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Canada or the United States?: The Paths of Three Ethnic German Families in the Wake of World War Two

It was twenty degrees below zero as a mother and her children hurriedly placed a few bundles onto a wagon pulled by a lame horse. Leaving the Polish farm the *Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle* (Ethnic German Liaison Office) had assigned them a year earlier, the family departed; it was January 1945. Although unsure of their destination, their goal was to stay ahead of the Soviet Army. After traveling for four days, resting for ten, and then traveling for a few more, they settled in a town housing fellow refugees and former neighbors from Neufeld, their ethnic German village in Chortitza, Ukraine. Lulled by a sense of false security, it was there that the Soviet Army reached them, repatriating them to Irkutsk, Siberia. The USSR separated the family during the repatriation process.¹ Repatriation to the Soviet Union was one outcome of World War II for ethnic Germans from Ukraine. Yet, others immigrated to Canada and the United States and a few settled down in West Germany. This article focuses on the stories of three families to illustrate the different paths ethnic Germans took after the war. These individuals are a case study that demonstrates the influential role legislative bodies and aid organizations had on post-World War II immigration.

The Zafts, Bobs, and Degens originated from the ethnic German settlement of Chortitza. In 1789, four hundred Mennonite families from West Prussia established Chortitza in southern Russia on the west bank of the Dnieper River. They, with thousands of other Germans, had come to Russia in response to Tsarina Catherine the Great's offer of free land and tax exemptions. The promise of exemption from military service was particularly attractive for Mennonites. The nineteenth century was a time

of prosperity for the ethnic German settlement, and Chortitza expanded to include eighteen daughter villages as other ethnic German settlements developed across the steppes.²

The twentieth century, however, brought challenges for many ethnic Germans living in Russia including anti-German sentiments and universal male conscription into the military. Johann and Marianne Bob illustrate the particular trials this ethnic group encountered from World War I to the German occupation in 1941. Born to German Russian families in Dnepropetrovsk, a city north of Chortitza, Johann became a blacksmith and Marianne a housewife. In 1910, five years after their marriage, the Roman Catholic couple moved to the village of Neu-Witebsk, a daughter colony of Chortitza. The family lived there for twenty-five years. When World War I began, the Russian Army conscripted Johann Bob into the military where he served from 1914 to 1915. In 1915 German forces captured him, leaving his wife with three very young children. As a prisoner of war, the German Army placed Johann in a prisoner of war camp in Würzburg, Germany. Four years later, the German Army released Johann, and he returned to his family in Neu-Witebsk. During the Stalinist repressions of the early 1930s, the NKVD imprisoned Johann and sentenced him to four months of hard labor. After Johann's release, the family moved to Chortitza.³

As the Bobs' story illustrates, Chortitza had grown from its beginnings as an exclusively Mennonite settlement to, by the early twentieth century, one with different religious faiths. When the German Army invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, Chortitza's population was eighty percent Mennonite and twenty percent Lutheran, Catholic, and Seventh-day Adventist. In addition to the loss of many of the original privileges that attracted the migrants in the late 1700s, the Soviet Union closed churches, prohibited educational instruction in German, and gathered private land into collectives.

This therefore helps explain why ethnic Germans and other Soviet citizens welcomed the German Army when they arrived in the late summer of 1941. The German occupation brought relief from Soviet policy and terror; individuals living there though were now under Nazi policy. The Bobs' twenty-five year-old son Joseph had to leave his studies at a teacher training institute to begin compulsory labor for the *Organisation Todt*, a Nazi military engineering group. Joseph worked on construction projects for the Nazis until 1943. Then, in 1943, the *Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle* or Ethnic German Liaison Office decided to move all ethnic Germans to Germany or farms in Poland. With the Soviet front moving closer each day, the Third Reich decided that ethnic Germans in Ukraine would serve a greater purpose as a bastion of Germanness in Poland. Johann, Marianne, and Joseph Bob left Chortitza on October 4, 1943. One month and eight

days later, they arrived at the end of the 1,200 kilometer train trip. The *Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle* assigned the family to Camp 168 in Ratibor (now Racibórz), Poland. The ethnic German resettlement camp was not the only camp in town. There was a slave labor camp consisting of Poles removed from their homes to make room for arriving ethnic Germans like the Bobs. After the *Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle* processed Johann, Marianne, and Joseph Bob, the Nazis declared them 100 percent German. Receiving German citizenship, however, did not shield them from service to the Fatherland. After three months in camp, Joseph began work at a police training department in Bendsburg, Poland. Bendsburg was located forty kilometers from Auschwitz and contained a Jewish ghetto as well as a POW camp inhabited by British prisoners.⁴

Furthermore, the *Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle* separated the Bob family during resettlement. The *Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle* sent Johann and Marianne's second son, Johann, and his family of four to a different resettlement camp in Poland. This was possibly the result of son Johann's marriage to a non-German woman resulting in the family's "subpar Germanness."⁵ Johann and Marianne's daughter, meanwhile, was living in a third resettlement camp. Justina Bob had married a Mennonite ethnic German, Gerhard, from Chortitza in 1937. However, one year later, the NKVD arrested him. Justina and Gerhard's child was born soon after his father's disappearance. In 1943, Justina and her four year old traveled by train to the Neustadt resettlement camp located near Danzig in West Prussia. This camp held many Mennonites from Chortitza and perhaps Justina Bob's in-laws as well.⁶

Ethnic Germans of all faiths from Chortitza had experiences similar to the Bob family during the early twentieth century. The Russian Army had conscripted men into its service, the NKVD arrested fathers and brothers during the 1930s, and families aided the German army during the early 1940s with information and military service. The *Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle* resettled all ethnic Germans from their homes, and ethnic Germans accepted land taken from Poles and Jews. In addition, they all experienced the chaos of the final days of World War II. In 1945, right before the end of the war, American soldiers took Joseph Bob prisoner. His last known location was in a POW camp. In the late 1980s, the German Red Cross's last record of him was still from 1946.⁷

While ethnic Germans died during the war, there were other ethnic Germans who survived the war and its aftermath only for the Soviet Union to repatriate them. The Jakob Degen family, Lutherans from Chortitza, arrived in Johannsdorf, Poland at resettlement camp 224 in 1943.⁸ However, sometime during the Soviet offensive westward in the spring of

1945, Soviet soldiers captured them. As former Soviet citizens who had cooperated with Nazi Germany during World War II, the USSR considered the Degens to be traitors. As a result, the Soviet government repatriated them to Dushanbe, the capitol of Tajikistan, where they were still living in 1965.⁹

Those who survived both the war and the USSR's repatriation attempts primarily had three choices: remain in West Germany, immigrate to the United States, or move to Canada. Some like Justina Bob decided to stay. She settled in Heilbronn, West Germany, with her son. In 1975, she was still searching for her husband who had then been missing for thirty-seven years.

The threat of repatriation and fear of the Soviet Union's reprisals, however, encouraged most ethnic Germans from the Soviet Union to leave Europe. Of the 35,000 Russian Mennonites that the *Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle* resettled in Germany in 1943, the Soviet Union repatriated 23,000 to the USSR, settling them in places like Archangelsk near the Arctic Circle.¹⁰

Because of the resettlement of ethnic Germans from Ukraine in 1943, scholars studying Chortitza must shift and focus on the people themselves rather than residences rooted to a particular place. Therefore, most scholars write about Chortitza's history from its origin to 1943, and do not extend beyond the German occupation during World War II.¹¹ This article, however, takes a longer chronological approach from the early twentieth century until the 1950s to understand the trajectories of individuals who continued when their village of Chortitza ceased to exist. Furthermore, this research focuses on post-World War II immigration. Current scholarship on Mennonite immigration during this period often focuses on the church's role of immigration and aid relief without placing the Mennonite experience in context.¹² Works also fail to adequately discuss Mennonite changes in identity, lobbying power, and the complexities of working with United Nations organizations to obtain Displaced Person status.

The immigration of ethnic Germans to North America followed distinct trends. Between 1947 and 1957, most Mennonites from Chortitza moved to Canada, whereas ethnic Germans of other faiths immigrated to the United States. Therefore, what role did religious affiliation have on immigration choices after World War II? Differences in legislation between the United States and Canada and organizations' understanding of and reaction to those laws was the driving force behind immigration destination choices.

Despite the different immigration patterns that developed after World War II, Canada and the United States did share similarities. In 1945,

both countries had restrictive immigration legislation. Neither country allowed German citizens to immigrate until 1950. Both countries had well established Mennonite communities and immigration allowances for close relatives. In America, the prairie states of Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, and the Dakotas had substantial Mennonite populations. Canada's western provinces of Alberta, British Columbia, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba also had large Mennonite settlements. Mennonites in both the United States and Canada were willing to sponsor immigrants and had the financial means to do so.

There were, however, key differences. In 1873, Mennonites had petitioned Ulysses S. Grant for one million acres and exemption from military service.¹³ The United States did not make those provisions, nor did it grant conscientious objector status during World War I. Canada, on the other hand, gave Mennonites the option of alternative service during war. The province of Manitoba also offered open land for concentrated Mennonite settlements. In 1873, a delegation of Mennonites from Ukraine arrived in North America seeking land on which to resettle their colonies. They traveled northward through the American prairie states up the Red River Valley to Winnipeg. Finding Canada to their liking because of its more liberal laws regarding military service, approximately 2,160 Mennonites from Chortitza moved there in the late nineteenth century.¹⁴ In this era, "Canada did its best to secure as many of these agriculturalists as possible."¹⁵ Canada offered travel assistance, exemption from military service and oaths of allegiance, bloc settlement, and the ability to establish their own schools.¹⁶ The Canadian government was even interested in "bringing to the Canadian West all the 60,000 Mennonites in Russia," but it did not materialize because of depreciating Russian currency.¹⁷

Despite anti-German sentiment during World War I in the United States and Canada, the need for more labor opened the door for Mennonite immigration to Canada again in 1922.¹⁸ If individuals passed a medical exam and secured employment, they could enter Canada. Nearly 20,000 Mennonites from Russia immigrated to Canada in the 1920s with the help of the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization (CMBC) and the Canadian Pacific Railroad.¹⁹ CMBC, a Mennonite relief organization, partnered with the railroad which provided transportation as well as land on credit to the Mennonite organization. After World War II, the Canadian Pacific Railroad again aided Mennonite immigration to Canada's western provinces.

One year after World War II ended, the Canadian government passed legislation which allowed Canadians to sponsor parents, siblings, or children. Ottawa also voted to accept other documents in lieu of passports.²⁰

The recent immigration of the 1920s to Canada ensured that close relatives were still alive yet had sufficient time to become Canadian citizens and establish themselves financially. Asking a close relative to sponsor Mennonite immigrants was a viable and much-used option. When one did not have close relatives, they found ways to create them. "A Ukrainian who entered Canada under the close-relatives plan later remarked, 'You can't pick your parents - but we learned after the war that you can pick your uncles and aunts. And when we arrived here we were often surprised to see how little they looked like us.'"²¹ A few years later the definition of a close relative expanded to include first cousins.

In 1946, Canada provided immigration exemptions for farm laborers, forestry workers, domestics, and close relatives, two years before the United States passed its Displaced Person Act. Mennonites had a history of owning farms and being agriculturalists in Ukraine. The argument that the agricultural provision helped steer Mennonites to Canada is not entirely accurate; however, many Mennonites did take advantage of this opportunity. Wealthy Mennonites who owned land in Ukraine yet hired workers to do the farming had to learn simple farm tasks once they arrived in Canada such as milking cows. By early 1947, the processing of the first group of immigrants was complete; in April, the *Aquitania* sailed to Canada from Bremerhaven, Germany.

One month later on May 1, 1947, Prime Minister Mackenzie King's speech on immigration highlighted the direction of Canadian policy. Canada was ready to move past the restrictions of the previous decade; a low birth rate and economic boom led to the need for labor and a growing population. King made it clear that Canada would accept immigrants who would aid their economy, but also stressed that Ottawa had every right to exclude someone from immigrating. During 1947, Mennonites from Chortitza settled in British Columbia, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan as part of both close relative and labor schemes.

The liberalization of immigration policy in 1947 enabled Mennonites to immigrate to Canada. The change in policy was partly the result of the Mennonite Central Committee and other organizations lobbying the Canadian Parliament. The Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) was an aid organization of the Mennonite Church. After World War II, MCC was one of the first relief organizations in Germany. Mennonite refugees flocked to its camps and looked to Mennonite leaders for immigration help. The Canadian government respected Mennonite organizations because they had previously taken responsibility for arriving immigrants. Consequently, with the aid of the Canadian Pacific Railroad, these individuals had not become a public charge or a financial burden to Canada.

The Mennonite-Canadian relationship was also unique because MCC convinced immigration officials of Mennonite eligibility as Displaced Persons or DPs. This was very important because only DPs qualified for assistance from United Nation aid organizations like the International Refugee Organization. DPs were citizens of an allied country or those who had been forcibly removed from their homes during World War II. Ethnic Germans had received German citizenship in 1943 and 1944 when the *Volksdeutsche Mittelstelle* resettled them. They also willingly left their homes because of fears of Soviet reprisals if they stayed. Therefore, this disqualified them from Displaced Person status and immigration aid. Nevertheless, the MCC convinced international governments that ethnic German Mennonites were not ethnic German but rather Dutch. The MCC argued that because their ancestors originated in Holland and their last names were Dutch that they were in fact ethnically Dutch instead of German. The MCC also argued that Nazi Germany forced the Mennonites to leave their homes in Ukraine. Although the International Refugee Organization never officially accepted these explanations, they did allow ethnic German Mennonites to immigrate as DPs.

As other countries, including the United States, opened their doors to Displaced Persons, Canada realized that it had to further liberalize its immigration policy in order to be able to attract enough immigrants for its labor needs. A Canadian immigration official remarked, "There is no doubt that for most DPs, the United States is still the promised land and Canada only a second choice."²² In order to have more resources for immigration, Ottawa created the Department of Citizenship and Immigration in 1950 to replace the Department of Mines and Resources. Canada now welcomed any type of relative, domestic, farmer, or other worker.²³ The industries that brought immigrants as laborers included the forestry service, sugar beet farming, and agriculture. Thirty to one hundred single Mennonite men qualified for each labor scheme. At times, Mennonites comprised one fifth of the total quota allowed.²⁴ Workers could not bring their families to Canada until they had saved enough money to provide for them.²⁵

Between 1947 and 1951, 7,698 ethnic German Mennonites from the Soviet Union arrived in Canada.²⁶ In 1952, Canada passed an act that gave the cabinet power to reject immigrants for ethnic, class, health, or other reasons.²⁷ This was the first legislation since 1910 that was discriminatory in this manner. In 1957, the immigration boom to Canada was over.²⁸

Although Canada's doors opened prior to America's, most Chortitzans of other faiths immigrated to the United States. Unlike Mennonites, ethnic Germans of other faiths were unable to obtain DP status, and therefore were not eligible for immigration to Canada in 1947. Second, few had

close relatives in Canada and therefore were unable to use the close relative preference to obtain a visa. Third, the organizations that assisted immigrants of Catholic, Lutheran, and Seventh-day Adventist faiths had their headquarters in the United States and therefore relocated immigrants to America. Lastly, the United States was the more popular destination. The Federal German Office for Emigration stated that only 20 percent of Germans wanted to immigrate to Canada as compared to 47 percent to the United States.²⁹

The Zaft family from Chortitz was one of thousands of ethnic German families interested in immigrating to North America after World War II. The Zaft family had been in the Neustadt resettlement camp with Justina Bob during the war. The Zafts survived the war together as a family, and in 1947 the family of ten had made a daring escape across the Inner German border from the Soviet Zone to the West. A few weeks later, the head of the family, Rudolph Zaft, wrote a letter to the Seventh-day Adventist Church headquarters in Maryland. Still fearful of the Soviet Union repatriating them, Zaft reached out to his denomination's headquarters begging them for help. Unfortunately, America was not ready for German immigrants.

After World War II, the United States did not necessarily need a labor force like Canada. President Truman did, however, feel a moral obligation to help refugees after World War II. In December of 1945, he used executive action to grant 42,000 DPs unused quota visas.³⁰ However, most Americans were not overly welcoming. Surveys show that in 1946, only five percent of Americans were interested in increasing immigration to the United States. Americans worried that newcomers would steal jobs and housing and would be Nazi collaborators or Communists.³¹ From behind these closed doors Truman slowly pushed forward.³² In his 1947 State of the Union Address, Truman urged Congress to help refugees.³³

In 1948 when the Zaft family registered with the U.S. Consulate in Hamburg, there was still little the Seventh-day Adventist Church could do to help the Zafts and other ethnic Germans immigrate despite a bill calling for the immigration of 400,000 DPs over a period of four years. This bill became the Displaced Persons Act of 1948. This Act gave DPs similar status to refugees. It called for the arrival of 200,000 over two years.³⁴ There were, however, many restrictions to the bill. First, only those who arrived in DP camps by December 22, 1945 were allowed to immigrate. This excluded some Jews and those from Eastern Europe. Second, there was also a 40 percent Baltic preference and a 30 percent agricultural preference that further thwarted the immigration of some DP populations.³⁵ The 200,000 spots were mortgaged quota numbers from the immigrants' countries (with the exception of children). Aside from the Baltic and agricultural

percentages, priority went to specific occupations including farmers, dentists, nurses, domestic workers, garment workers, and scientists deemed to be in short supply as well as relatives. The first transport of immigrants under the Displaced Person Act arrived in New York harbor on October 30, 1948. Given a warm welcome at the port, the U.S. attorney general dubbed them “the Pilgrims of 1948.”³⁶ Over the next two years, 308 ships sailed into the ports of New Orleans, Boston, and New York and 284 flights ferried passengers across the Atlantic to America.³⁷

Despite this increased access to the United States, ethnic Germans like the Zafts did not qualify for immigration under this legislation because they were not Displaced Persons. The Zafts tried to make a life for themselves in West Germany after their escape from the Soviet Zone, but the family of ten was living in two rooms inside a house holding forty refugees plus the original owners. The owners forced the refugees to use the outhouse in the backyard and empty it when it became full. The Zafts had to wait in line for food and find odd jobs to support their children ranging in age from two to fifteen.

On June 16, 1950, Congress introduced amendments to the 1948 law, and the Seventh-day Adventist Church responding by collaborating with Church World Service to find sponsors for 300 Adventist families. The 1950 amendment admitted an additional 200,000 immigrants including 55,000 ethnic Germans. It also dropped the 30 percent agricultural preference. However, the Cold War and lingering suspicion toward immigrants remained present. In 1950, Congress passed the Internal Security Act over Truman’s veto. This act gave the US government more power to screen immigrants and exclude those who had belonged to the Communist Party.

Although never belonging to the Communist Party, the Zaft family had their own immigration challenges. The family was very large, consisting of children too young to work and an aunt too elderly to seek employment. It was very difficult to find someone willing to provide work and be financially responsible for ten people. The family also had physical disabilities. The aunt had scoliosis, and the youngest Zaft child, Hildegard, had Down syndrome. Despite these negative circumstances, the family framed their immigration challenges in a particular way. Instead of stating that their daughter had Down syndrome, they explained that as an infant refugee, she had scarlet fever, little food, and was exposed to cold temperatures. This had affected her speech, but the impediment was curable - the family simply could not afford treatment.³⁸

Canada and the United States did not allow individuals with disabilities to immigrate and Hildegard’s condition made the family a “special problem case” even though Church World Service believed her to only

have a speech impediment.³⁹ A pediatrician's assessment of the child was reminiscent of Nazi attitudes. Dr. Kast blamed the child's "Mongoloid type" on the father because of the father and daughter's similar eye shape.⁴⁰ In September 1951, a local doctor examined the four year old child. Dr. Georg Eule stated that as a baby, doctors believed the problem was lack of food; however, as Hildegard grew older, her "Mongoloid" condition became more pronounced.⁴¹ A third doctor recommended that the parents place the child in an institution.⁴²

On December 31, 1951, the last day of the Displaced Persons Act, crowds mobbed the American Consulate in Frankfurt.⁴³ For the 400,000 who entered America under this act, the act had granted them a new life. Those like the Zafts, who had not been granted entrance, now had to find another way to immigrate to the United States. In 1952, the Immigration and Nationality Act or McCarran-Walter Act reinstated the quota system established in 1924. Despite Truman's veto, the bill passed. Truman declared,

Today, we are "protecting" ourselves as we were in 1924, against being flooded by immigrants from Eastern Europe. This is fantastic . . . We do not need to be protected against immigrants from these countries—on the contrary we want to stretch out a helping hand, to save those who have managed to flee into Western Europe, to succor those who are brave enough to escape from barbarism, to welcome and restore them against the day when their countries will, as we hope, be free again. . . . These are only a few examples of the absurdity, the cruelty of carrying over into this year of 1952 the isolationist limitations of our 1924 law.

In no other realm of our national life are we so hampered and stultified by the dead hand of the past, as we are in this field of immigration.⁴⁴

That same year, Rudolph Zaft wrote a heartfelt letter to the chair of the Seventh-day Adventist immigration committee asking him to "pardon us for coming to you with our heavy burden." He was disheartened that former Adventist neighbors from Chortitza had been able to immigrate to the United States, and yet the Zafts were unable to because of their "sick child" who was actually "just a bit retarded and somewhat behind in her ability to talk." Zaft explained that Hildegard was born a few weeks early because of heavy bombing while his wife and four children fled west from the resettlement camp alone. When the child was eleven days old, Olga continued her flight on foot "in rain, in snow and cold [temperatures], so

cold that the ice froze under the little child.” Without food or water, Olga had fled the advancing Soviet Army for eleven days until she arrived at a relative’s house. “We had to keep hiding so that they [occupying forces] would not hand us over to the Soviets.” Even with legislation allowing ethnic German immigration, his daughter’s condition prevented them from obtaining visas. Zaft understood that immigration was only possible if they left Hildegard behind, noting: “that is for us the most terrible thing.” “We have done absolutely all we could, but nothing seems to help.” Therefore Zaft turned to the Church for help.⁴⁵ Unfortunately, the Adventist church official felt that nothing could be done for the family and merely forwarded Zaft’s letter along to another official.⁴⁶ Furthermore, when a church official did respond to Zaft, he hinted that perhaps they should try immigrating to a different country and left the family with the charge that, “If you love the Lord and serve Him, you can be assured that He will care for you, and that in the end you will be made to realize that all things have worked together for good, for you.”⁴⁷ Correspondence with the US-based church office would not resume for two years.⁴⁸

When the Displaced Person Commission ended in December 1951, voluntary agencies became even more important in matching potential immigrants with sponsors.⁴⁹ The individuals these organizations helped often had to fit religious, national, and occupational preferences that met both the sponsors’ expectations as well as that of the United States.⁵⁰

Church World Service (CWS) is an American-based organization with headquarters in New York City. Founded in 1946 as an international aid organization, it began to focus on immigration in 1948 after the passage of the Displaced Persons Act. It aided non-Lutheran Protestants and Eastern Orthodox immigrants.⁵¹ Religious councils, societies, and denominations served as cooperating agencies. CWS gave blanket assurances to groups who found sponsors, arranged for repayment of transportation, and fulfilled other legal obligations.⁵² CWS found sponsors within the United States, therefore controlling where immigrants settled. Furthermore, denominations such as the Seventh-day Adventist Church working under CWS had their headquarters located in America. The main church office sent assurances to potential sponsors, which often included churches. Sponsors completed eight copies of the assurances and mailed them back to the Adventist headquarters.⁵³ From there, the office sent them to CWS and then onto the American consulate in Frankfurt, Germany. The amount of paperwork involved meant that it took months and even years before hopeful immigrants in Germany received word of being able to leave. The United States collaborated with foreign governments and private American agencies to ensure immigrants met the stipulations required for

them to arrive in the United States. The Frankfurt office fielded assurances, paperwork, and requests for action to various field offices in Europe and the main office in Washington, D.C.

The Zaft family, still waiting to immigrate, asked the Adventist church to find sponsors for them through the Church World Service program. In order to make his family more attractive for immigration, Rudolph Zaft, although a photographer by trade, labeled himself a farmer and listed his experience as a mechanic in an effort to qualify for an occupational preference.⁵⁴ The interviewing officer spoke glowingly about the family after a visit to their home in Rehden, Germany. "I really cannot find words enough to present this very industrious family in the way it should be presented."⁵⁵ The interviewer recognized the poverty and difficulties that plagued the family six years after the war had ended. The family of ten was still living in two rooms without indoor plumbing.⁵⁶

Finding an organization that would provide a sponsor and loan immigrants transportation funds was only the beginning of the immigration process for ethnic Germans. Potential immigrants had to successfully complete twenty-two steps that included screening by the FBI, CIA, Immigration and Naturalization Services, medical checks, interviews, and a search through captured German records to ascertain involvement with Nazi Germany during World War II.⁵⁷ Immigrants quickly became familiar with the complicated and long immigration process as illustrated by this anecdote:

Two DPs met and one asked where the other planned to emigrate.

"Canada or Australia."

"Why not the U.S.?"

"Because the Americans put you on a scale, and start adding papers to the other side. When the paper equals your weight, you're ready to go."⁵⁸

Paperwork could measure fifty-one feet in length for one person's American immigration file.⁵⁹ During an interview, the immigration officer asked a DP what he would do if he caught Stalin. The DP replied, "I'd bring him here to Funk Kaserne [immigration camp] and make him go through processing for emigration to the States!"⁶⁰

Typically, it took three months to one year to process an individual's immigration paperwork.⁶¹ For others like the Zafts, it took much longer. Bureaucratic delays and the large amount of paperwork made immigration a very slow process. The Adventist Church found a sponsor for the Zafts

in southern California in 1953. Ultimately, the woman decided that it was too expensive to sponsor the entire family and instead offered to take the two oldest daughters, Lilly and Lydia, as domestics. However, a lack of communication between the sponsor, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and Church World Service resulted in a frustrated sponsor who withdrew her offer. Immigration personnel employed by the Adventist Church acknowledged their miscommunication mistakes: "I am afraid that you have now put the Zaft family 'on the shelf' a little longer."⁶² The immigration committee secretary wrote, "We must not now disappoint the Zafts - we are lucky that they still feel so nice toward us inspite [*sic*] of our blunders or delays . . ."⁶³ One year later, the church suggested that someone from Detroit, Michigan might sponsor the family.⁶⁴ Then, in June 1954, the church suggested still a different person to sponsor them. The head of the immigration committee wrote a potential sponsor, "Don't get scared of the large family when you look at the picture, for the 18 and 16 year old daughters are no liabilities since they are able to help support the family."⁶⁵ The sponsor was not interested. A few months later, a man offered to employ one of the Zaft daughters as a housekeeper and found another lady nearby in Southern California to employ Lilly and Lydia.⁶⁶ In December 1954, a different woman in California agreed to employ Lilly and Lydia as housekeepers.⁶⁷ Each of these sponsorships fell through, however. Every time the family thought that they would be able to immigrate, they had to travel to Bremerhaven for medical exams and paperwork checks.

In 1953, the Refugee Relief Act passed bringing 214,000 refugees on non-quota numbers over the next four years.⁶⁸ Fifty five thousand of these visas were allocated for ethnic Germans; others were earmarked for persons fleeing Communist countries as "escapees," and for various ethnicities.⁶⁹ Immigration inspectors were stationed in Camp Grohn, Bremerhaven, the port of embarkation. The US consul issued visas which the immigrant took to Camp Grohn for a final inspection of paperwork. Because of the backlog, immigration inspectors began to travel to immigration centers to speed up the process once immigrants arrived in Grohn.⁷⁰

Finally in September 1955, Wilhelm Hann, a former neighbor of the Zafts in Chortitza and fellow Seventh-day Adventist, offered to sponsor the family. By this time, the elderly aunt had died and the oldest Zaft son was married and no longer interested in immigrating to the United States. Hann was not an American citizen yet, and therefore had to find someone willing to sign the paperwork even though Hann promised to be financially responsible for the family.⁷¹

Yet even with a sponsor secured, the youngest daughter Hildegard was unable to pass the medical exam. When the United States disqualified or

rejected someone from immigrating, a three member board reexamined those cases. Created in August 1949, the board's goal was to establish eligibility precedents and also review each rejected case. This board was directly connected to the Displaced Person Act of 1948 and therefore they stopped accepting appeals on August 13, 1951 in preparation for the termination of the DP Act on December 31, 1951.⁷² Therefore, the Zafts had no recourse.

They realized that time was running out for them to be able to immigrate, and that the American consulate would not change their mind about Hildegard. Rudolph and Olga Zaft made the difficult decision to leave her in Germany. Hildegard was twelve years old. She lived until the age of seventy-one in a German institution for the mentally disabled. Although the decision to leave Hildegard behind in Germany and the promise of visas for the rest of the family meant that the immigration processing had begun, it would be another five months before the Zafts touched American soil.⁷³ In 1957, when the Zafts sailed past the Statue of Liberty into New York Harbor, they were some of the last World War II immigrants to arrive in the United States.⁷⁴

The Bobs, Degens, and Zafts despite differences in religious affiliation led similar lives in the Soviet Union. Yet, after World War II, the immigration process was very different for Mennonites as opposed to ethnic Germans of other faiths. Organizations like Church World Service and the Mennonite Central Committee played a crucial role in deciding where immigrants settled. The effects of immigration legislation on the twentieth century, however, also left their mark on the experiences of individuals looking for a better life in North America.

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Notes

¹ Nelly Däs and Nancy Bernhardt Holland, *Gone Without a Trace: German-Russian Women in Exile* (Lincoln, Neb: American Historical Society of Germans from Russia, 2001), 157–58.

² For more information on ethnic Germans in the Soviet Union and Chortitza, please read Adam Giesinger's *From Catherine to Khrushchev*, Ingeborg Fleischhauer and Benjamin Pinkus' *The Soviet Germans Past and Present*, Marlene Epp's *Women without Men*, Paul Toews and Aileen Friesen, *The Russian Mennonite Story*, A.J. Kroeker's *First Mennonite Villages in Russia 1789–1943*, and Frank Epp's *Mennonite Exodus*.

³ Johann, Marianne, Johann, Joseph, Justina Bob, EWZ 3342, A063, Frames 1846-2124, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA II), College Park, Maryland.

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- ⁵ Johann Bob, EWZ 3342, A063, Frame 1872, NARA II.
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⁵⁰ US DP Commission, *Memo to America*, 162–64.

⁵¹ CWS did not aid Lutheran immigrants because the Lutheran World Federation exclusively aided Lutheran immigrants.

⁵² US DP Commission, *Memo to America*, 276–77.

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