

## Johann Gerhard, (1861-1932), and Helena Loewen Funk (1863 – 1938)

David F. Loewen

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**Johann G Funk Family, 1911 (Oldest son, Johann, is not in the photo.)**

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Johann Funk, born in Schoendorf, and Helena Loewen, born in Schoenhorst, were married in 1883 and settled in the village of Katerinowka, a daughter colony of Chortitza. The Funk's farmed about 450 acres and operated a mill, powered by an Otto-Deutz motor. As members of the Mennonite Brethren Church community, Johann and Helena were pious followers of Christ, and raised their family of 13 children to become faithful followers as well (five children died in infancy). Although the law forbade Mennonites from proselytizing, they were permitted to testify to their faith if asked questions, which they did freely.

Their home was filled with singing praises and reading Scripture regularly. It was the memory of all those happy years together as family that sustained Helena in that remote wilderness to which she and Johann had been banished, and where he died. In a letter to daughter, Anna, in the Congo, she wrote:

*“Memory is the best thing life has to offer. In my loneliness I vividly recall the beautiful songs which you as children used to sing.”*

All the children were well educated, and Johann subscribed to journals from America and Germany, and maintained a small library of classic literature and theology. He was ordained as a preacher in his fifties, and realizing his need to improve his language skills, registered for evening classes. In addition to being a successful farmer and a preacher, Johann was also a skilled craftsman who built their furniture in his well-equipped workshop.

Helena Loewen's father, Jacob Loewen, died when she was 12, and her mother when she was 18. She had little formal education, but enjoyed reading and had a sharp sense of humour. She appeared to possess boundless energy for all the work she engaged in and enjoyed doing. She found her strength in her faith, and was often heard to say, "He who abides in me bears much fruit, for without me you can do nothing." In her apron pocket one could always find a New Testament. Apparently, she knew the gospel of John from memory.

Then came the Revolution and the Civil War, and Katerinowka lay in the path of opposing forces, but Machno's men would wreak the most havoc. Even though the village of Katerinowka was on his 'black list' (villages to be destroyed and lives decimated), the Funks survived that storm, although they had been harassed and threatened, and their home and farm ransacked and pillaged.

By 1921, five of the Funk children were married and had received their inheritance. They may have escaped the raids experienced by their parents.. The others were not so fortunate, and in her memoirs, Anna (Funk) Bartsch describes the harrowing, and perhaps, miraculous 'escapes' from the clutches of Machno's men.

By 1927, Johann Funk's financial resources had been depleted and he was concerned about his two unmarried daughters, Anna and Helena. He offered to sell his threshing outfit to pay for their trip to Canada, which the two girls accepted. After 10 months of waiting, their passports suddenly came, giving them only four days to prepare their departure. In her memoirs, Anna writes:

*Looking back, I can still see the train coming around the bend. My body trembles – can I bear it? I draw aside for a few minutes, alone and an inaudible groan wells up within me! I have made a free decision to say good-bye, which I sense somehow will be forever! A final embrace – there are no words – we are speechless, father, mother, and the others who are with us. We board. We wave good-bye. Auf Wiedersehen! But this was never to be. We never saw each other again (The Hidden Hand, Bartsch).*

Failed government promises and the years of marauding bandits drove thousands of Mennonites to emigrate between 1923-1929. Those who had not left, were very ready to emigrate in 1929, including Johann and Helena Funk. In his memoirs, Johann Funk's grandson, Aron Funk, writes:

*Almost all the Mennonites wanted to leave, our parents were among them, but it was no longer possible. Our grandparents (Johann Funks) also wanted to go, but they wanted all the children to leave first and then they would follow. Those who didn't take the first chance had to stay behind, and most of them perished.*

Time was not on their side and the delay would cost Johann his life. In 1929, Johann and Helena made the decision to join thousands of other Mennonites at the “Gates of Moscow”. I am assuming that he had already been dispossessed of his farm holdings under Stalin’s dekulakization policy. In Moscow, Johann was arrested and exiled to a wilderness workcamp in Ryabinovik, Siberia. Helena voluntarily joined him in this exile, where he died of starvation on February 16, 1932, at the age of 70. His oldest son, Johann, had arrived prior to his death and remained until his passing. Aron Funk writes in his memoirs:

*Our grandparents were also exiled to the north. Grandfather died in the banishment. Uncle Johann Funk went there while he was still alive, but already weak and ill, and stayed there until he died. After grandfather's death, grandmother was released, and Uncle Johann brought her back with him.*

Anna Funk Bartsch, now serving a first term as missionary in the Belgian Congo, with her husband, Heinrich, recalls getting a letter from her mother in Siberia, dated November 1932.

*She wrote that my father had died. I had seen my parents for the last time in 1927 when on their advice, my sister Lena and I had left them to go to Canada. They had planned to join us, but things hadn't worked out that way. They too had come to the gates of Moscow but instead of going to Canada, father was sent into a prison camp in Siberia and mother joined him voluntarily. He was already 70 years old. There they worked for three hard years in a slave labor camp and hungered. Finally even father's generally strong body gave way and he succumbed. News of this shattered me (The Hidden Hand, Bartsch).*

Upon returning to Ukraine, Helena rejoined her daughter Susanna, in Nikolaital, where she died on December 23, 1938, at the age of 75. One account indicates that she never fully recovered her health after the three starvation-filled years in the Gulag.

Between 1924 and 1927, five of the Funk children emigrated to Canada – Jacob, Helena, Margareta, Anna, and Cornelius.

Four sons were arrested and sent eastward, where they perished or disappeared without a trace. Johann Funk had five daughters from his two marriages, three of which lived into adulthood: Lydia, Frieda, and Anna. In 1941, Johann was “drafted” into the army and disappeared without a trace. Regarding the other three, at this point I only know of the dates when they disappeared from their families: Isaac (1931), Heinrich (1934), and Abram (1936)<sup>1</sup>.

David Funk lost his property in 1933, under the same dekulakization policy that victimized his father. His son, Aron, writes:

*Everything was taken away from us and we had to leave our house, which was demolished. When collectivization started, our father became an accountant in the Collective, and he always wanted to be very honest. But with this Soviet government that was no longer possible. The accountant was not allowed to record it accurately, but the way the superiors wanted it. For example, our father was supposed to write down working*

*days for one of their own who, in reality, had not worked. Our father said: "That's not right!" And that was the cause for his dekulakization.*

Two daughters, Maria and Susanna, evacuated westward with the retreating German army in 1943, but were soon repatriated to Siberia by the Soviet authorities, like so many other Mennonites, where they died within a short period of time. Katherina's fate is unknown<sup>2</sup>.

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#### **Notes:**

1. Some of these dates may be slightly inaccurate, due to conflicting information. Furthermore, I have had access to only a portion of Aron Funk's memoirs. If I should be able to locate the entire memoirs, details of the other family members' fate may become known.
2. Likewise regarding the daughters, access to the entire memoirs may reveal a complete picture of their respective lives.

Johann Bartsch is BK #216964 in the GRanDMA database.

#### **Sources:**

- Bartsch, Anna, *The Hidden Hand – The Story of Anna Bartsch's Life*, 1987
- Funk, Aron (1923-1992), *Excerpts of his Memoirs*, 1987
- GRanDMA