

Map of Mennonite villages in the large Barnaul-Slawgorod area of the settlement in Western Siberia, Russia.

Gustav J. Froese (1888-1938)

~ One of the Disappeared ~

by D. Frederick Dyck*

For many of us with German Mennonite ancestors who migrated to Russia in the 19th century, the “brick wall” in genealogy research has another unique name. It is “disappeared.”

In totalitarian states such as the Soviet Union, to be one of the



***D. Frederick Dyck**, Western Missouri Correctional Center, 609 East Pence Road, 4B-222, Cameron, MO 64429, co-authored *Jacob J. Dyck: Am Trakt to America, Sixty Years of Silence* with Alice Sitler Dyck. Published in two parts in 2001, the first part gives the history and genealogy of the descendants of Jacob J. Dyck (b. 1881) and Marie G. Harder who moved from Russia to Kansas. Claassen and Harder family history is also included. Part II tells what happened to those persons who remained in Russia—stories of contacts made after 60 years of silence; stories of slave labor camps; old photos of families, homes, and churches.

disappeared is a phrase fraught with dread. How does a person disappear? It could begin with an arrest by the secret police (NKVD-KGB) at 3:00 a.m.

“What was he arrested for?” Akhmatova would cry indignantly.

“What do you mean what for? It’s time you understood that people are arrested for nothing!” - Nadezhda Mandelstam in *Hope Against Hope*.

Often, torture followed arrest in order to secure a confession for the alleged crime. My first cousin, once removed, Johannes J. Dyck of the Am Trakt Mennonite settlement, recalled his 1937 arrest and subsequent torture at the infamous Lubyanka Prison in Moscow.

Johannes refused to confess to any crime after numerous beatings, but was convicted and sentenced to death because he “was an enemy of the Soviet Union.” He was placed in a freezing cold death cell in only his underwear with straw on the floor to cover himself. With scraps of food and melted snow to drink, Johannes survived two months in the death cell where he was expected to die, saving the state the cost of execution.

Finally, he was dragged out, a living emaciated skeleton because of starvation and uncontrolled diarrhea from dysentery. Given some ragged clothes, he was placed on a train to Vladivostok with other prisoners. After the 5,000-mile journey, he boarded a prison ship bound for the port of Magadan in far Eastern Siberia. Prisoners who died on the train were simply thrown from the box cars to be eaten by wolves, wild dogs, foxes, and other scavengers.

Those prisoners who died on the ships were tossed overboard and eaten by the sharks that shadowed this known food source. *Disappeared*. From Magadan, Johannes was trucked to the fearsome gold mine camps of the Arctic Kolyma. It would be 20 years before Johannes was reunited with family in Russia, and nearly 40 years more before family in America learned he was alive.

Johannes’ brother, Gustav Dyck, was also arrested in 1937. He was charged and convicted of anti-Soviet agitation. Gustav would serve his 20-year sentence as part of a roving timber-cutting brigade in the Arctic regions of the Soviet Union. While in these frigid Arctic regions, Gustav noticed large snow-covered mounds in otherwise empty fields cut of timber. Another older experienced prisoner told Gustav that those were the unburied dead prisoners. The permafrost prevented digging graves so the bodies were stacked in large piles after they froze solid.

The mortality rate in the timber brigades was 100% every 120 days, so there were many bodies. After years of being freeze-dried, the bodies would gradually break

down into dust and be blown away by the relentless Arctic wind. *Disappeared*.

Johannes and Gustav were fortunate in the sense that they survived the Soviet Gulag system. In *Gulag, A History*, the Pulitzer Prize winning book by Anne Applebaum, the author states that 1.2 million Volga Germans were deported east into the Siberian wastelands and that few survived. This includes the Am Trakt Mennonite settlement that was home to the families of Johannes and Gustav Dyck.

Overall, the number of people killed in the Soviet Union in the years 1917-1980 from the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, the Civil War that followed, murder-famine (*Holodomor*), the Red Terror, mass deportation and executions, is estimated by Anne Applebaum at 12 million. She writes that this would be a low, conservative number. The French authors of *The Black Book of Communism* quote a figure of 20 million.

Thanks to the survival of Johannes and Gustav Dyck, my mother Alice Sidler Dyck was able to fill in large gaps in the Dyck genealogy when contact with Gustav was made after he had emigrated to Germany with his family in 1994. Still, there were unknowns.

My paternal great-grandparents are Jacob D. Dyck (1832-1882) and Justina *nee* Wall (b. 1855). Both were born in German West Prussia and emigrated to the German Mennonite settlement of Am Trakt in Samara Province, Russia, in the 1850s.

Paternal Grandfather Jacob J. Dyck (1881-1954) came to the United States in 1907 while the rest of his extensive family remained in Russia. Jacob brought with him some knowledge and history of his father Jacob Dyck’s ancestry. This, combined with Gustav Dyck’s information after 1994, gave the family a genealogy and history of their Dyck ancestors after some diligent research.¹

The most compelling remaining mystery was what had happened to Jacob’s mother, Justina, and her second husband, Jacob Froese (b. 1854), and their son Gustav (1888-1938). Jacob Froese, Justina, and their son Gustav migrated from Am Trakt to the Siberian settlement of Barnaul about 1904.

Jacob J. Dyck had gone to Barnaul with his mother, stepfather, and half-brother to help build a house and get them established on their new farm. It is not known which Mennonite village that the Froese family settled near in the large Barnaul settlement area. According to GAMEO,

¹ Dyck, D. Frederick, “Updating and Revising Dyck and Wall Family Data in Jacob J. Dyck: Am Trakt to America,” Jan. 2020 *MFH*.

there were 58 villages by 1925 with a population of 13, 173. Each male member of a family was given 40 acres, so the Froese family group with Jacob J. Dyck could have received up to 120 acres. Families of limited financial means could receive 400 Russian rubles (about \$200) start-up money.

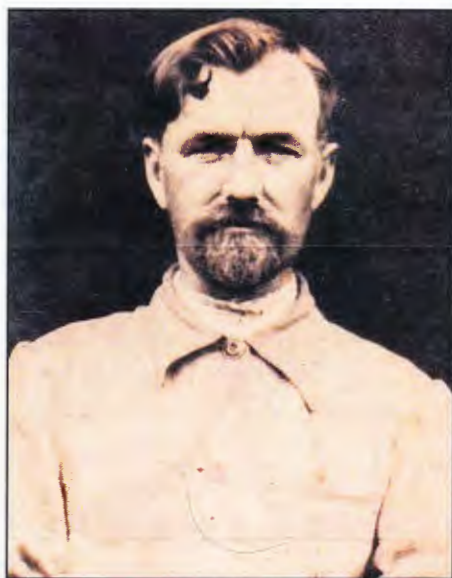
By 1908, Justina was a widow for a second time and her son, Jacob J. Dyck, was in the United States. Two pages from a Russian register of the Barnau settlement area show Gustav Froese, age 20, as head of the household and included his mother Justina Wall/Dyck/Froese, age 53; sister Justina Dyck (from Am Trakt), age 28; Gustav's wife, Margaretha Ekkert, age 20, and their infant son Wilhelm. Father Jacob Froese had apparently died.

The 1910 register records the formal marriage of Gustav and Margaretha and states that Gustav's mother Justina is alive, while father Jacob Froese is deceased. In rural Siberia, secular government formalization of a marriage might follow a religious ceremony with considerable time. Gustav and Margaretha's situation was not unusual in that regard. This ends the reliable records of Justina Wall/Dyck/Froese and her daughter Justine Dyck.

Conflicting accounts of the fate of Justina *nee* Wall have emerged over the past 100 years. My paternal grandmother, Marie G. (Harder) Dyck, of rural Whitewater, Kansas, wife of Jacob J. Dyck, told my mother in the 1950s that a letter received from Gustav Froese told Jacob J. Dyck that their mother Justina died in 1915 at age 60. This seems to me the most plausible explanation of Justina's death. These scant rumors of letters from Russia are just that—rumors! All such letters were seemingly destroyed in



Gustav J. Froese, center, ca1910, with two unknown companions. Credit: Willi Frese.



Gustav J. Froese, ca1930, when he resettled in Far Eastern Siberia. Credit: Willi Frese.

found a temporary place to live in a far flung Mennonite community and Gustav worked as a farm laborer.

In 1937, Gustav was arrested and taken to prison for interrogation. The question and answer portion that follows is the more relevant, important part of the transcript.

² Frese, Willi, "Discovering Ancestors Through a Photo," Apr. 2020 *MFH*.

the 1930s, and nothing else was known of Justina's Froese family until the Spring of 2018.

Willi Frese/Froese, my second cousin once removed, of Rodgau, Germany, and I confirmed our common ancestry after a flurry of letters in Spring-Summer 2018.²

Part of the wealth of information, documents, and photos that Willi had sent to me were three photos of his Great-grandfather Gustav J. Froese (1888-1938). Gustav is my great-uncle—my grandfather's Jacob J. Dyck's half-brother. With these photos was a brief biography of the fate of Gustav and excerpts from

a trial transcript that Willi had obtained from Russian archives. After 85 years, family in North America knew how Gustav had been made to *disappear*.

Willi wrote that since few families were allowed to leave the Soviet Union via Moscow to Europe, Gustav decided to take his family out through the east via Harbin, Manchuria. Willi writes that Gustav left the Barnaul settlement area in 1927 with his wife Margaretha and their four children.

Gustav never made it into Manchuria or to Harbin as the border crossings on the Amur River had been closed. The family apparently



Gustav J. Froesel/Frese (1888-1938) while in a Soviet prison awaiting execution. He was shot on March 10, 1938. The sign board around his neck in Cyrillic alphabet reads: "Frese, G J(acobovich)."

After each of his answers, Gustav had to affix his signature.

Family of the accused:

- Mrs. Margaretha Frese, son Wilhelm belongs to the collective farm (*kolkhoz*) "Energy"
- son Peter studies medicine in Blagoveshchensk³
- daughter Alochina Katherina with son-in-law Vasaly
- daughter Maria, pupil of collective farm "Energy"
- sister Justina Penner, housewife with her husband in the collective farm "Stern"
- brother Jacob Dyck, in North America, a *bauer* (farmer)
- sister Maria, in Canada
- sister Johanna Frese, in South America

Signature: Frese

Questioning

Question: When did you come to the Far East?

Answer: I came to the Far East from Western Siberia in 1927.
Signature.

Question: What did you do when you came to the Far East?

Answer: When I came to the Far East, I settled in Blumenort, Amurgebiet, Tombowskij district, where I started to build and worked in agriculture. *Signature.*

Question: When you came to the Far East, you were occupied with speculation. Why are you hiding it?

Answer: No, I haven't been speculating. *Signature.*

Question: You were a preacher. Answer me.

Answer: No, I was not a preacher. I was a simple member of the Mennonite community. *Signature.*

Question: Do you have contact with foreign countries?

Answer: Until 1932 I had written with my brother, Jacob Jakobovich Dyck, who has lived in North America⁴ since 1908. *Signature.*

Question: We know that you and David Abramovich Penner were planning to emigrate abroad in 1933, for which D.A. Penner specifically went to Vladivostok to the German Consulate to prepare for departure. Give an answer on this question.

Answer: I wanted to emigrate to another country as early as 1930 when there was mass emigration. 1933 was an opportunity for owners of gold or dollars. If I had, I would have emigrated. I don't know that D.A. Penner was in the German Consulate in Vladivostok. *Signature.*

Question: You were arrested as a member of a counter-revolutionary terrorist organization in your village of Lugovoye. Make a full confession about this counter-revolutionary fascist organization.

Answer: I was not a member of a counter-revolutionary fascist organization and did not engage in counter-revolutionary fascist activity. *Signature.*

Question: We repeat, we know that you have carried out counter-revolutionary fascist activity with the aim of destroying the collective farm, damaging the reputation of the party. They have led counter-revolutionary Japanese-Russian agitation to damage the reputation of the Red Army. We demand that you tell us the truth.

Answer: I deny. I have not carried out any counter-revolutionary fascist activity and I cannot add anything to this question. *Signature.*

This log was read to me. The answers are written correctly. *Signature.*

Generally, these *troika* (tribunal) trials lasted mere minutes with a verdict and sentence following in a matter of days. The last photos of Gustav Froese were taken in an unknown Siberian prison just days before his execution by shooting on March 10, 1938. He was likely buried in an unmarked mass grave with hundreds, if not thousands, of others just like him. One of the *disappeared*.

Gustav's wife and children were never informed of what happened to him. It was not until 1992 that Gustav's daughter, Maria Froese Quiring, obtained a copy of his classified prison documents and learned how he had died.

³ Blagoveshchensk is a large city on the Amur River border between Russia and Manchuria. Additional place names in this interrogation transcript give clues to the possible location of a Mennonite community now extinct.

⁴ Whitewater, Kansas.

