

Helen Rose Pauls. *Refugee: A memoir retold by Helen Rose Pauls*. Self-published (Globe Printers), Chilliwack, 2016. 96 pp.

Reviewed by Robert Martens

The refugee story, apparently endless, goes on and on with horrible regularity. Russian Mennonites, of course, have their own version, fleeing their homeland in the 1920s and 1940s to find sanctuary in North and South America. In *Refugee*, that greater story is encapsulated in the life of one such person, Agnes Sawatsky Pauls, who suffered years of exile and imprisonment in the USSR before escaping with the retreating German army in 1943. Fraser Valley writer Helen Rose Pauls has put in written form the verbal reminiscences of Agnes, her mother-in-law, and the result is a narrative that cuts to the heart.

No book review could adequately speak to that story. The following excerpt might give an idea of how one person's resilience and faith brought her through unimaginable suffering with her spirit intact. The story begins in a work prison in the 1930s.

Extract, *Refugee*

One night my name was called. My term of punishment for escaping from Siberia was over. My debt was paid, but I knew that upon my release I would be sent back to that awful slave labour camp in Siberia from which I had escaped. Once again I was downcast by fear and indecision. Now be sent back? I still had hopes of finding my family in Arkadak, where life must surely be more pleasant and perhaps a semblance of our former life would still go on. I tried to weigh the odds. Certainly, I was closer now than I ever would be again.

An opportunity presented itself and I took it. At nightfall when others were being counted before entering the prison compound for the evening meal, I hung back in the forest. Then I ran. I had no idea where we were or near what town our prison lay. I searched for railroad tracks as I knew they always led to a town. One evening about midnight I reached a train station, exhausted by fear and constant running, numb with cold and desperately hungry. Everywhere there were people milling around. Control was strong and the police were apprehending people left and right. I knew I could not stay.

"Your pass, madam, your pass, sir?" shouted the police. A pass! I had no pass. I could tell that my way was blocked once more and I would be apprehended. The future was completely hopeless. Without a pass I could not take a job. No work meant no food. I left the station and found a spot in the forest to say my last prayers.

Death would come easily, I thought, as I sank gratefully into the soft inviting snow. A pleasant numbness, a sweet forgetting and all would be over. Desperation weighed down each cell of my tired body as I shifted my weight for greatest comfort. Even from this distance, the din of the heaving rabble at the train station fell on my ears. I wrestled with God. I couldn't grasp this. My grandfather had been a preacher. My father had been a choirmaster and church leader, and a most conscientious Christian.

Our home had been peaceful. Where was God now?

My body shook and retched. All day I had not eaten, filling my mouth with snow to ward off fainting. And now all was hopeless. I would die here alone from hunger or cold, far from my loved ones.

Solemnly, I made a pact with God I had not addressed for a long time. I promised that I would thank and praise him all my life if he gave me one last chance. That I would help others and do good at every opportunity.

An amazing thing happened. It was as if the heavens opened and I saw God and the angels. A voice spoke. Was it inside me? Above me? I saw soft lights and a pleasant warmth surrounded me. The voice seemed to whisper, "You are my child. Get up. Shake the snow off your clothes and walk to a place that I will show you."

Dumbfounded, I arose, and walked as if in a daze. The station was behind me; the noises still clamouring in my ears. Far away, dogs barked. The night sky was gorgeous with stars. I was near to collapse and managed to walk forward with shuddering steps. A few modest homes were set back on the trail. Station workers' homes, I assumed. My glance was directed to one small building. A light still shone. I had nothing to lose, although I knew that citizens were severely punished if they helped anyone without documents and anyone would be afraid not to report me. But prison meant death anyway. I knocked. (39-40)

Refugee can be purchased at the Mennonite Heritage Museum or from the author.