not as swollen as they used to be. I do the routes up to N9 and even up to N10, if necessary, by foot" (Villages No. 9 and No. 10).

There is no question that daily life for Isaac revolved around the constant threat of material deprivation ("We have a dilapidated house, 3 cows, 3 donkeys, 3 chickens, that is our livestock."), loss of life, and increasing suppression of religious freedom ("The Sunday book is no longer kept sacred." "Spiritual life leaves much to be desired. In the face of the evening, when we should lift up our heads because our salvation is approaching, more and more lukewarmness moves into our midst."). Yet, in the midst of despair, his letters reveal a profound wellspring of hope – rooted in unwavering faith, the strength of family relationships, mutual support from distant relatives, and a resilient commitment to hard work and community life, however diminished.

Taken together, these letters paint a vivid picture of lives under immense strain, where survival is a daily test and the fabric of community, faith, and well-being is constantly threatened. They reveal the depth of suffering endured by Isaac and those around him, ranging from personal ailments and mental anguish ("My mental ailment has intensified, it sometimes makes me anxious that I will lose my mind.") to significant material and spiritual deprivation ("We are not allowed to hold religious meetings in private homes, only in a church. Funeral sermons have now become graveside speeches.") and the ongoing loss of life.

In the years immediately following 1930, daily activities focused on a relentless struggle to survive. In one letter, Isaac writes, "Since, as you know, we sold everything and borrowed most of the money from the Klubnikovo cooperative and the same has gone bankrupt, so we have little left after we have lived for 1 1/2 years on my money. We have been promised full payment, but when?"


Deutschland
Administration des Postes d'Allemagne
Zollinhaltserklärung[5])
Déclaration en douane
Absendungsort / Lieu d'expédition: Berlin
Bestimmungsort / Lieu de destination
Bestimmungsland / Pays de destination: U. d. S. S. R.
Empfänger / Destinataire: M
Sendung / Envois
Bezeichnung des Inhalts[1])[6]) / Désignation du contenu
Wert[2]) mit genauer Bezeichnung der angewendeten Währung / Valeur avec indication précise de l'unité monétaire employée
Gewicht / Poids
Bemerkungen[1]) / Observations
Anzahl / Nombre | Gattung[7]) / Espèce | im einzelnen[3]) / par espèce | insgesamt[3]) / totale | roh / brut | rein[3])[8]) / net
1 | 2 | 3 | 4a | 4b | 5 | 6
1 Karton
Reis
Mehl
Zucker
Speck
Geschenk zum persönlichen Gebrauch.
Keine Handelsware
Ursprungs- oder Herstellungsland der Ware / Pays d'origine ou de fabrication de la marchandise:
(Ort) Berlin den 19..
Der Absender / L'expéditeur
Anmerkungen auf der Rückseite sorgfältig beachten!

An essential lifeline for Isaac and Anna was the unwavering support of his brother Abraham in Canada. A single care package provided immense relief and underscored the scarcity of their diet. Anna writes, "There were five kilos of rice, 2 1/2 kilos of flour, a kilo of sugar, a piece of bacon. I have already fried myself a piece, it always tastes very good. For my husband, the food is a bit meagre when he stands at the planing bench almost every day. For me, the meagre diet is not bad at all because I have a weak stomach. Now we will feast on the beautiful rice, we have not seen anything like it for a long time." In appreciation for the care package, Isaac penned a poem, written on the back of the parcel receipt, underscoring the scarcity of basic materials such as writing paper.

The family's struggle to survive is depicted as a relentless, daily battle against a

backdrop of economic collapse, political pressure, and widespread scarcity. High assessments and taxes are repeatedly noted: “Our allowance for the last months was grain 18 rubles, seed (sunflower) 3 rubles, meat 5 kilos are over 3 rubles. Our last assessment was 35 rubles. Several such high demands have come. Until now we have been able to meet these demands.” Even with meagre resources, Isaac and his family continued to do everything in their power to comply.

Notwithstanding these challenges, Isaac’s letters reveal a profound and enduring faith that served as a constant source of strength, comfort, and guidance amid personal hardship and sweeping societal change. The following excerpt from a letter of 23 April 1929 epitomizes this steadfastness:

> *I would so gladly, dear brothers and sisters, have a heartfelt conversation with you, to share the concerns of my whole heart. How often it has done me good when we were able to exchange our hearts so openly, as a source of strength on our pilgrimage journey. May God reward you all for the trust you have shown us.*
>
> *By God’s grace, I am still carrying out my office, but I feel my strength is failing. And my longing for home grows ever stronger. I would have gladly gone home many times already, but at times it still seems far off. Yet I do not want to complain or despair, but rather seek to serve the dear Father faithfully – in the family and in the congregation – until He calls me home.*
>
> *And even though many of our close friends have passed away, God remains ever the same. I can entrust everything to Him. He was, and is, and will remain good and faithful. He bears patiently with my many weaknesses. And when troubling dreams awaken me, and I struggle through the rest of the night against the dark powers in vain, He remains my support.*
>
> *And when I come before Him weak and empty, He is my strength and draws from the fullness of His divine being: strength and comfort, peace and joy – to bear witness to His infinite love and mercy to the ends of humanity. And then I feel compelled to proclaim His grace to all people, and my desire to be a blessing to humanity grows ever stronger.*
>
> *Full of life and weary from the battle, I journey toward my true home. Even if things around me seem so gloomy, and I find no rest or peace, and even if enemies are still many – Jesus is and remains my goal. I will always look to Him, and trust Him in every situation.*
>
> *Should the darkness frighten me, should sleep flee from me at night, and heavy dreams awaken me because of the vastness of evil’s night, still I remain firm in this: Jesus is and remains faithful to me. With Him I will overcome, and with Him I will one day find rest.*

Isaac’s letters reveal a consistent and profound posture of thankfulness, often expressed through simple phrases such as “thank God,” even amid scarcity. This gratitude is evident in nearly every aspect of his life. Despite economic hardship and physical ailments, he writes, “We are all healthy, thank God, except for a few physical ailments that accompany us on our journey through earth’s valley.” Even when acknowledging shortages, he notes, “We still have, thank God, our daily bread, only the heating is scarce, and the fodder is depleted.” Upon receiving a small parcel of food, he expresses heartfelt appreciation: “We thank you warmly for the proof of your love, God will repay you.”

As his strength waned and his longing for his heavenly home intensified, he remained grateful for the ability to serve. His gratitude, repeatedly articulated, is both a spiritual discipline

and a testament to his resilience. In the face of weariness, Isaac remained determined to persevere – to remain steadfast in his service until the end of his life: “I still flee by the grace of God in my ministry, but I feel that my strength is broken. And my longing for home is getting stronger and stronger…. But I don’t want to lament and hesitate, I want to seek to serve the dear Father more faithfully, in the family and in the church, until he calls me away.”

His trust in God is unwavering: “And even if some of my trusted friends are gone, God still remains the same. I can entrust everything to Him. He was, and is, and remains good and true. He bears with my manifold weaknesses.” He finds comfort and strength in God’s sustaining presence: “And when heavy dreams wake me up and I struggle unsuccessfully through the rest of the night with the dark forces, He remains my support. And when I come before Him weak and empty, He is my strength and draws from the fullness of His God: strength and comfort, peace and joy to bear witness to His infinite love and mercy for all mankind.”

His spiritual focus was centred unmistakably on Christ: “No matter how many enemies there are, Jesus is and remains my goal. I will always look to Him, trust Him in all situations. If the darkness frightens me, sleep flees from me in the night. Where heavy dreams awaken me because of the greatness of the evil night, I remain steadfast, Jesus is and remains true to me. With Him I will overcome, with Him one day I will find rest.”

On November 26, 1933, Isaac was sentenced by a “troika” of the PP OGPU for SVK to three years of exile, presumably in a labour camp. He was posthumously rehabilitated on September 11, 1989, following the collapse of the Soviet Union. No written record of his experiences during that period is known to this writer.

One common thread that runs through his letters is the steadfast faith to which he clung throughout the turbulent 1930s. His reflections repeatedly reveal a man anchored not in circumstance, but in conviction.

Approximately thirty poems written by Isaac are known to this writer, preserved among correspondence kept by Abraham and Maria Loewen. In one letter to his brother in Canada, he reflected on his reasons for writing poetry. His poems appear to have been offered as comfort and emotional healing to those who received them. They stand not only as artifacts of creative expression, but as a testament to a man who, despite suffering beneath repressive Stalinist rule, maintained unwavering trust in God.

The last known letter written by Isaac is dated 1933. References to him appear in other family correspondence as late as 1936. Isaac Jacob Loewen died on May 16, 1946.

The following poem would have been sent shortly after the Abraham Loewen family arrived in Canada in the late fall of 1926.

“I’m so happy that some of my poems found a place in your thoughts during your journey; my hope is that one or the other will express your feelings and so may be a source of comfort. With love to you all, friend, brother and uncle, Is. Löwen.”

Zum letzten mal in euren trauten Mitte

Zum letzten mal das Scheiden wird uns schwer

Wir lenken fortan alle unsre Tritte
Hinüber übers große Welten meer
Ihr bleibet hier in eure Heimat Stille
Aus winkt von dort die ganße Lebens fülle
Drum reichen wir auch noch zum letzten mal die Hand
Doch fort besteh'n soll ferner unser Liebe band
Ob uns auch trenmen fortan Land und Meer
So hört doch unser Freundschaft nimmer auf
Daß sagt in unser'n auge auch die Zähne
O laß uns ziehe und haltet uns nicht auf
Das euer Herz an Leben nicht verzage
Und wo wir euch in Leben weh getan
Vergesst es uns und denkt förder nicht davon
So lebt den wohl es muß geschieden werden
Nehmt von uns hin den letzten abschied gruß
Und denkt an uns so lang so lebt auf Erden
Das letzte Liebe zeichen sie ein Küß
Die Liebe soll im Herzen fort bestehen
Auch wenn wir uns hier nicht mehr wiedersehen
Gott wallt mit seiner Gnade über uns und euch
Dann sind wir alle hier und drüben ewig reich.

For the last time in your trusted circle
For the last time, our parting is so hard
From now on our steps will be directed
Far away across the world's great ocean
While you remain here in your homeland stillness
Life's fullness beckons us from over there
And so, for the last time we shake hands
But our bond of love shall always carry on
Whether sea or land separate us from now on
Our friendship will never come to end
Our eyes and teeth both speak the same desire

O let us go and do not hold us back
That your heart may not despair but go on living
And where in life we have caused you pain
Please forgive and think of it no more
Goodbye, our parting has to happen
Receive from us our final farewell greeting
And think of us as long as you're on earth
The final sign of love, a kiss
Our love will keep on lasting in our heart
Even though we never meet again
God shower us and you with his grace
Then we'll be, here and over there, forever rich

Leven Isaac Yakovlevich (I867) [add information]

Date of birth: April 12, 1867
Gender: male
Profession/place of work: different jobs
Place of residence: village Petrovka, Pokrovsky district

Sentenced: November 26, 1933
Condemning body: troika at the PP OGPU for SVK
Sentence: 3 years of exile
Date of rehabilitation: September 11, 1989

Archive file: 00052
Data sources: Database "Victims of political terror in the USSR"; Book of Memory of the Orenburg Region - 2015

