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Edited Transcript of a Voice Recording of an Interview on 24 August 1976 of

Abraham Peter Regier by Henry Paetkau as part of

Walter Klaassen's Oral History Project at Conrad Grebel College

on Russian Mennonite Immigration to Canada in the 1920s.

Transcribed by Anne Regier Bergen; edited and typed by Henry Regier, July 17, 2008.

The voice recording was made onto tape and stored in the Mennonite Archives of Ontario, Conrad Grebel College Library. In 2006 the information on this tape (and on tapes of other interviews) was transferred to CDs by the Archives' staff. This interview was conducted in A. P. Regier's home at 1 Pine Street, Virgil, ON. Henry Paetkau's questions are in boldface type. Father's voice was weak and sometimes too weak to be understood; small parts that are unintelligible or seemed jumbled have been noted with curly brackets { }. In other places small additions to clarify meaning have been included in square brackets [ ]. Other background information, such as this introduction, is in italic print. The Kroeger clock on the wall had not been stopped and its tick-tocks were loud.

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Henry Paetkau, HP: Mr. Regier, please say where and when you were born, your family background and your youth.

Abraham P. Regier, AR: You want me to tell you in my broken English.

HP: Your English is pretty good; if you get stuck you can go to German.

AP: Some of my ancestors came to the Chortitza colony early following the first wave in 1788-9 led by the Deputies Hoeppner and Bartsch. Johann Bartsch was one of my wife's ancestors; her ancestor Abraham Kroeger married Margaretha Bartsch, the Deputy's daughter. The Kroegers stayed in Rosenthal. My [ancestors] started out in Kronsweide; later my grandfather moved to Chortitza.

[Grandma file 7.07, July 2014 and other information state that Jakob Regier migrated into the Choritiza Colony in 1818, married in Rosengart in 1819 with the first six of their children, until 1834, being born in Rosengart. He was listed as a householder in Chortitza village in 1837. He may have been a member of the Kronsweide Frisian Church during his first years in the Chortitza Colony. He was elected lay minister in the Chortitza Flemish Church in 1824, at the young age of 32. He was likely the nephew of Aelteste Cornelius Regier, who came on a visit from Heubuden, Prussia to Chortitza to help sort out difficulties within the clergy and died in Chortitza in 1794. On the map Schoenwiese lies north of the Chortitza village and both Alt and Neu Rosengart to the south.]

There were 12 children in my father's parental family, including himself. There were 8 children in my parental family: 2 died when they were young; One brother, Dietrich, died in a concentration camp (and my sister's [Margaret's] husband also perished in a concentration camp); one brother , Peter, came with me to Canada in 1923; [One sister, Agathe, came in the late 1920s and another sister, Katharina, came in the 1970s]. I was born in Chortitza [in 1895].

HP: What did your father do? What kind of business was he in?

AP: My father was a farmer. He was the first in the family to finish the Zentralschule, in 1784. Then he worked for a while in the Volust, the civil office. That involved a lot of handwriting and he had good handwriting, so he was a secretary. Penner and he were conscripted to serve 4 years in the Vorstei [forestry service as a non-combatant alternative to military service] where he was head of the business part of that work.

My mother's family were the Koops; my Koop grandfather was a co-founder of the Koop factory which employed about 1,000 people at the time of the 1917 October Revolution. My grandfather Peter Koop passed away in 1889 of tuberculosis at the age of 44 years; his brother Abraham continued and he, in turn, passed away in 1920.

HP: So you're related to Mr. Herman Koop in Kitchener.

AR: His grandfather Abraham and my grandfather Peter were brothers.

HP: How much schooling did you yourself get?

AR: I was born in 1895. In our Dorfschule or primary school we had very good teachers. Then I completed the 4 years of the Chortitza Zentralschule or secondary school. After that, 5 years of the Kommerzschule in Halbstadt, Molotschna Colony. Then I started in an engineering institute, [Gornej] like a university, in Jekaterinoslav, now Dnjeproprotovsk. At that time it was hard to get into any advanced school; there were only about a dozen in all of Russia. It was during World War I that I applied. There were 150 vacancies and 3,000 applications. As a final part of the screening process three examinations were set and I was fortunate to be accepted as one of the 150. Then I was conscripted to serve in the Red Cross. When the German Army occupied our area I again went to the engineering institute, but then the Revolution happened and I had to drop out.

HP: You didn't go back after WWI?

AR: No. Everything had been taken away from us; we were too poor to have the means so that I could go to that school. Anyway, only revolutionaries were allowed in any schools, professors had been done away with. I don't know what kind of schools they

had for a dozen years, perhaps students as understudies of party men.

HP: When WWI broke out, what were the feelings about that?

AR: In 1914 in August the threshing was in full swing. My father was mayor of Chortitza. Conscription happened in a couple of weeks. We usually had 4 hired men and 4 girls who were Russian, besides a German girl for help in the home. We, the 'children' in the family, also worked in the farming. Of the 4 hired men that we had, 3 were conscripted and left immediately. All the horses, three years and older, and wagons were also subject to 'conscription'. We had about 20 horses. All the horses of the village were brought together and then the army officers came to choose which to take away. We were left with only a handful of horses. My father bought smaller horses, not the usual farm horses, but they cost more than the government was paying for those it took away. We had four wagons and three were taken, so father bought some old junky wagons and repaired them.

Because the Russians took us to be Germans, we had to start a Nachtdienst or night duty to try to spot any German planes that might come from hundreds of miles away to contact some of us who, they feared, were German spies. As a hobby I had a lot of pigeons; we had to do away with them because they could maybe be used to carry news to Germany. My brother Dietrich helped me to kill them.

HP: What were the feelings of the local Russian people toward you?

AR: They weren't bad at all because they had lived all around us and knew we wouldn't do anything like that. It was the big fellows in St. Petersburg and Moscow. Some people were spreading hate, as they do all over the world.

HP: What were the feelings toward the Czar?

AR: We had to sing his praises and pray for him every morning in school. His picture had to be in every house and in other places, like icons. We accepted that the Czar was ordained of God for the Russians and not quite for us. He was not a Kaiser that we preferred. We felt as strangers, after 100 years, and we had a different kind of law for us as Mennonites. We were a different kind of people with different classes. We were allowed to do things that Russian people could not do. We were given preferences in banks and elsewhere because they thought that we were more honest and we would manage ourselves better. German words were often used in connection with Mennonite business; Jews also used German words but 'they weren't liked too much'.

We had Jews in our village and they even had their synagogue. Catholics sometimes worshiped in a local church {which one is not clear, since there was a Greek Orthodox and a Mennonite Church then in Chortitza}. Sometimes I would go to the Jewish 'church'. Our village had some flour mills and 4 factories which employed some Russian people for whom they built a Russian Orthodox Church. The village's factories gave them land for big orchards and contributed funds for the priests and deacons. They contributed to a Russian Orthodox school for their youngsters and a hospital with a doctor. I don't know whether factories in other Mennonite villages contributed as much for the Russian workers in them.

Just before WWI my father was the mayor of Chortitza. A budget for the coming year had been made which provided some funds for support of the Russian elementary school, etc. Then a cousin of my mother, Herman Koop's son Jacob Koop, came to my father and said, "Peter, let's do something decent; I want to add as much as the village is budgeting to build something decent. Let's build a hall as well and also lower rooms, central heat, heat the teachers' house, too and also add 2 rooms for a single teacher, etc." The village said, "Regier, this isn't what we wanted." Father replied, "This won't cost you more; doesn't it look great?" "Yes, but, but, but, but..." And that was the way it was built. My father also believed in paying good teachers proper salaries; my forefathers weren't stingy. Others may have been more interested in the welfare of their mares and colts than that of their children.

HP: When did the Czar come out with this program to confiscate the land?

AR: That was toward the end of WWI, but I don't know exactly. I always bought a first class Russian paper from Moscow and a government paper for Petrograd (Leningrad). Articles were written by more liberal professors and business people some of whom were German and even had German passports. In our village a couple of young men [had previously] joined the German army. Of course they were rounded up when WWI started and sent to the east to Orenburg, Siberia, etc.

There was a professor (Lindeman?) at the University of Moscow who was trying to help us. His ancestors two generations back had come to Russia. That's where the Verband der Buerger Hollaendischer Herkunft got started. One of our teachers at the Zentralschule had studied with this professor in Moscow. That professor had got proof from Danzig that we Mennonites were descended from people who had migrated from the Low Countries to the Danzig area in the 15th and 16th Centuries. The Zentralschule teacher, [Heinrich Heinrich] Epp, had studied with the University of Moscow professor. This Epp was the brother of Dietrich Epp who subsequently was the editor of Der Bote, a Mennonite weekly in Canada. The Epp brothers lived across the street from me in Russia and I visited there sometimes.

We then knew little about Russian life. In the elementary school we had a Russian teacher, but that was the case only in this one school out of a total of 16 or 17 in our 'county'. We always had help in our home and as a child I could speak Ukrainian more fluently than Low German. Then one uncle came to our home and asked, "What do you want to make of that boy, a Russian kid?" But my father was strict, and parents had to speak [High?] German, too. I had a good start there, and it helped me later on.

When the German Army occupied our area in 1918, I was at one meeting but not as a formal delegate. There were delegates from numerous villages and the meeting was so large that it had to be held outside. It was convened beside the county office where big shady maple trees grew. Benches were brought out for the delegates. The German Governor Eichhorn from Kiev, the capital of the Ukraine, came to this meeting and someone wanted to impress him and made a motion that all the subjects, except the Ukrainian and Russian language, be conducted in German. I was one of 4 university students (Lehn, Schultz, Epp and I) who stood on the other side of the fence; we asked ourselves what was going on here? Lehn or Epp said something like, "Regier, say something!" I lifted my hand; the chairman (who had been one of my Zentralschule teachers, Johann Froese) recognized me. I

said something like this: "I have no voting rights here, but I just want to ask a question. Are we still in Russia or are we in Germany?" He looked at me, and so I said, "May I say more?" "Yes", the chair responded. So I asked, in effect, whether our area would formally become part of Germany. The Governor replied, "The young man is looking further into the future than we are. The war is not yet over. Because of problems on the Western Front [in France, etc.] our army here in Russia could be called back quickly to serve there. I would like to speak further with the young man later." There was no further discussion of that issue. Later my father, who was one of the delegates, said, "How did you dare to trust yourself, in front of all of those present, to say something?" I said, "Wasn't that a decent, a good thing that I said, or was it bad?" "No", he replied. I was 23 then but it wasn't expected that I should have something to say.

HP: How did people feel about the German occupation?

AR: Oh, they were all for it. Because of all the [previous] plundering we had nothing left. We thought things would get better again, but much worse was still to come. The meeting that I mentioned earlier had occurred in summer. In fall, the Germans were rolled back and we started the Selbstschutz. [self defence militia]. With two other men, I was called by the county office to organize this. I was the secretary; I had to write 'all these things', go to ...(?). At that time there were Ukrainian officers and higher German officers from whom we could get rifles, machine guns, everything else and the instructors.

I've always been co-opted to participate in committees and organizations. Like with a big clothes wringer, if you put in your hand all of you gets pulled in. As a volunteer I didn't get paid, but I think I helped my people a little.

HP: Going back a bit again to the Revolution: what did your people feel when the Revolution started and Kerensky set up his government?

AR: At that time I was in Odessa with the Red Cross and I joined the Social Revolutionaries Party. My father took a different route. We, of course, liked.... (?). With some university education I was given responsibility in an office, and didn't actually have to do the medical work with the wounded. In headquarters I was Assistant District Accountant in the Red Cross with responsibility for the Ukraine and 3 Russian armies including the 9th Army which was stationed in the Ukraine [Roumania?] at that time. All the southern part of Russia was under our supervision.

HP: You got this job because you had an education?

AR: I hadn't finished my university education. While I was studying I was asked repeatedly 'to report' [presumably for military service]. I always gave a small bribe to one of the secretaries. For 20 rubles or so I could get an extension of another month, and this continued month after month until Christmas time, 1916. But a 25-ruble bribe, followed by a couple more later, worked again. Finally the few Mennonites in my position had to report and to apply to the head office in the capital city to transfer from the Russian Army to the Red Cross. We were lucky; there must have been a big shot behind our success. There were about 50 Mennonites at various levels of advanced study who were part of the Red Cross where I was going.

HP: Were there meetings, general meetings?

AR: Oh yes, we could start right away. I belonged to the Social Revolutionists but to the Right side. There were also other Revolutionaries to the Left; they called themselves Bolsheviks and we Mensheviks. We had one Bolshevik with us in our office; he worked in a neighbouring room. His name was Ricovsky (sp?); he was a Jew and had a PhD from the University of Vienna. Later he became the head of the Ukrainian government. He knew the Mennonites very well. He wasn't saying much but was watching. Through him I found out what Karl Marx's ideas were and I discussed them with him. He said that compulsion was necessary in Russia for success, as Stalin acted years later. He was a stranger, too; maybe not a 'stranger' but a different nationality, a Jew. What I read in Marx's books, and what I read about the personality of a Jew, helped me to understand what was happening at the time. {The foregoing sentence, edited from his comments, may not reflect accurately what he had intended.}

When the Bolsheviks came, it was my understanding of Marx's ideas that helped me to decide for emigration, as soon as possible. I was elected as secretary-treasurer into the Verband der Buerger Hollaendischer Herkunft at the county level and used that to promote emigration. When it came to going somewhere it was said, "Regier, you are the youngest, you have to go." I went and I learned a lot that way. I was shot at and I was under greater danger of my life.

HP: How long were you in the service?

AR: About a year or so. I started on 16 January; I went to the front [in Roumania] for 3 months in late summer which was a lot different than back in Odessa where I was stationed. I was the accountant for the Red Cross with the 9th Army.

{In a jumble of partial sentences, Father describes one trip in which he had to deliver cash payments to personnel in Roumania's mountainous countryside that came under fire from German forces.}

There were members of the Russian nobility stationed there [who apparently served no useful purpose, judging from Father's indirect statements]. My commanding officer was from the Imperial Guard, Nikolai ?; he had poor eyesight. When it came to eating we were all together at lunch and the evening meal but not at breakfast. He was in poor health. His assistant was a general, too. In the evening there was always a Gala (?). The high school had a big room where the large meals were served. The officers spoke French, though they were served by Russian people. I had learned French in high school; and could read and write it and, though it was difficult, I could make myself understood when speaking.

One Sunday morning I was sitting in my office doing some work when a Russian General sat down next to me in the chair and said, "Abram Petrovich Regier, what nationality are you?" I said, "I'm a Jew." "No." "Why do you ask me?" "If your name would be Socolow, a Russian name, I wouldn't ask. Your tongue doesn't give you away; you speak a perfect Russian. But we've been wondering, your work is different. ... Likely German" "Yeah", I said. Then he started in German. "Lutherisch?" "No."

"Protestantisch?" "No." "What then?" "Mennonitisch." "Oh, you have no churches, you have prayer houses." "How do you know that?" He said that he had studied in Germany and had good friends in Baden where he used to go for his holidays.

For the last two months he [the Russian general] and I came together in the evenings to read Bibles together. I had a Russian and a German Bible, one of which was a miniature Bible. Others came together in the evenings for drinking, playing cards and talking about women. I asked my friend once whether he expected to get married. He replied, "Yes, I have a girl friend and she's waiting for me." I told him that I had a girl friend at home and that she expected me to come home again clean to marry her. "Doesn't your girl friend expect that too?" "No, my people never think of that." I said, "But she's a person, too, and we are Christians and we should [act properly?]." When I left there, he came to the station and said that I was his best friend. That's how you win friends, sometimes.

HP: Where did you go from there?

AR: Well, back to headquarters in Odessa. He [his friend the Russian general, see above?] had urged that I try to be examined by a medical commission to give me a leave of absence for 3 months. My boss, who was a colonel, had papers for a leave for my partner and told me I could use those papers [??]. That partner was Alexander Thiessen who wanted to go home to the Kuban. Oh, he was mad!

I went home and went back [to Odessa] only the next summer to get my settlement [release?] papers. The Germans were there already. I was paid for the time, back wages. The Red Cross was still [responsible for this territory] in 1918. {Important note, this part was difficult to understand; Father seems to admit to illness sufficiently serious to use someone else's papers for his leave of absence and this may not have been what he intended to mean.}

HP: But then you stayed in Chortitza?

AR: Yes, in Chortitza. [While on leave (?)] I started to attend the lectures again in the university, which was 50 miles from us. This [the university process?] broke down when the Germans came in. When they withdrew, some Russian parties competed for power.

In the fall of 1919 Makhno's forces came into our village; just before they came I was working in the county office; I had been elected with 3 other people. Yes, I've seen them and spoken with them but it was dangerous, very dangerous. Nobody told them that my father was one of the biggest farmers in the village. If they had known that they would have shot me, – they would have just killed me.

HP: But they didn't do anything to you?

AR: To me, no. They gave me a paper which I still have which says, in Russian, that I work for the county and I am allowed to go around in the village day or night, when I'm on duty.

HP: Was there no Selbstschutz at this time?

AR: The Selbstschutz: I was a responsible party to organize the [local] Selbstschutz in the fall of 1918.

HP: Can you tell me how that got started?

AR: Well, we heard about all the people all over Russia who were getting killed by the Russian bandits. We wanted to protect ourselves against these bandits when they came in. In our villages, the bandits were from other places. We called for volunteers and in no time about 50 came, including some of my own relatives. Some of the older people were against it. But not to the extent that they spoke out too much. {There are some unintelligible words here.} I was a member myself; we had exercises. Of course, everybody got a rifle.

We got word that a group of people or army or something came to Alexandrovsk, now Zaporozhje, to plunder. That time we worked with other villages and went to a neighbouring village where they could cross the Dnjepr River. We dug in there for a day or two but they didn't come across; they were scared. We dug trenches right close to our village, but it never came to a fight, never.

The following year I was coming home one night from my girl friend [Margaretha Kroeger], about 2 miles to go. I was coming down to the county office, it was in the center [of Chortitza], about half way across the village. I was going by there and I saw wagons leave, maybe 50 of these volunteers (Selbstschutz) were going to the neighbouring Russian village. "But we'll be back in no time." They had a Russian officer at that time. But we never saw them back. They must have been called away [by some 'authority'?].

Some university students were officers in the Army [what Army?] and they were called to move further south. They asked me, "Why don't you go?" "No, I have my duty to do at home." On one Thursday or Friday they were moving out on horseback while I was coming home by train on the other side of the Dnjepr before crossing over and coming back home [to Chortitza] in the evening. There I found my friend from the university right in my own house. "What are you doing here?", he asked. "Oh, this is my father's house, my home." From there we had to ??? neighbouring county. That's the way they went and later on organized the White Army against the Red Army.

A lot of our young people went to ??? joined the White Army later, too; maybe they had to join. Have you seen Gerhard Toews in St. Catharines? He was one of the officers.

The end of the first disc came here. There seems to be a disconnect in what Father was saying.

{Father then refers to some kind of convention.} We were on a hayrack [wagon] but there were also light wagons at that time [?]. Maybe a dozen people, poor horses, 2 days to travel 50 to 60 miles to the city where we had a convention. Everything was new to us. This was in 1920. Our chairman was a fellow with whom I had worked in the Red Cross, a Russian officer. He sent me a piece of paper: "You don't know me." I shouldn't recognize him, he wrote because it would give him away; he was an officer and I was an officer. We were trying to build up something here and others would avoid us as they did with a lot of 'my' [the Russian's or Father's?] friends. People didn't understand us at home, why you can't work your land when you have no horses to work it with.

For a year and a half I was in there [the Chortitza Volost administration?]. Another student from the university was head of a new province with Zaporozhje the capital. They took our [Chortitza] county out of the previous province and added it to the new province. When he found out that I was here he came quite often to us and was trying to build up the province, to do something. Then he wanted me to be head of the agricultural department of his office, but I had to become a member of the Party. "No, I can't, I can't!"

Then I put out some feelers in the factory. I was training in engineering. I went to Armin Lehn, he had been a big shot in the Red Cross in Moscow during WWI. In the factory, he was head engineer and superintendant. Through him I got a job there as his assistant. The factory was making agricultural equipment. It was one of the factories that my grandfather once owned, but that was way back; he had 3 factories in WWI before the Revolution.

When [the head of the new province] found out [that I had a position in a factory] he said, "You are a fox, you slipped away this time. Who is going to work your place [leading the agricultural department] now?" There were better men than I; people who were farmers, while I was a student.

We started some new [accounting procedures?] in our head office for engineering in the factories in Zaporozhje. When they found out that I had a good education, they wanted to start this new accounting procedure. Everything was in Russian there. I had to start off, they gave me good help and soon we were going very strongly.

Besides that there was always my volunteer membership in the Hollaender Verband where we worked on getting out of the country.

HP: Was that the primary concern of the Verband?

AR: Yeah. Later on they thought [our economic condition] could be built up again. In 1922, when the American Relief Administration came into our part of the country, it was run by the men of the Hollaendisches Verband. That's when I became the secretary of the municipal organization. Orie Miller came in and we asked him: "Do you have a scheme, how to run this [program], have you an office and paper forms?" "No, I don't have any." Well, here was Dietrich Epp (later editor of Der Bote), Jakob Kampen and Jacob M. Dyck (who later became a farmer in Saskatchewan) and they decided: "Regier, you can do books, you have to do it." Good, but I had my job in the factory too.

The meetings were always in the evening. I went home, started working, setting up forms that we could use: here's a village with a number of people that are in dire need which provided information on qualifications for help. Flour and beans. I had to set up the bookkeeping for that. I brought my scheme to the next meeting: "Good, that is very good." He [Orie Miller?] asked others if they agreed and they did.

The suffering was more intense in the Old Colony [Chortitza] than in the Molotschna so we started there. "When you go to the Molotschna, do not say that these are forms from Chortitza, say that they are from the MCC." "Why?" "Oh, they would definitely want something else." There was always competition. Anyway, I had learned my bookkeeping in Halbstadt, the capital of the Molotschna. Later I had to make a couple of trips to Halbstadt as a representative of the Chortitza Volust. One time when I came to Halbstadt I saw Heinrich Janz. He was in charge of the storehouse in Halbstadt. "The Americans really have exact bookkeeping!" "How do they do that?" "Don't you know? All those forms." "You say they're good?" "Yes." "Do you know where that comes from? I learned this in Halbstadt and Peter Letkeman was our teacher." "Is that so? So it all comes from the Molotschna." We had a good laugh, good fun.

HP: So this is how the immigration process started, growing through the Verband? Who were the leaders in this movement?

AR: The coordination: in Halbstadt there was Benjamin Jantz who represented 60 odd villages and we were 20 villages, and they didn't suffer as much as we did. {A jumble of partial sentences follows here which seems to imply that the emigration movement had started before the American Relief Administration and the Mennonite Central Committee arrived with food.} Already on April 22, 1922 our principles and our whole scheme were approved [among those interested in emigration] and with a government representative in the Ukraine. Who signed this? Rogoski (?), who knew a lot about the Mennonites. He didn't know that I was [one of those] behind this. I corresponded with him later while waiting for the Moscow government to agree, which came in 1923. Meanwhile, the help including tractors that came with the American Relief Administration provided hope for some that we could build ourselves up again. Frank Epp wrote about that in his book "Mennonite Exodus".

We saw no headway at all and sent John P. Klassen in the beginning of 1923 to Moscow. He had to stop on the way at Kharkhov to pick up lists that we had already given to Benjamin Jantz to take to Moscow and get an OK for them. He was sitting [outside Benjamin Jantz's office in Kharkhov] while Jantz was discussing these matters with his assistant Philip Cornies. They had a letter from Benjamin Unruh in Germany who promised him that Hitler would help us. But Hitler didn't have much to say yet in 1921. Later, yes; maybe he [Benjamin Unruh?] was a Nazi himself. Here he [John P. Klassen] had to sit and wait in the front room late at night until they were ready [to talk to him]. "But what do you want?" "I want to go to Moscow to get something done." They advised him not to and begged him to go back, everything would be alright. "No, my people asked me to go."

I was in the Committee at that time when Jacob Dyck, Dietrich Epp and I went to Johann Klassen who was a teacher in the

Zentralschule at that time and was thinking like we were. We must get out but it was dangerous to go to Moscow; we promised we would look out for him. You know Klassen, he became a professor at Bluffton College. He did go and got the papers approved in Moscow but it needed some prodding. It was dangerous, going before the Russian government to tell them "We want to get out." It's a sign that says: " We don't agree with you; we don't like you."

HP: You were part of this first group?

AR: Yes, I was pushing, right? At Christmas time in 1921 there was a conference in a small village of the Molotschna. In the Molotschna, they didn't have good standing in the county seat, Halbstadt. In our county we always had Mennonites in the administration, right from the start. We had one Russian, who could speak Low German as well as we, but the rest of us were Mennonite. We could do these things. But in Halbstadt it wasn't like that. To have this meeting they had to go to a small village not far from Halbstadt. Delegates to the meeting came from all over southern Russia and the Ukraine. I had to go for our county. I was the sole representative and had all the votes; my main theme was to get out of there. There was a young fellow, a university student Henry ???, who wanted to become the chairman of the whole thing at that time and he asked me for all my votes. "No, you won't get any of my votes; we [support the position of (?)] Benjamin Jantz. I had all my notes with Benjamin Jantz, because Benjamin Jantz wanted to get out of the country, too. I didn't know him before that. That was one meeting.

In summertime 1922 in ?? I represented Chortitza again. We were pushing again but had to be careful because we had representatives from the Communist Party. {There are some disconnected sentences here.} Most times we went by horse and wagon. It was dangerous; once we were shot at but we escaped.

Though I say we were pushing, I don't like the word 'push'. We have to pull; we have to go ahead and pull. I've been pulling all my life.

HP: In 1923 you left; were you married then already?

AR: We were married in 1920. {Because typhus killed her parents in January 1920, as they did mine} she was alone. I had asked for her from her parents in 1916, but I wanted to finish my university education. We weren't in a hurry. But then WWI came; conscription; typhus; I had 5 orphaned brothers and sisters younger than I to care for. I was 25 and my wife was 24. My brothers and sisters needed a mother and we married. So we started with a big family and later had our own big family.

HP: Did you encounter any problems on your way out of Russia?

AR: {The sentences seem to be jumbled here and what follows is an inference of what Father meant to say.} In our Chortitza county we could get permission to have meetings of our Hollaendischer Herkunft Verband. I had worked in the Volust office with a Russian who spoke Low German, as I have already stated. He got or gave us permission for meetings in a small village 4 miles from Chortitza. He sometimes came along, and he even drove me in his four-wheeler with fine horses once. Sometimes he would go to inspect the village and its orchards and sometimes come to our meetings. I was the secretary to keep minutes. It was easier for us than for the Halbstadt people, where everything had to be approved with a certificate from the provincial seat before anything started. That's why we from Chortitza, the Alt-Kolonie, were the first to leave with 3,000 the first year. Our Committee divided responsibilities: Zacharias led the first train, Peter Berg the second, Regier the third and Neufeld the fourth. With the third train it took us 13 days to come to the border.

HP: Did you experience difficulties?

AR: The Hollaender Verband provided an escort or guide for the first two trains but not for ours. Benjamin Jantz said, "You know better, you will be our escort, just let me know along the way how it is going." When we came to Kharkov, the capital of the Ukraine, I was standing beside the cars when the Russian Communist Police came to me. "What's going on there?" I didn't know. There was a minister, Isaac Epp, who was preaching and they had a choir singing Christian songs. It was Sunday morning. I asked in Russian, "What are you doing here?" He was preaching in German. I asked him, with the police there, to leave and never to do that again. "As long as I'm leader, it's forbidden." The police took me to their office and put on an act: "We understand, you didn't know about this." It could have been trouble there.

When we came to another station, they [station authorities?] started to condemn the freight cars. The wheel had trouble here, the axle there, so on. "Maybe you want a bit of grease, a little money?" There were big notices all over the station; you could be shot for offering or taking a bribe. But we found a quiet place to give them some [money] and the train went again.

(When we were leaving I bought 4 million rubles for 2 Canadian dollars. This was a little treasure for [unforeseen] expenses.)

When we came to the border it was evening and the [Russian] office was closed and we [were told] to wait until next morning. All our names had to be entered into their ledgers. Their head office [personnel] were there. Maybe if we pay him a little extra he'll let us through because of all the people and the boat is waiting for us. "No!" "There's another way. We have teachers among us and people that could read and write quite well, we could fill out those ledgers for you." "Well, maybe we could supervise it and you could reimburse the supervisors." So in a couple of hours we had it done. David Rempel, he passed away in Saskatoon last year, he was one of them. And Henry Epp, a teacher in Manitoba, was another. The Russian officials had [another] list that they showed me and asked if those people were in my train. "No."

When we started from our village each railroad car had a foreman with a list: how many families are there?, how many in each family?, how many males?, how many females? (I had that for my own car. I liked to be informed, I knew that the Russians did, too.) Do you have any with alias names? [Someone on our train said] "No, we can't tell you that." I said: "But I have to know what I have to lie to, but you mustn't lie to me." There were some; they were rooted out by police [where? when?]. Here were all these names that we got through. If there were some persons that lied, in our opinion they were not guilty enough to be punished. The

laws were different there when we got to the border.

HP: How did you feel when you finally got out of Russia?

AR: I had had much trouble with all the papers in Russia, so that after we came through the border I said, "Now you can have someone else as your leader; I don't want any part of it anymore!" "No, no, no; until we get to Canada."

Here we had the first American or Canadian medical examination. Some people were sent to Germany; some people wanted their whole family kept together. After I talked to them, about 250 out of 765 who left Chortitza went to Germany. When we came to the boat there were about 200 Jews from Russia. The boat was the Bruton, given to Great Britain by Germany as part of war reparations. It was a small boat, 8.6 thousand tons. CPR got this boat. It took 3 days to come to Southhampton and here they told us that we would stay on the boat and proceed to Canada on this boat. Originally we had hoped we would get a bigger boat. It was only about 2 more weeks of travel. There were passengers left over from the previous boat. I heard that they had had a revolution [while waiting on shore]. "No, we're not going on that boat." "Why not?" "We're not going on that boat." They had a committee there too; one was Abram Vogt who later lived near Steinbach, Manitoba. He was sent to us with a resolution that they had protested against sailing on Bruton to Canada and they wanted us to protest, too. So I pulled my committee together to consider the case. We weren't allowed off the boat and they weren't allowed on the boat, and they threw that [issue] over to me. "Na ja, we agree, we don't want to go." "And what is the reason?" "Na, the ship isn't sea worthy." "How do we know that?" "We'll have to vote in a committee to investigate, is it agreed?" "Agreed." "And who shall be on that committee?" "Well, Regier first, you are an engineer." "But I didn't finish my university training." "But Regier..." "Secretary, write this down: 'Regier and his family stay on the boat, even if we all sink. If you will now protest then the way to Canada may not be open for you and you'll be sent back to Russia'. You can go and do what you want, but Regier and his family will stay." The writer was Epp [who asked the committee] what he should say? "We must go, is it agreed." "Agreed."

{Some jumbled bits of sentences here.} Abram Vogt [of the committee on shore] said: "I understand." I said: "The way is either to Canada or let those that don't want to come along go back to Russia". Three days we were there [in Southhampton], putting in coal with men carrying baskets on their back, – no cranes at that time. Provisions had to brought to us for two weeks. And when the [holdovers from the second train] later came on board I heard that they were all for Canada.

One was cursing in Russian and I marked that fellow. I went to him and said, "I'm Regier, were those your words? Not another word like that or the Captain will put you in a place here where neither your wife nor anyone else will see you because you're not right for Canada." He came along after I had explained it to him. I didn't see him for 20 years in Canada. He never mentioned that again, but we had peace until we came to the St. Lawrence here.

While some people were seasick on the ocean we had peace. Recovering in the St. Lawrence [it wasn't so peaceful again]. When the CPR train was ready to leave I went from car to car to say goodbye to the people. Some wouldn't shake hands with me, they just grumbled. When I reported later to Aeltester David Toews he said, "Hat der Herr sie bewahret; der Weg wuerde zurueck nach Russland." ["The Lord has protected them; the way would have been back to Russia."] Sometimes you have to be stubborn.

{Some jumbled partial sentences here.} When we came to Canada, Isaac Zacharias, who was working then at the head office of the Board [in Rosthern] and had been the leader of the first train (he was my cousin) and Gerhard Enns who was MLA in Saskatchewan (he was not a Mennonite but a Swedenborgian who had migrated before WWI from my part of the country) brought me an invitation to come to work at the Board office in Rosthern. I told them no right away; with Abram Friesen [who was there] I can't work together; he was my teacher for 5 years [chemistry, in Halbstadt] and we never saw eye to eye.

I got another invitation to come to a farmer in Morris, Manitoba. I didn't know this man. In the previous train some people had told him about me and I had it in my mind to go there.

When we came to Winnipeg there was a representative from the Board, Henry Wiebe, a Holdeman with a beard. He said, "Why doesn't anyone come to Alberta. Manitoba is full, Saskatchewan too; we have another 700 here and no one wants to go to Alberta? In Alberta the harvest is just starting; it is a good harvest; you will be able to earn well and nobody wants to go there?"

I said, "How much time do we have?" The train was sitting there and the baggage was being sorted: what goes to Rosthern, what goes to Steinbach, what stays in Manitoba. "Listen to me. Who wants to go with us to Alberta? Alberta is having a good crop, there are possibilities to earn money yet, we can go to Mennonites there. In Manitoba the crops are nearly finished and Manitoba is filled up. In Saskatchewan the harvest is in full swing and will soon be over. No one yet has gone to Alberta." "Are you going to Alberta?" "Yes, I'm going as I told you. Who is coming with us?" "We'll all come along." Isaac Lehn (the father of Kathy, Jake Hildebrand's wife in St. Catharines) asked if they could come along. "Yes, come along." They were not all from my village, Chortitza. "Get all the baggage tickets." "How did you do that? You are to go to Rosthern." I'm a leader; I want to be as far away as possible from my Menniste."

The [Holdeman Mennonites] came to meet us at the Acme station and take us to the church to get acquainted. There were 60 of us; later still more came. They gave us lunch in the church and were starting to liven up. One of their ministers welcomed us and we had to reply, in German, of course. We had one deacon with us, Klassen; I didn't know him before. Then I said to him, "Klassen, you are the only spiritual one among us here." "No, I can't." So I had to do it. Then we started to break up the group into families. "I take this one." "I take these." It was like a slave market; they meant well, you see, but you feel that way. I had my 16-year-old brother, he went to one place and the rest of our family to another. We had an 'adopted' niece from Russia with us and our one daughter.

HP: You were on the farm for several years?

AR: No, not several years. When we came to Canada, while on the train, we had to sign a debt plan, a promissory note, for $700 to

cover the travelling expenses; also we had to promise to stay on the land in agriculture.

HP: For how long?

AR: It didn't say. We were lucky to land on the farm that we did. The man had a half section of land. Homestead land in the beginning of 1910, or later. All the land was open prairie, very rich land, very! This fellow had over 45 bushels of wheat to the acre. He had just started cutting before I came. He had a McCormick binder, the same kind of binder we had in Russia. The binder was throwing about half the bundles in an untied, loose condition. I asked him, "Am I supposed to tie these all?" "Here is some twine, you can cut off and tie the loose bundles." He wanted to pay me 50 cents and acre. I wouldn't make 10 cents... So I started as we did in Russia: take two handfuls of wheat stems, jam their cut ends together, twist them and use them instead of twine. {Father's children Anne and Henry were taught this method later, in 1942, to use when 'stooking' some oats at Lymburn and Father's own McCormick-Dearing binder, being operated by Father, was throwing the occasional loose bundle.}

During the day time it was very hot and the owner rested for 3 hours but I didn't. "No, no; lie down or you won't last." If I want to earn something, I've got to work. {I quietly started to work on repairing the tractor.} In the meantime he had phoned one of his farmer neighbours there (also a blacksmith, Schmidt Toews they called him) to come and fix his binder. After the mid-day break he made one round with his binder and said, "Schmidt Toews has been here; did you see him?" "No, I didn't see him." "Well, where were you then? He fixed the binder." "Why do you say that?" "The binder doesn't throw loose bundles any more." "Oh, decent man." "Yes, decent man." On Sunday we went to church. Isaac Lehn was stationed at his [Schmidt Toews'?] place and must have told him about me. They were very nosey, always wanted to know everything. We went to church in a democrat. A democrat is a 2-seater buggy and Schmidt Toews came in a Cadillac. Schmidt Toews had 3 sections of land. So my farmer asked, "Schmidt Toews, what do I owe you?" "For what?" "Well, you fixed my binder." "No, I wasn't at your place." "Well, who then?" "Your Russlaender did it." He looked at me and never said thank you or anything. That's the way it worked with him. I didn't make much money there.

After that our threshing machine worked for 50 days. I got $5.00 a day and this fellow gave me his team, for which he got $2.00 a day [from me?]. [Johann] Toews where we lived gave me 2 horses; they were runaways. When I started out I always had to watch them. Then one time they did run away and next time when they started again I jumped on the hayrack and let them run until they gave up. They looked like great horses to me, but they were limping and were shaking. They never ran away from me again. I started loading up again. When I said "Whoa" they stopped fast. There were 10 teams mostly with Canadian men. Someone said, "That Russian knows something."

That first fall I sent back over $100 for the Reiseschuld [the promissory note to the CPR]. When the Board received my first payment they appointed me as Districtman responsible for asking people to pay and I was on a committee again. If [a person that I approached] asked me "Have you done it?" I could answer [that I had done it]. I never asked my people to do more than I was willing to do; that way my conscience was clear. I had a little success there. Some people would say, "The Reiseschuld won't run away." Some people cursed at me, even on the phone in Russian. We had party line phones, so you could here the clicks of people listening in, so we sometimes had some fun.

HP: How long did you stay on the farm?

AR: Only until the next spring. We arrived on 21 or 22 August, but when the harvest was over we had no wages, nothing. I had to work on the farm, not for wages, not for 'keep' [?]. We were on a milk farm for which grain was needed to feed the cows and horses.

I heard about work with the CPR and applied in Edmonton which had a yard that employed 8 men in summer time and only 4 men in winter time on a section gang to repair tracks. I applied there and they needed 4 men, so I got 4 men together from the [immigrants] that came in 1923. It was hard work with ties to pull in and the tracks [to move?]. [Of our group of 4 men] I was the only one who continued the following year. The rest went to Saskatchewan or Manitoba. I stayed there [partly] because I promised to work in agriculture. The railroad at that time worked more for agriculture than anything else, hauling grain [and so on].

{We moved to Edmonton and in} the next winter I worked in the packing plant at Swift Canadian. I paid Reiseschuld every time I got my cheque. I got 25 cents an hour to start with. {Parts of sentences are jumbled here and may mean the following.} There was a Moravian church nearby which was more like ours than the German Lutheran church a block away; we attended the Moravian church for 2 years.

Later at one of the Alberta provincial meetings David Toews said that if some of us had not been so concerned to pay our Reiseschuld soon, then the CPR would not have continued to bring more of our people in. I found that business is business; in business people judge us not on what we preach but on what we do. That's the way it was here, too.

HP: Where did you go from there?

AR: More people were coming to Alberta from Russia in the next few years. But these were people whom we did not know. In the meantime I was offered a job [by the railway] as section foreman, because I had good 'credit' with my bosses. They knew that I was conscientious and that they could depend on me.

I was trying to save up money to go on a farm, but where? Then we heard of a group of people who were buying land as a group in the Peace River District [of northwestern Alberta.] I was always in touch with Board members Cornelius Toews and Abram Klassen. When they came to Edmonton, they always stopped at our place. We had rented a small house. They said, "There's a group that wants to settle [in the Peace River District], they need someone who speaks English."

I didn't know English yet; we didn't have any night school at the time. There was a night school but only for beginners; I went one night in Edmonton and they taught the alphabet. I bought myself a self-learning book for the English language and a German-

English dictionary. I was sitting, reading, writing and trying to pronounce properly.{Some sentences follow about an experience with an English-speaking person who was surprised that Father had had no formal schooling in English.}

{We joined the group that went to the Peace River District} but I couldn't work with these people because some were cheating and acting badly. So I sold my part [of this Adair Ranch] for almost nothing and started working out on farms for $5.00 a day. {There are jumbled parts of sentences here.} My brother was growing up; he was working on the farms, too.

Another man from the [Adair] Ranch wanted to join us, Jacob Nickel, who became Aeltester in Northern Alberta and later moved to Rosemary. You may know his oldest son David Nickel in Vancouver. We got a map of the country from the Dominion Land Office which showed which land was still available for a homestead. A homestead had 160 acres; you put down $10.00 and you had 3 years to improve the property to get title to it.

At this time Mother came into the room. Father asked her for something to eat, but Henry Paetkau said he had to go. Following are some statements made subsequently by Henry Paetkau and entered onto the tape record.

Mr. Regier had some trouble with his voice and was concerned whether it would hold up during the course of the interview but he did well though he did speak quietly. He has a very keen mind and a good, clear memory. He is very interested and widely read in Mennonite history and is trying to promote it by buying and exchanging books. I would say that he is an excellent resource on Mennonite history. He was the founder of the Niagara Credit Union in Virgil and [his innovations are] mentioned in Ron Kenyon's book "To the Credit of the People", the history of the Credit Union movement [in Ontario]. He also indicated to me that he was arrested several times while working on the committee of the Verband while still in Russia but was spared imprisonment through interventions of higher authorities with whom he had good relationships. He was very active in Russia and Canada. Local Niagara and St. Catharines papers have had articles about him and his work.