

# California Mennonite

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*Susanna Rempel when she was over 100 years old. She lived to be 104. (Photo courtesy of the Rempel family.)*

*Susanna (Krause) Rempel (1891-1996) was born in Schoenfeld, South Russia, but after the death of her father she moved to Gnadenfeld with her mother and two brothers. In this Mennonite village in the Molotschna Colony of South Russia, she met her future husband, Aron A. Rempel (1882-1953), who had lived in Gnadenfeld all of his life. Aron and his father were engaged in the manufacture and repair of agricultural machinery, but World War I took its toll on the economy of South Russia, forcing the family business into bankruptcy. This prompted Susanna and Aron, who were married and had two children by this time, to migrate to Petropavlovsk in the Omsk Mennonite Settlement of Siberia where Aron found work as a merchant trader for agricultural machinery. The winds of change pervaded the air, however, as the Bolshevik Revolution, with its subsequent civil war between the White and Red Armies, was rapidly spreading eastward to Siberia. No longer willing to risk the dangers of war-torn Petropavlovsk, Aron and Susanna joined the crowds of refugees on the Trans-Siberian Railroad as they wound their way back to their families in Gnadenfeld. It was 1920, however, and their relatives were caught in the throes of a widespread famine. In an effort to escape death by famine in 1923, Susanna and Aron, along with several hundred other Mennonites, fled to America via Batum (in the Republic of Georgia) and Constantinople.*



*The Rempel children after they came to the United States. Back (left to right): Marie, Agatha, Aron. Front (left to right): William (born in Turkey), Annie, Susan, Herman. (Photo courtesy of the Rempel family.)*

## *The Rempel Family's* Escape from Death by Famine

by Corinna Siebert Ruth

**A**lthough the majority of the Mennonites in Russia were still farmers just before World War I, there was a decided trend toward industrialization at this time. In 1908 the production of agricultural machinery was second only to the milling industry, with twenty-six factories producing farm machinery in the Molotschna and Chortitza colonies alone.<sup>1</sup> The production of farm machinery was not limited to South Russia, however. As early as 1897, Peter J. Wiens, the first Mennonite to settle in Siberia, established a business in agricultural machinery in the city of Omsk.<sup>2</sup> With the coming of the Trans-Siberian Railroad, other Mennonites settled along the popular train route between Petropavlovsk and Omsk.

When the Rempel family business of manufacturing and repairing agricultural machinery failed after World War I, Aron and Susanna (Krause) Rempel migrated to Petropavlovsk where jobs were available for machinists. Aron soon found work as a merchant trader for agricultural machinery. His job often took him away from home for months at a time while he traveled to eastern Siberia, often as far as Vladivostok and other trading centers across the Asian Continent. This left Susanna alone much of the

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time to face the challenging job of caring for their children: Maria, Aron Jr., and Agatha.

With the advent of the Bolshevik Revolution came the subsequent Civil War between the White and Red Armies. As a young man of draft age who was caught up in this conflict, Aron needed to make a choice. When he chose to serve as a noncombatant mechanic in the White Army, he did not come home to his family for almost a year. Susanna was left to fend for herself while gunfire and explosions rang out throughout the city of Petropavlovsk. There was looting and burning, and, at times, she was forced to house the soldiers who were occupying the city.

When she heard that the Red Army might seize any religious writings, Susanna tore the covers from her German Bible and disguised it as her cookbook. All the while, Susanna did not know her husband's whereabouts or whether he was dead or alive. To complicate things, she was pregnant. In the midst of all the turmoil around her, Susanna gave birth to a little girl, but her husband never saw his infant daughter. Unaware of Susanna's pregnancy, Aron, emaciated and sick with typhus, staggered home to his wife and children not long after the baby had died.

After Aron's health had been sufficiently restored, he and Susanna decided to leave the horrors of war-torn Petropavlovsk and go back to their families in Gnadenfeld. Packed with hordes of fleeing refugees, the trains along the Trans-Siberian route were slow, with unexpected delays that lasted for days or sometimes even weeks. Often hungry, the family

slept in train stations or on open platforms while they were waiting for the next train that could afford enough space for them.

It was cumbersome for a family of five to catch a train while people around them were pressing to climb aboard. One day Aron coaxed his family to hurry, but the train was pulling out of the station and they missed it. Later they heard that this very train had plunged into a deep ravine, so they felt fortunate to be spared. Traveling in crowded boxcars, they were subjected to infestations of lice and the diseases they carried. There was no place where they could attend to their personal hygiene. Beatings and killings were a common occurrence on this popular train route where there was no law and order.

One night in Kharkov while the family was asleep, robbers,

## “With no grain for flour, Susanna ... made bread from tree bark ...”

who anesthetized them with chloroform, reached into Susanna's mouth, extracted her dental bridge, and stole the gold. When she awoke, the fractured remains of her bridge lay on the ground beside her. Blankets and other essentials were also taken while they were in a semi-conscious state.

After six exhausting months of travel from Siberia to South Russia, they finally arrived in Gnadenfeld in the fall of 1920. The children were filled with excitement at the prospect of greeting their aunts, uncles, cousins, and especially their grandmother whom they had not seen for several years, but their welcome was lukewarm at best. Caught in the midst of a widespread famine,

their relatives could only see five additional hungry mouths to feed.

Conditions in South Russia had grown steadily worse since Aron and Susanna had left several years ago. The Molotschna Colony had been a veritable battlefield for the White and Red Armies. Both armies had invaded the Mennonite villages and confiscated food, horses, and essential provisions. In addition to the forced occupation of the Whites during one period and the Reds during another, the Mennonite villagers had been subjected to the violence of Nestor Machno, the commander of an army of anarchists recruited mostly from the Russian peasantry.

Machno's wrath was directed particularly at the Mennonites on whose estates he had worked as a cattle herder. His troops conducted a “reign of terror” in the villages, committing scores of murders and rapes, usually staged in the middle of the night after the family was asleep.<sup>3</sup> His soldiers

stole large numbers of horses, wagons, food, clothing, furniture, and agricultural machinery. What they did not confiscate, they often destroyed. Without an adequate supply of horses and agricultural machinery, much of the land in Gnadenfeld and its environs was barren and uncultivated.

Moreover, when the Communists had risen to power, their government had imposed heavy taxes and excessive requisitioning of grain, often more than the farmer's total harvest yield. With no grain for flour, Susanna and her family could not make bread, so they and other women in Gnadenfeld made bread from tree bark instead of flour. Many farmers were not even able to save enough seed



*Children of Aron and Susanna Rempel. Back (left to right): William, Annie, Dick. Front (left to right): Herman, Susan, Aron. (Photo courtesy of the Rempel family.)*

for planting the wheat crop for the following year. The lack of horses, farm machinery, and seed for planting led to a massive famine by 1920. In 1921 conditions worsened with a severe drought and subsequent crop failure.<sup>4</sup> There seemed to be no hope for the future, and the dread of death by starvation pervaded the minds of the people.

Although the idea of emigration to America seemed remote, there was news in the villages about a successful escape

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route through Constantinople (now Istanbul) in Turkey. During Machno’s “reign of terror” young Mennonite men had formed a Selbstschutz, a self-defense group. When they were defeated, they fled the country to Constantinople where they received assistance from the newly-formed Mennonite Central Committee that was based in that city for the purpose of famine relief to Russia.<sup>5</sup>

This story of escape was fur-

**“Malaria and typhus ran rampant among the Batum refugees.”**

ther fuelled by a subsequent account of the flight of Abraham J. Kroeker, the editor of the *Friedenstimme*, a Mennonite German-language newspaper. Mr. Kroeker had secured exit documents for Batum, Georgia, an international seaport on the Black Sea only six miles from the Turkish border. He sailed to Constantinople from Batum and, with the help of the American Mennonite Relief Unit,

left for America in March 1922.<sup>6</sup>

News of these successful escapes spread like wildfire among the starving Mennonite villagers. The Rempels had been in Gnadenfeld for over a year, and conditions had not improved. After much consideration, Aron and Susanna packed supplies for their five children and joined other Mennonites: Aron’s father, Johann Rempel; the Karl Rempel family; and Heinrich Dirks with Heinz, Mariechen,

and Katja. All of them traveled in a caravan of horses and wagons that left for Batum in the spring of 1922.<sup>7</sup>

Though their spirits were sparked with new hope for the future, they knew little of what they were about to encounter in Batum. Although they had been warned that the city was overcrowded with refugees, they were not unduly disturbed by it because they expected to leave for Constantinople and on to America very shortly after their arrival. They needed to find temporary accommodations, and since hotel rooms were in short supply, they, along with other Mennonite refugees, found a section of a blacksmith shop for rent. They were, however, compelled to pay a substantial fee for sleeping on the floor. It was a filthy establishment, and in the middle of the first night Susanna found herself being nuzzled by pigs. Later they realized that they were sharing their board with pigs, cows, and rabbits that were

*Aron and Susanna Rempel on their 40th wedding anniversary. (Photo courtesy of the Rempel family.)*



allowed to roam freely in the yard and into the shop.

Food became prohibitively expensive in Batum, but through arrangements made by the Mennonite Central Committee based in Constantinople, the Batum Mennonites were able to obtain food rations from an organization called Near East Relief until the end of 1922.

Months had passed, but exit visas were not forthcoming, and what had been perceived as a temporary stop in Batum became increasingly permanent. Malaria and typhus ran rampant among the Batum refugees. Few were exempt in the Rempel family. Susanna, who was pregnant, was also fighting the effects of malaria. By October 1922, of the 217 Mennonite refugees, fifty-two persons had died of either typhus or malaria.<sup>8</sup> Many times only a few members out of a large family survived the infectious diseases.

In the fall of 1922, Aron and Susanna finally obtained their exit visas and boarded a steamer for the 700-mile voyage over the Black Sea to Constantinople where they arrived eight months after leaving Gnadenfeld. At the end

of the long journey, Susanna was taken straight to the hospital in Constantinople where on November 22 she delivered a premature baby boy, William, who was now a Turkish citizen.

Susanna did not complain about conditions in the hospital, but she could not speak the language of the hospital staff and became increasingly suspicious of them. She thought that they might take her baby away from her. She had heard of such things. Busy

*“... all seven members of the Rempel family sailed for America with bald heads.”*

with the other children, Aron, who was relieved to know that she was well cared for, had not visited her since the baby had been born. The lack of communication with her family or anyone else caused strange things to cross her mind. If an opportunity to sail to America would present itself, she thought perhaps her husband would leave her behind in a strange land. After a week, Susanna finally aborted her stay in the hospital. She simply tucked her baby inside the fur coat she was wearing, slipped out

of the hospital, and wound her way across the city to her family by taxi. Her husband's facial expression was filled with disbelief when suddenly, without warning, she entered the room.

Months passed as they waited for the necessary exit visas to the United States. Mennonite Central Committee was finally able to make arrangements with Mr. and Mrs. Sommer in Crawfordsville, Iowa, who offered to sponsor them. Before they could leave, however, the entire family appeared before the American Medical Clinic in Constantinople for health inspections. There they were rejected because of an infestation of head lice. They would not be allowed on board an American-bound ship until they could rid themselves of these parasites. In desperation they chose the most radical solution to the problem—the shaving of heads. The women, donning their headscarves, joined the men aboard the SS Washington the next day as all seven members of the Rempel family sailed for America with bald heads.

After a long trip over rough seas, the SS Washington was steered into New York Harbor shortly after midnight on July 1,

1923. Soon after their arrival, they were taken to a quarantine center on Hoffman Island for the inspection of contagious diseases. Susanna still showed some evidence of malaria, and the baby suffered from infections. The family was taken into the center's dining room where the smell of coffee, bacon, and fresh bread filled their nostrils. Hot stacks of pancakes, fresh fruit, and milk graced the white linen tablecloths in the room. Her children ran past her to partake of the food, but Susanna,

**“Aron Jr. decided [the Fourth of July fireworks] must have been staged to welcome the Rempels to America.”**

dumbfounded, just stood in the middle of the dining room and wept. Later in life, she recalled the experience when she said, “You don’t know what it means when your children finally can eat. I just thanked God for America.”<sup>9</sup>

Later, Aron and his ten-year-old son were in awe as they watched the Coney Island 4<sup>th</sup> of July fireworks display from Hoffman Island. Aron Jr. decided it must have been staged to welcome the Rempels to America.

After they arrived in America, they spent the first six months working on the Sommer farm in Iowa in order to pay off the loan for their passage. Due to ill health, Aron’s father, Johann Rempel, had not been granted a visa for the United States but received one for Mexico instead. After six months in Iowa, the whole family accompanied Johann to Mexico. During their stay in Mexico, Johann’s health grew steadily worse, and the bereaved family grieved his passing in a foreign land.

The Rempels had been in Mexico for only a year when their relatives in Reedley, California, Wilhelm and Margarethe (Rempel) Neufeld, agreed to sponsor them as immigrants to the United States. For lack of any other public transportation, they hired a car, a taxi, to take them on their long journey from Mexico to Reedley. When they arrived in Los Angeles,

Susanna could no longer ignore her labor pains. As they searched desperately for a midwife who could speak Susanna’s language, her thoughts harked back to her experiences in Constantinople. They finally found a Russian midwife to help with the delivery of Herman, her first American child, born on September 18, 1924. Though their trip was delayed a week or two, they finally arrived in Reedley to be welcomed by the Neufelds, their relatives.

Aron and Susanna (Krause) Rempel worked hard and soon owned their own farm near Dinuba where they were later blessed with two more children, Annie and Dietrich. They had come to America with five children: Maria, Aron J., Agatha, Susanna, and William. The family attended the First Mennonite Church in Reedley. During World War II, in 1943, they sold the farm, and Aron and Susanna made yet another move to the frontier country of Palmer, Alaska, in the Matanuska Valley. Here they began another new life, and it was in this valley where Aron was eventually buried in 1953 on the banks of the Matanuska River. After his death, Susanna returned to Reedley where she lived until she passed away in 1996 at the age of 104.

When asked in an interview whether she had ever lost hope when things seemed so bleak in

Batum, Susanna answered that she had received a vision that God would give them a home in America, and she had never lost sight of that vision. She never forgot the words of her father who told her that she was a child of God, and she did not believe that God meant for his child to stay in Batum. The story of Aron and Susanna (Krause) Rempel and all others in Batum who faced the horrors of death by famine and disease is awe-inspiring. They maintained strength and courage in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. Susanna said it best when she attributed her lack of despair during times of adversity to her tenacious belief that she was, indeed, a “child of God.”

#### ABOUT THE ARTICLE

*With permission from the Rempel family, their story has been excerpted from Susanna’s personal papers, her interview on unpublished film, and the writings of William C. Rempel. This article originally appeared in First Mennonite Church: Celebrating Our Centennial, 1906-2006: The Unfolding of Our Story, edited by Corinna Siebert Ruth (Kitchener, Ontario: Pandora Press, 2006.)*

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#### ENDNOTES

1 *The Mennonite Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Industry Among Mennonites in Russia.”

2 *The Mennonite Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Siberia.”

3 *The Mennonite Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Nestor Machno.”

4 Henry D. Rempel, *From Bolshevik*

*Russia to America: A Mennonite Family Story* (Sioux Falls, SD: Pine Hills Press, 2001).

5 John B. Toews, *Czars, Soviets, and Mennonites* (Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1982), 123.

6 Toews, 124.

7 J. C. Krause, *Gnadenfeld*,

*Molotschna, South Russia: Memories of Good Times and of Hard Times, 1835-1943*, trans. Carl Rempel (Fountain Hills, AZ: [self-published] 1995), 9.

8 Toews, 127-128.

9 William C. Rempel, “Racing to America,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 4, 1998.