Ella Dyck (1934-1951) ca1948.

Ella Dyck

One More Sacrifice In Stalin's Time of Terror

by D. Frederick Dyck*

Genocide is a word that is associated in most people's minds with the Nazi Holocaust against European Jewry in the years 1933 to 1945. It is generally accepted that six million Jews were systematically exterminated by the Nazis in those years.

There was another instance of genocide during those years that has yet to be adequately documented by historians. This genocide began in Soviet Russia in the early 1920s under Communist ruler Vladimir Lenin (1870-1924) and continued until the death of his successor, Joseph Stalin (1879-1953). During this roughly thirty-year period, it is estimated that twenty-five million people were murdered in Soviet Russia as a direct result of the policies of Lenin and Stalin. This is in addition to the twenty-five to thirty million Russians who died during World War II in the years 1939 to 1945. In the eye of this storm of death were hundreds of thousands of German Mennonites and Volga-Germans.

At the close of World War II in 1945, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill brazenly asked Joseph Stalin about the millions who had died in Soviet Russia prior to the war. Stalin's response, paraphrased here, was that "one or two deaths is a tragedy—millions of deaths is merely a statistic."

There may be a perverse sense of truth in Stalin's statement to Churchill. It wasn't until reading letters from my Mennonite relatives who had survived the Communist terror that this writer had full appreciation of the scope and enormity of the genocide in Soviet Russia. The individual stories are overwhelming in their sadness. This sadness is epitomized for me in the short life of my second cousin, Ella Dyck (1934-1951).

> . . . twenty-five million people were murdered in Soviet Russia . . .

In 1854, my Dyck ancestors immigrated to the Mennonite settlement of Am Trakt, Russia, from Poppau-Junkeracker, West Prussia, where the family had lived since the seventeenth century.[1] Am Trakt was located east of the Volga River, approximately fifty miles southeast of the city of Saratov. Modest in size compared to the older Mennonite colonies of Chortitza and Molotchna in the Ukraine, Am Trakt had 197 farms and 1,176 inhabitants in 1897.[2]

Among the inhabitants of Am Trakt in 1897 were the six children of my great-grandfather Jakob Dyck (1832-1882):

1. Anna Dyck, 1872-1945
2. Maria Dyck, 1876-1957
3. Johannes Dyck, 1878-1921
4. Justine Dyck, 1879-(?)1930
5. Jacob Dyck, 1881-1954, twin
6. Johanna Dyck, 1881-1970, twin

Anna married Peter Tgahrt and died in an Allied bombing raid on Berlin, Germany. Maria married Heinrich Dyck and immigrated with her family to Saskatchewan, Canada, in 1927. Johannes married Maria Wall and died at Am Trakt in 1921. Justine married ___ Penner and is thought to have been shot by Communists near the Manchurian-Russian border in 1930. Jacob (this writer's grandfather) immigrated to America in 1907, married Marie Harder, and farmed in Butler County, Kansas. Johanna married Jacob Froese and immigrated to Curitiba, Brazil, in 1930.[3]

Jacob J. Dyck had been very close to his brother Johannes J. Dyck and they maintained contact by exchanging letters after Jacob settled in Butler County, Kansas, in 1907. Mail out of Russia became sporadic after the Russian Revolution of 1917, and would eventually cease altogether by 1930. Before 1930, however, letters told Jacob of the birth of five children to Johannes and his wife Maria, in addition to a daughter, Maria ("Mimi"), born in 1905: two sons, Johannes (Hans), born 1909, and Gustav, born 1913; and three daughters, Anna, born 1911; Irma, born 1917; and Elsa, born 1918. A letter also brought Jacob the sad news of his brother's death from pneumonia at the young age of forty-three in 1921.

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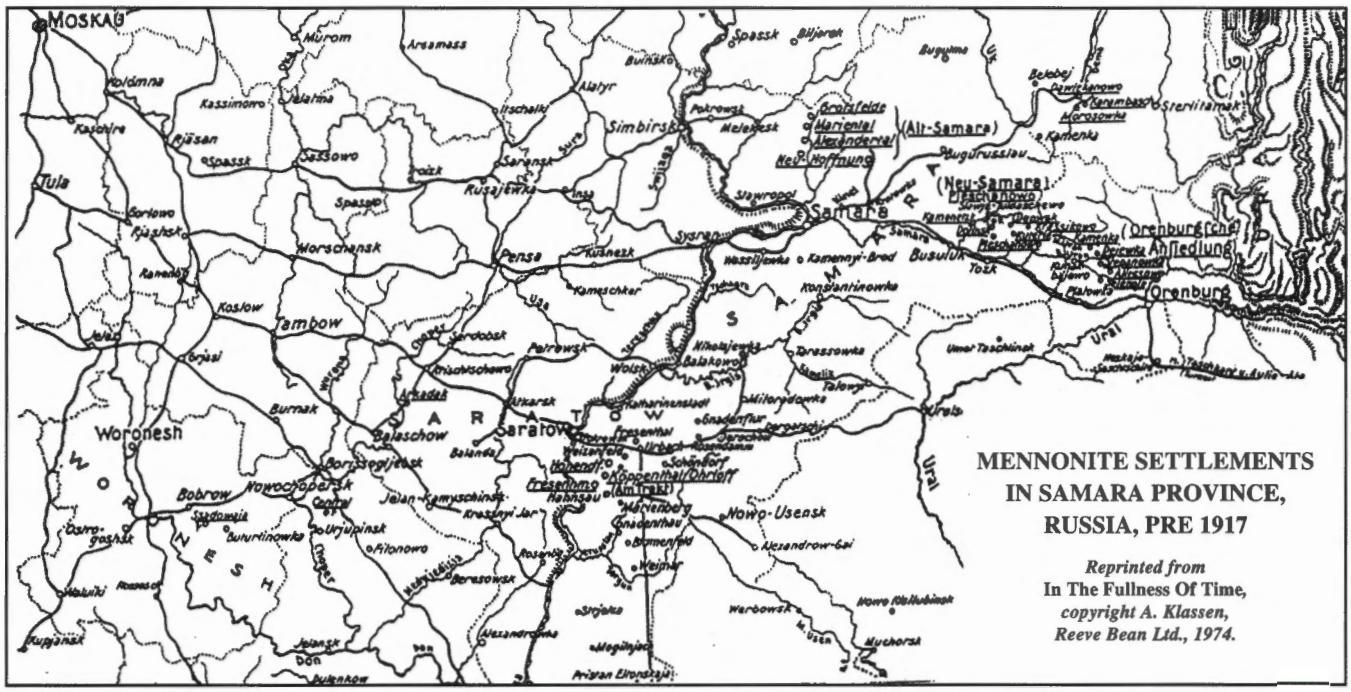
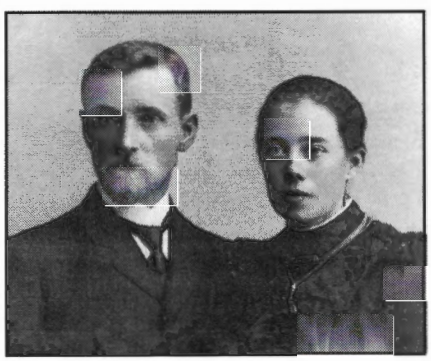
[1] For the author's Dyck ancestral lineage, see *MFH* 20 (Oct. 2001).

[2] Johannes J. Dyck, *Am Trakt: A Mennonite Settlement In The Central Volga Region* (Winnipeg, Manitoba: CMBC Publications, Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 1995).

[3] See *MFH* 9 (Apr. 1990), "The Story of Johanna Dyck Froese."



Through increasingly rare letters from Johannes's widow Maria at Am Trakt, Jacob was aware of the dire circumstances of his brother's family after 1921. Civil war, forced collectivization of farms, confiscation of livestock and farm machinery, arrests and executions, and eventually famine contributed to the massive death toll in Soviet Russia during the decades of the 1920s and 1930s. Am Trakt was in the center of the area hardest hit by Communist dictator Joseph Stalin's murderous decrees. Jacob could do little to alleviate the suffering of Maria and her children, but he did manage to send at least one large clothing package that reached the desperate family before 1930. After 1930 there ensued sixty years of silence about the family of Johannes and Maria Dyck.



Ella's paternal grandparents, Johannes J. Dyck (1878-1921) and Maria (Wall) Dyck (1886-1974) ca1904.

The fall of the Communist government in the Soviet Union in the early 1990s offered descendants of Prussian-Russian Mennonites in North America the opportunity to reestablish contact with relatives who had been locked behind the Iron Curtain for over seventy years. Toward this end my mother, Alice Sitler Dyck, wrote to the Russian Embassy in June 1990, inquiring if avenues were available for finding lost relatives. The reply from the embassy was not encouraging—they could only offer the address of the Red Cross in Moscow.

Several months later my mother received a letter from Emilie Wall Pauls, who had recently immigrated from Russia to Canada. With the letter was a small slip of paper with a Russian address and the name J. J. Dyck in the Cyrillic alphabet. Through Helene Dyck Funk of Laird, Saskatchewan (my third cousin), Emilie got my mother's address in Kansas as someone with knowledge of relatives of J. J. Dyck. Emilie explained that J. J. Dyck was her maternal cousin and he had asked that she try to locate relatives of his father's family that might be in Canada. My mother recognized immediately that this J. J. Dyck might be the son of Johannes J. Dyck, my grandfather Jacob J. Dyck's older brother.

After two attempts to contact J. J. Dyck in Russia by letter, my mother received his first reply in August 1990. He was indeed Hans, the son of Johannes Dyck. Hans wrote,

> . . . I am so happy that I can't even write. I have thought of you my entire life. . . . I want to excuse that I write so badly in German. I have not written German for 59 years. . . . I am not going to call you "cousin," instead, I will write "brothers" and "sisters." That is for me, easier and closer to my heart. . . . I was 12 years old when my father died [1921]. That which he gave me had to suffice my entire life. I was and am very faithful to my father. That's why my entire life I wanted to hear something of my relatives.

My family's correspondence with Hans lasted only eighteen months. In March 1994 my parents received a letter from Gustav Dyck of Baindt, Germany. Gustav is Hans's younger brother (born 1913, Am Trakt, Russia), and he had received my family's letters to Hans from Hans's children after his death from a heart

Ella's parents, Johannes J. "Hans" Dyck (1909-1992) and Helene (Wiens) Dyck (1913-1945), ca1929.

attack in Omsk, Siberia, Russia, on April 6, 1992.[4] Gustav had immigrated to Germany from Russia in January 1994 with most of his extended family. It is from Gustav that my family has learned most of what we know about the tragic circumstances and fate of the Mennonites of Am Trakt. At the urging of my parents, Gustav wrote his memoirs that cover the years of his life from 1913 to 1994. In personal correspondence with Gustav, I learned details of the story of Ella Dyck.

After their father Johannes died in 1921, Hans and Gustav struggled to help their mother Maria keep the family together. The Communists confiscated nearly all the livestock in Am Trakt as well as most of the equipment needed to farm. Grain that had been set aside for seed was eaten as the people faced famine. In the absence of horses to pull farm implements, Hans and Gustav took turns being the "horse." There were no large fields anymore, only subsistence farming of small plots of wheat and vegetables. Throughout the 1920s the Dyck family's fortune ebbed and flowed at the whim of Communist decrees and various "Five-Year Plans" concocted by Stalin.

In 1929, Hans married Helene Wiens. He was twenty and she was sixteen. Helene's family's farm was seized by the Communists that year and her father Cornelius was condemned as a *kulak*, a wealthy farmer. Helene was also a criminal in the eyes of the Communist government and she and husband Hans were forced to live in hiding. In 1930 Hans was arrested for the first time because he "kept a *kulak* daughter hidden." He escaped confinement, however, and fled to the city of Leningrad with Helene. Here the couple's first child, a son they named Victor. Victor lived less than a year and died in 1932.

In late 1932, Hans and Helene moved to the city of Engels, thirty miles northwest of Am Trakt. Hans was arrested there for the second time. His crime was "speculation" (buying farm products in the country and reselling them in the city for a profit), and he was sentenced to five years in prison. After two months in prison, Hans escaped again and reunited with his wife Helene in Engels. In 1933 a second child, daughter Eleanora, was born to Hans and Helene. On October 25, 1934, their second daughter, Ella, was born.

At the time of Ella's birth, her father Hans was engaged in the highly illegal activity of forging identity papers and passports for dispossessed people, many of them *kulaken*. This occupation as a forger supplemented his income as a "speculator," and Hans apparently made quite a lot of money in these two activities according to his brother Gustav. Under normal circumstances there might be an inclination to disapprove of Hans's methods of earning a living. However, avenues for making a legal living were closed to Hans. He was an escaped convict and his wife was classified as a criminal *kulak*. All around them people were dying from starvation. Hans's survival and that of his family depended on his ability to provide for them in any way he could.

The precariousness of this existence caught up with Hans on October 9, 1935. He was arrested for a third time after a woman arrested for carrying false identity papers named Hans as the person who had supplied her with the papers. Hans was tried under Articles 58.10 (anti-Soviet agitation) and 58.11 and sentenced to eight years in prison. He was fortunate that his previous arrests and convictions were apparently not a part of his record at this time. Before being moved to a secure prison north of Moscow, Hans learned that his daughter Eleanora had died.

While serving his eight-year sentence, Hans was arrested a fourth time in 1937 and charged with being an enemy of the Soviet Union. He was sentenced to death and moved to a Moscow prison for execution. Miraculously, Hans survived two months in his death cell where he was expected to die of hunger, exposure, and frostbite. His death sentence was commuted to an additional ten years hard labor and he was transported to the infamous Kolyma gold mines in far-eastern Siberia, where he would remain until 1957. Hans was one of the few that survived transport to Kolyma. According to author Robert Conquest, three to five million people perished in the slave labor camps of Kolyma.

Hans's wife, Helene, and infant daughter, Ella, remained in the city of Engels until the German invasion of Russia in 1941. How they survived is unknown, but it must have been a living nightmare. In 1941 all remaining German Mennonites and Volga-Germans in Samara Province were forcibly "resettled" in Siberia and Kazakhstan. Helene, accompanied by her daughter Ella, was moved to Altay Province near the town of Abakan. Altay is where the large pre-1917 German Mennonite settlement of Barnaul was located.

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[4] After his release from the slave labor camp at Kolyma, Hans remarried sometime after 1957. His second wife's name was Anna, maiden name unknown. Anna was Russian, not of German Mennonite ancestry. Hans and Anna had two children, a daughter Helene and son Alexander. They have chosen to remain in Russia rather than immigrate to Germany.

In the autumn of 1942, Helene was "dragged off" to work in Khirgiz. Whether Helene worked on a farm or in a factory is not known, but she was around some type of large machine that crushed her to death on May 20, 1945. She was only thirty-two years of age. Ella, who was ten years old when her mother died, had remained in Altay and was taken in by a woman with three young children whose husband had been mobilized into the Soviet Army. This woman, surnamed Roht, could not provide for Ella and turned her over to a state orphanage.

Ella remained in the orphanage until 1951, probably for a period of at least six years. She was horribly mistreated because of her German ethnicity and because her parents were classified as criminals. Routine physical and mental abuse was accompanied by chronic malnutrition and lack of adequate clothing in the extreme cold of Siberia. Somehow, Ella's father Hans in Kolyma learned of his daughter's location and plight and arranged to send her money. One can only wonder at how Hans managed to acquire money in a slave labor camp and send it from the city of Magadan in Kolyma to Ella in Altay. However,

Ella's aunt and uncle, Katharina (Wiens) Dyck and Gustav J. Dyck, ca1956.

Ella received only a small fraction of what her father sent. After his release from Kolyma in 1957, Hans told his brother Gustav that he never sent Ella less than 1000 *rubles* (one *ruble* = $.09 in 1950) at a time. Ella received only ten to forty *rubles* at any given time, so not only was Ella abused by orphanage officials, but they stole her father's money that could have made her life less harsh.

In February 1951, Ella went to live with her Uncle Gustav Dyck and his family near Novosibirsk in western Siberia. Gustav was under virtual house arrest after his release from a ten-year sentence in slave labor camps far north of Moscow near the Arctic Circle. Gustav had been arrested at Am Trakt in 1937 and charged with anti-Soviet activity under the notorious Article 58.10.

The Roht woman who had briefly cared for Ella found out where Gustav lived and sent him a letter telling him where Ella was. After many letters pleading for Ella's release into his custody, Ella was escorted to Gustav's home by two government officials. She was in pitiful condition and could not walk unaided and had no baggage, only the few clothes that she wore. Under the care of Gustav, his wife Katharina, and Ella's paternal grandmother Maria Dyck, Ella's health at first seemed to improve as did her zest for life.

In late summer 1951, Ella told her Uncle Gustav that if she could, she would like to have the then-fashionable ensemble of long black skirt, white blouse, and a pair of black leather boots. Gustav's wife Katharina secured the material for the skirt and blouse and sewed them for Ella. Gustav found a bootmaker to make the boots.

At this point I will let Gustav's own words complete the story as translated from Russian to English by his granddaughter-in-law, Galina Dyck.

> *I can still remember it like it was yesterday, it was September 2, 1951, she [Ella] put on all her new clothes and considered herself in a mirror, then she went outside, went to the street and [stood] there for a little while, it was a warm, sunny day. Then she went without any support back into the house, she put her new clothes off without support, she laid them nice together and went to bed, she never got up. September 9th, it was 10 a.m., she shouted "Uncle Gustav, come over here to me and sit down on my bed," she took my hand and she hold it tight. After 30 minutes she was pressing my hand even stronger. That's how she died, I did not have the courage to let her hand off till her hand started to be cold. She was just one sacrifice more from the "happy childhood" in Stalin's governing time. She died at the age of 16 years, 10 months, and 15 days.*[5]

Suggested Reading

In The Fullness Of Time: 150 Years of Mennonite Sojourn in Russia by Walter Quiring and Helen Bartel (Waterloo, Ontario, Canada: Reeve Bean Ltd., 1974). Although long out of print, this wonderful book has hundreds of old photographs that make it worthwhile to search for.

Kolyma Tales by Varlam Shalamov. Translated by John Glad. Copyright by John Glad (New York, N.Y.: W. W. Norton and Co., 1965).

Jacob J. Dyck: Am Trakt To America. A History and Genealogy For The Descendants of Jacob J. Dyck and Marie G. Harder by D. Frederick Dyck. The story and genealogy of the author's paternal grandparents' families includes Claassen, Harder, and Wall families as well as Dycks from 1670 to 1954. Available from Masthof Bookstore.

Sixty Years of Silence: The Dyck Family in Soviet Russia by Alice Sitler Dyck. Contains the memoirs of Gustav Dyck, translated by Herbert C. Dyck, edited by Alice Sitler Dyck. Appendices to Gustav Dyck's memoirs list the families of the eight villages of Am Trakt ca1925-1930 and the fate of many who were arrested during the Great Terror in Russia. This book is 389 pages in length and contains 150 photographs, the vast majority of which date 1871-1920. There are twelve color plates of original artwork by Abraham Claassen in West Prussia in 1836. Professionally printed on high quality gloss paper, 8-1/2" by 11", softcover. Available from Alice Sitler Dyck, 231 West 3rd Street, Washington, KS 66968. Price is $35 per copy plus $4 mailing costs.

[5] Letter to the author from Gustav Dyck, Baindt, Germany, November 6, 2001.