

## Reiseschuld and a Frugal Lifestyle



Abraham J. & Maria (Eitzen) Loewen Family, 1926

Like all the other families who came to Canada, thanks to the generous assistance of the CPR, Abraham Loewen had a travel debt (*Reiseschuld*) to pay off. Abraham and Maria Loewen had vowed that they would neither purchase nor set foot in a car until that debt was paid off. They were, therefore, quite upset and disappointed with son, Martin, when he purchased a car for \$360.00, before the debt had been paid.

The car was a good deal and not to be missed, thought Martin. In fact, his mother was much more upset with Martin than his father was. Abraham was able to see the value in having a vehicle, whereas Maria was noted for her frugality, and this was certainly not a priority for her. The money needed to pay off the debt was in fact, on its way from that autumn's harvest (1929), but that was not good enough for Abraham Loewen, and certainly not for his wife, Maria.

The Loewen's did eventually buy a car; it was a little coupe, with the back converted into something resembling a truck box. Three could sit in the front and another two or three in the back. This car was traded several years later for a larger car—a “touring” car with curtains. Martin had met someone in Calgary with a Dodge, like the Loewen car, only it was a sedan. This man had always wanted a coupe, so an even trade was arranged. Of course, the sons did all the driving. It should be noted that Abraham Loewen never learned to drive a car, even after 50 years in Canada.

The car purchase had not been the first time that Martin had surprised his parents and siblings with his impulsive spending. In the very first years of farming in Simons Valley, Alberta, the Loewens had been involved, in one way or another, with breaking horses. Martin had broken horses on the Colpitts ranch where he was a hired hand, and through his connection, the Loewens were also able to benefit materially by housing horses on their farm and breaking them. On one occasion, Martin was charged with taking these horses to the auction in Calgary, a distance of about 20 km. Abraham sent a steer along to sell for cash to make a payment on their CPR travel debt.

At the auction, Martin noted a beautiful “pump” organ on which the bidding was not very

high. According to a brother's account, Martin had felt it a shame that such an opportunity was not being taken advantage of and so he entered a bid of \$25.00 and became the proud owner of a pump organ. According to his sister's account, the price was only \$5.00, and Martin had bid in error. Regardless, at that time, \$25.00 was a good month's wage and it should not be surprising that Abraham was disappointed with Martin's arrival home that day – a horse-drawn wagon (which had rubber wheels), loaded with an organ.

His father's displeasure was mitigated by his mother's (not to mention his sisters') approval. This time the value was appreciated sooner by the other parent. That organ became the focal point of many family gatherings and in the early years, of Sunday morning worship times in the Loewen home, where the extended family gathered. Tina points out that she bought the organ almost immediately and became the sole player of the instrument in the Loewen family. When the Loewens moved to the West Coast in 1947, the organ also made the move. As a young boy, I remember the many times we played on that organ, pulling the "stops" and pumping the pedals to get the organ to make a sound. The organ was sold in the 1980's when Tina sold the home and moved to smaller accommodations. The organ found a home, for a while, in an Abbotsford shoe store.

Abraham and Maria's frugality was modeled not only to their children, but also to their children's spouses. On one occasion, Maria Loewen asked her daughter-in-law, Sara Loewen, if they had already repaid the travel debt. When Sara enquired why she was asking, Maria replied that she noticed that Sara was wearing a new dress. On other occasions, shortly after marriage, Sara, experienced visits in their Calgary home from Abraham, who came into the city on errands, and upon seeing objects or clothing in the home that he felt were unnecessary luxuries, he would remark, "Musst du dass haben?" (Do you really need that?) Many years later, when living next door to Abraham and Maria, in Abbotsford, Sara enjoyed friendly 'ribbing', by asking her father-in-law, Abraham, whether he really needed "that", referring to some item they may have purchased for themselves. Apparently, Abraham enjoyed the 'payback' comments.

On the day that Abraham Loewen stood behind the counter at the office where he was to repay his loan, another gentleman stood on the other side and was astounded that the loan had been repaid in only three years. That gentleman was none other than Dr. Drury who had been in Russia administering medical tests to prospective immigrants and had had the authority to grant or to deny permission to emigrate to Canada. He had almost denied Abraham Loewen permission because of his deformed thumb, the result of a heavy trunk falling on his thumb. But here he was, paying back the loan in three short years. This was quite an accomplishment, considering how many never paid their debts, and still others who were unable to pay their debts until the 1950's.

There were 11 people in the Loewen family to pay for. Of course, the four oldest, Lena, Abe, Martin & Isaac worked very hard in the first years and gave their entire earnings home so that the loan would be paid off. Some say it was only because Abraham had lots of sons (5) who would be able to help carry the burden of paying for the trip, that Dr. Drury gave his permission.

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*Abraham and Maria (Eitzen) Loewen and family emigrated from Russia in 1926. They were part of the Orenburg group, led by Peter P Dyck.*