

LETTERS FROM TANTE ANNA

Separation for our Mennonite forbearers in Russia was painful and most often permanent. Not only did they suffer the pain of separation as a result of the decision of those who had emigrated earlier by choice, but by the late 1920s, they also experienced the painful separation from one another as a result of arbitrary arrests that led to one-way tickets to eastern work camps or death sentences. Abram Driedger was arrested in Moscow in 1929 for the crime of being a kulak while attempting to emigrate with his family. His death sentence was reduced to 10 years in a distant work camp where he died of pneumonia four years later. All but a son never saw him again.

At some point, likely by 1930, the finality of their situation became evident. The decisions of the 1920s would follow each one of them for the rest of their lives. The pain and tragedies that followed in the years ahead were often the subject of correspondence exchanged between family and relatives on either side of the ocean. That correspondence did not always flow seamlessly. There were periods of time when it stopped completely, due to political events in the UdSSR, and there were times when letters flowed sporadically, suggesting either confiscation of letters or a broken postal system.

Margaretha Driedger's letter spoke of the pain of that separation from her husband, Abram Driedger. There still was hope of a reunion, but little did she know at this time that she would never see him again.

It is a hard life. And on top of that there is still no news from papa; no sign of life for four months already. I am afraid that he has been taken away from us. How hard it will be for me to be divorced without talking to him. If he is really going to be gone for another year, you can call it that - buried alive.
(Mar 7, 1930, Margaretha Driedger)

But even in the midst of the pain she was living with, she wanted to know how her older sister and family were faring in Canada:

Now I would like you to write us a long and detailed letter about your life and material situation there.

Abraham and Maria Loewen received correspondence as well from former neighbours and friends in Pretoria. Some letters not addressed to them, were often shared with them by those relatives who had received them. This letter from a former neighbour in Pretoria, addressed to Maria Loewen's nephew and niece in Alberta:

How often I see you still sitting in the spirit and singing, where you did it so often, where is the time. You are so happy and we so unhappy. You have no idea about our life here. We never thought that we would have to go hungry again.

We wanted to be satisfied, but first no flour, no meat, no milk, and no lard, only the green soup; hungry all day and nothing to eat, as one feels like it.

Why did we have to stay behind, it was destined for us, such a hard life. Greetings to Greta and Peter. Greta, you can't imagine how often I see you in my mind. I sang the song to you. You are gone, that was always so precious to me, yes, everything is gone. When we got the package, we drank tea and thought of you, how good you are. Goodbye, Ade. Your suffering neighbor.
(Daniel & Justina Loewen, October 10, 1933)

The separation was not only physical, but for those languishing in the Soviet Union, it also often included separation from news of their own families and friends in the UdSSR. Even though they were not always separated by great distances, they might just as well have been separated by an ocean. Isaak Loewen, an elected minister in Orenburg (Deyevka) in correspondence with his brother Abraham, in Canada, discusses the fate of their siblings, Martin (Loewen), Helena (Funk), and Margaretha (Hildebrandt):

Martin Regier (nephew) died far away. Where did our brother Martin die and where is his family? I already asked in the previous letter. Do you also know something about Johann Funks? Heinrich Hildebrandts are both supposed to be dead. (Isaak Loewen, April 9, 1933)

The pain of separation appears to have waned more for some than for others, or perhaps, some simply had too many pressing, daily circumstances to focus on, or families whose attention was needed more. Perhaps it was a coping mechanism - focusing less on what might have been and instead, on the reality of their daily situation. The pain of separation did not appear to wane for Maria's sister, Anna. She craved communication with her Canadian family.

It is Sunday afternoon, and so I want to visit you by letter, because my thoughts are only daily with all relatives, especially with you, who have already sent me so much help.

How I would love to be with you; surely a small place would be available for me. How is your harvest, and how are you doing? Are your children still all at home? How is Lena and Sawatzkys and the Peters? Please give my greetings to everyone, also Abram Eitzens. Are they already on their own land? Would love to drop in on everyone.

(Anna Eitzen Bergen, October 15, 1934)

Since I have waited in vain for a letter from you, I want to write again. Maybe the letter has been lost again and you will get it. I love to read letters and get almost none. It always takes too long for you to write. I feel very abandoned. Did you receive my letter from June? Have always received what you have sent so far, say thank you very much for it. Do you live close together with Dycks, and does Maria often come home? How are Peters' children and Sawatzky's and Abram Eitzen doing? Is your farm already right? I would like to take a look at you.
(Anna Eitzen Bergen, August 25, 1935)

It was no different for Maria's sister, Margaretha Driedger. The pain of separation and a feeling of abandonment did not diminish with the years; the evidence is in her letters. In Margaretha's letter of 1935, she reveals the pain of separation from her husband, from her children, and from her sister.

We received your valued letter on April 16; thank you very much for it. It's the only joy remaining, and we want to keep that as long as we can. Dear sister, you were right, it's a struggle dealing with difficult thoughts regarding our children who are so far apart from one another, and one looks longingly for something rich in life...

How I yearn to be there, but I can't drive there; I too am not well. My body aches; I am anemic, and nothing appears to help. I have now received some other medicine and if it does not help, I am to have an operation as well, and where will I leave the children?

Isn't that sad news? Oh how difficult such news is for a mother's heart, and now also this sad news about Greta. I would love to visit everyone and help, but too far away. But I remember you daily in my prayers. That's why you do not fail either; everyone has their cross to carry. Who would have thought five years ago that we would experience such life? Often one tires of all the worries and heavy thoughts. We don't need to worry ourselves any longer about father (her husband), but the deep pain will never heal.

I am constantly wondering each day, what day is it actually? And it always worries me that he (Henry) had to be on his own so early in his life¹. My hair is becoming grey, and the children are far away and sick. I haven't seen Henry for two years; there he can satisfy his hunger which we could not offer him here. If it's the Lord's will, he will come for a visit this summer. How I would love to visit you; so much to be discussed. We would love to have attended the wedding and tasted everything. Such is no longer possible for us... I trust you will share with them (children in Alberta) our situation here. I would love so much to have Henry here with me – we are lacking everything.

All the best and don't forget your abandoned sister. (Margaretha Driedger², April 18, 1935)

- 1. Henry (11) and Peter (17) left their mother to live with a sister in Chortitza, where they would have access to food; it was feared they might starve should they have stayed with their mother.**
- 2. Margaretha Driedger died in 1967, at the age of 87.**