

Jacob A. Neufeld. *Path of Thorns. Soviet Mennonite Life under Communist and Nazi Rule*. Ed. and trans. by Harvey L. Dyck and Sarah Dyck. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014. 444 pp.

Book review by John B. Toews

*Path of Thorns* brings new life and vibrancy to Jacob A. Neufeld's largely forgotten German memoir, *Tiefenwege* ("deep" or dark ways), first published in 1957. I know of no other surviving narrative, either in scope or depth, that better articulates the Russian Mennonite experience between 1917 and 1948. The Civil War, attempts at reconstruction, the drastic shifts under Stalin's First Five-Year Plan, the terrors of the 1930s – Neufeld documents one man's survival journey through these times. He personifies the twenty percent of Mennonite male heads of families who eluded imprisonment, exile to labour camps, or outright execution. In addition he joined the German and Mennonite colonists in the so-called "Great Trek" from Ukraine to Germany that began in the fall of 1943. Co-translator Professor Harvey Dyck is to be congratulated for his informative and incisive introduction that so aptly sets the stage for a better understanding of the memoir. In doing so he also provides the reader with a substantial bibliographic resource.

As a translation the book very successfully transitions the agonies of a Germanic/Mennonite soul into an idiomatic English that will deeply resonate with the reader. It is a masterful translation that at times, while not at all distorting the German text, frequently appears to elucidate the essence and imagery of the narrative more clearly and graphically than the original.

The reader might be struck by Neufeld's pro-German sympathies. The Great Trek, via the Warthegau in Poland, brought Neufeld and his co-religionists into a collapsing German nation and its subsequent post-war disasters. Readers who are accustomed to western attitudes towards a defeated enemy capable of great brutality may be taken aback by Neufeld's deep empathy for things German. From his perspective, the German Wehrmacht "rescued us from our oppressors" (369) when they occupied Ukraine. Later, German citizens, themselves in great deprivation, shared their rations, offered sympathy, and housed fleeing Mennonites. As one who had found refuge, Neufeld writes: "our deep sympathy for the Germans is probably understandable ... yet we had never imagined that judgment [upon them] would be so pitiless" (339). He was a man of two worlds. His homeland had rejected him; Germany had given him shelter and shown him kindness. Many had been victims of Nazi atrocities; he, on the contrary, experienced kindness at the hands of ordinary Germans. For him there was another side to the story.

Neufeld periodically pauses in his memoir and struggles to make sense of his experiences. As a deeply pious Mennonite Christian, he seeks to come to terms with the countless assaults on his innermost being. For him, Stalinism had battered traditional Mennonite identity in every possible way. He observes how quickly, during the Great Trek westward, the human being could change "under conditions of threat, affliction and severe poverty" (285); and yet, amid all the failings, there were the "matchless deeds of our women ... not one of them collapsed" (287). Throughout the narrative Neufeld, amid calamitous situations that might generate despair or rebellion, maintains a "Kingdom of God" perspective: God is in charge (370-72). Consistently he provides a clear personal perspective on who he is and on the world view he firmly holds. Most moving, for me, was the letter he addressed to his wife, Lene, in September, 1947, while he was still in the Gronau, Westphalia transit camp.

This translation is a key contribution to the telling of an incredible story. In its scope, depth and presentation, no other book better articulates the bitter Mennonite experience under Stalinist rule. Beautifully written, masterfully translated and meticulously introduced, it belongs in every Mennonite home.

*Path of Thorns* can be purchased at the MHSBC office at Garden Park Tower, 2825 Clearbrook Road, Abbotsford.