

Chapter Six

Even the Strong Wept

*He shall return no more to his house,
neither shall his place know him any more.*

Job 7 – 10

Heinrich Kroeger's last notebook dealing with his life in Russia begins on March 17th 1925 and ends in the summer of 1926. On the inside back cover is written:

G.G. Rempel
Monitor, Alta
Canada

This was Helena's older brother, and Heinrich's partner in the wagon plant at Olchowatka before the war, who had emigrated to Canada in November, 1925. Helena's younger sister, Tina, had left with her family two years before. Heinrich's uncle Abram had also emigrated and was living in Saskatchewan.

Heinrich and Helena knew that to follow George, Tina, and Abram would require them to pull up deep roots. Their families had lived in Russia for 120 years. Whatever the religious stresses and social inequalities within their villages, the Mennonites had enjoyed stability, comfortable homes, religious fellowship, self-government, and a strong sense of community. Now, in scarcely half a decade, their world had been shattered by the cataclysmic events since 1917.

Some members of the colonies remained strongly opposed to the notion of leaving, convinced that better times lay ahead. In the spring of 1923, a Mennonite leader passionately implored a colleague to "think of our mission here in Russia, our Mennonite ideals, our beautiful villages, the fertile soil!...Our task is and remains in Russia." Many others, however, had concluded that their communities could not be re-established, and that they would have to seek new lives elsewhere. In the summer of 1922, some 17,000 Mennonites applied to leave.

By early May, 1923, negotiations with governments in Kharkov, Moscow, and Ottawa had opened the way to emigration. The authorities in Moscow had agreed to lay on special trains to transport those leaving the Mennonite colonies. The Canadian Pacific Railway had committed to finance the passage of an initial group of 3,000.

In late June, a train of 28 box cars came to a stop at the station in Chortiza. The first departures were at hand.

Before the passengers could board, the train had to be made ready to accommodate them. Boiling water and soap were used to clean the box cars. Rough boards were nailed together to create bunks and benches. The cars were not large, but each had to accommodate some 25 adults and children. The cars had no windows. They were not heated, which could explain why the annual movements of Mennonites took place in the summer and early fall, even though the port of Libau from which they sailed is ice-free.

Those leaving had to take along food for a journey of uncertain duration. While some families brought meat and other foods, the fare of most emigrants was a Mennonite staple known as *zwieback*, crusty buns that were made with generous portions of butter. Those departing had roasted their *zwieback* to keep them from going stale during the trip. Some families brought several 100-pound bags to see them through. Water tanks were installed in each car. There is no record of how sanitary requirements were met, but it could not have been easy.

Each group of emigrants elected a train committee of five, one member of which was then chosen to act as the train leader. Every car had its own leader and an assistant. People agreed on certain rules and complied with them.

Heinrich and Helena Kroeger were living in Chortiza-Rosental when some of their friends and neighbours boarded the first train in June, 1923, and they joined the crowds of Mennonites at the station.

There are many moving contemporary accounts of the departures. One deals with Dietrich Epp, who had been born in Chortiza, was educated at the elementary and the *Zentralschule*, and then became a teacher in the village. He was also the conductor of the male choir, which he conducted one last time at his farewell party. The evening before his departure he walked once more along the streets of Chortiza and Rosental, taking leave of old friends, buildings, and places dear to his memory.

Following is an account of the departure of his train the next day:

The train was scheduled to leave at 6:00 PM. Never had so many people been assembled at the Chortiza station... Those who departed and those who remained looked at one another probably for the last time. Here and there a burst of sobs, tears in the eyes of everyone.

A last parting handshake, the emigrants boarded the cars, and the train began to move.

This train, bearing 750 colonists, left Chortiza on June 22nd. A second left on July 2nd, a third on the 13th, and a fourth on the 24th. A favourite hymn sung by the Mennonites as the trains prepared to leave was, "God be with you until we meet again." But for many, there was to be no such meeting in the future. There was an air of finality at the departures, with many of those leaving and many of those remaining knowing that they would never see each other again.

The first train took ten days to reach the Latvian border, partly because it was frequently shunted on to sidings. Sometimes officials came on board, and bribes had to be paid.

At the border between the USSR and Latvia the railway tracks were surmounted by a high arch. In Czarist times it had been a fairly simple monument, but the Bolsheviks replaced it with an elaborate iron structure bearing a large red star. It came to be known as the Red Gate. The side facing Latvia welcomed visitors to the Workers' Paradise with the inscription in Russian, "Workers of the World, Unite!" The Mennonites, however, were proceeding in the opposite direction.

The first stop inside Latvia was at Rezekne, where there was a major medical and quarantine centre. Here each migrant was given a medical examination. Trachoma was common in south Russia. This eye disease was highly infectious and had therefore become widespread in the Mennonite colonies. Of those who crossed into Latvia in 1923, individuals found medically unfit had to be temporarily diverted to Lechfeld in Germany until their medical condition had been successfully treated.

When they got to Riga, the emigrants left their box cars and transferred to a narrow gauge railway for the final stage to the port of Libau. A local newspaper reported that 13 babies had been born since the group left Chortiza.

Following is an excerpt from the report filed by the Canadian immigration officer who met them:

...this party arrived in Libau on the 5th inst. and was put on board S.S. "Bruton" for Southampton...I examined all this party as it came aboard the steamer and the examination was over by about 2 o'clock p.m...

This party, of 695 persons, appeared to be of a very good class of emigrants, great numbers of them were children, and I have no doubt that, if the balance, which is coming forward, is like this first party, they will prove very good immigrants for Canada.

On July 11 a Canadian immigration official's report about the second group from Chortiza included the comment that, "the train arrived in extraordinarily clean condition".

The emigrants crossed the Baltic, transited the Kiel Canal, and landed in Southampton. After a short stay they boarded the CPR's *Empress of France* for Canada.

The group landed in Quebec City, which was the port through which most immigrants entered Canada. On hand when the *Russlaender* arrived were two members of the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization (CMBC), together with German- and Russian-speaking representatives of the CPR. After completing immigration formalities, the *Russlaender* boarded a special train. The CPR supplied them with blankets that it had obtained on long term loan from the Department of National Defence. They did not need to carry food, as part of the CPR's undertaking was that it would provide each immigrant with two meals per day at a cost of 25 cents each.

The train then set off on the five-day trip to Rosthern, Saskatchewan, which was the headquarters of the CMBC and the centre of a heavily Mennonite part of the province. Word of their progression across the country preceded them and generated growing excitement in the area.

Late on the afternoon of July 21st the long train bearing the first group of *Russlaender* came into sight and pulled to a stop at the station in Rosthern. Their 6,000 mile migration was at an end. It had been one month less a day since they left Chortiza.

In his comprehensive study, *Mennonite Exodus*, Frank Epp describes the reception given to the first group when they arrived. Residents of the surrounding area had poured into Rosthern through the day, and a throng had gathered at the station. As the first *Russlaender* disembarked a surge of emotion ran through the crowd. There were tears and expressions of thanksgiving.

When all the new arrivals were gathered beside the train, David Toews mounted a small platform and welcomed them to Canada. After five days in a strange land, they again heard their own Low German language.

Gerald Brown, a reporter for the *Saskatoon Star Phoenix*, described the religious service that followed:

A great hush fell upon the assembled thousands and to the ears of the Canadians came a soft, slow chant, "*Lobe den Herrn den machtigen Konig der Ehren*", which is the German equivalent of our own "Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow". Besides being a favorite hymn of the Mennonites, it is their nearest approach to a national anthem.

Softly the chant rose and fell, seeming to be a musical expression of the great tragedy and heartbreak of the Mennonites. Then the Canadian Mennonites took up the song, and the tone increased in volume, growing deeper and fuller, until the melody was pouring forth from several thousand throats.

When the first note of the song burst upon the air, every Mennonite removed his hat, and the others paid like tribute. There were many in the crowd who had sprung from other races, but the significance of the song was manifest to them when they saw their Mennonite friends bare their heads and when they saw grown men, whom they had known for years, burst into tears.

The day ended with the immigrants and their effects being taken to the homes of Mennonites with whom they were billeted in the area surrounding Rosthern. Their new life was about to begin.

The principal constraint on the numbers of Mennonites who could be moved each year was financial. Since most of the emigrants were poor, the CPR knew that its 'loan' for transportation was risky. Experience with the first group would determine what, if anything, the company might agree to do in future years.

The first invoice presented to the CMBC by the CPR was for \$165,000, of which \$68,000 was due on October 23rd. Near-desperate appeals for funds were sent to Mennonites in other provinces and in the United States, but the results fell far short. On the 23rd Toews sent to Colonel Dennis \$22,500, which was followed by a further \$3,500 the next day. What then came to light was that Toews and the Board had overlooked a late modification to the terms of repayment, whereby the first amount due was only \$17,186.98. Thus, the first payment had been made on time, and in an amount that exceeded what was due.

All future payments were to be late, and often short of the amount due, but the initial impression had been made, and Colonel Dennis had been provided with evidence he could use in persuading the CPR Executive to continue the program. On the basis of the company's experience in 1923, President Beatty agreed to the movement of 5,000 Mennonites in 1924. He also eased some of the previous terms of repayment.

A further component of the post-1923 arrangements was that, in addition to financing the movement of Russlaender on credit, the CPR agreed to undertake the movement of individuals who were able by one means or another to finance their own passage. As a result of this decision, a number of Mennonites in addition to those brought out on credit were able to find refuge in Canada.

But most Russlaender were too poor to pay for their passage. Illustrative of the change in their fortunes was the case of Heinrich Sudermann, whose family before 1914 had farmed some 4,000 hectares. Upon arrival in Canada he obtained employment as a section hand maintaining tracks for the Canadian National Railway. Similarly, Isaac Zacharias, a multi-lingual university graduate whose family had once had a net worth of \$500,000 was employed in the offices of the CMBC at \$ 40.00 per month.

In 1924 the CMBC continued to experience difficulties in raising funds to meet its obligations to the CPR. By the end of 1924 the total debt incurred had reached \$825,238.65, against which the Board had managed to pay only \$183,000 – of which \$60,000 had been loans that it had obtained from other sources. Nevertheless, President Beatty agreed to further concessions that enabled the 1925 movement to take place. The saga was to continue through to the end of the movements in 1930, with the CPR continuing to ease its terms to accommodate the straitened circumstances of the CMBC. The Board for its part continued to collect from the new arrivals after they had begun to have earnings, and to make payments every year, even during the depression of the 1930s.

There was unquestionably an element of self-interest in the CPR's actions. It was after all a commercial entity. In bringing the Mennonites from the USSR the company was providing passengers for its ships, potential settlers for the lands it held on the prairies, and future customers for its railway, particularly in Western Canada. There is more to the story than that, however. In providing credit transportation to destitute people, who were sponsored by an organization that had no financial resources, the Canadian Pacific Railway went far beyond the terms on which it normally brought immigrants to Canada. It is hard to visualize a 21st century Chief Executive matching the compassion and extraordinarily enlightened corporate self-interest displayed by Sir Edward Beatty over more than two decades.

And in the end, Beatty and Dennis' actions were vindicated, even though neither of them would live to see the final outcome.

In 1923, it was the Russlaender of Chortiza who had emigrated. In 1924 came the turn of the Molochna colony. Trains had been arranged for, and the necessary exit permits had been issued by the authorities.

The scene when the first train prepared to leave the station in Lichtenau was comparable to that witnessed in Chortiza by Heinrich and Helena Kroeger the year before. One of the emigrants described the sadness of the farewells:

The evening shadows lengthened, the sun was about to set. We loved the soil of our homeland. Now it was time to bid adieu and leave one's

hearth, village, customs, relatives, and friends. People took leave of one another. Even the strong wept, some sobbed...The bell sounded once, then again. Everyone knew only a few minutes remained...Here a firm handshake, there the last embrace, tears flow...The third bell, the train begins to move. "Goodbye. Come after us." "Reunion in eternity," shouted one emigrant...Gradually those remaining behind fade into the distance...

The 1924 emigrants followed the same route as their predecessors from Chortiza the year before. When they arrived in Quebec City, an immigration official reported of one group that "The entire party was very well behaved while in this building, and physically they were a very good group of people."

The following year, 3,772 Russlaender came to Canada. The last year of large scale movement was 1926, involving nearly 6,000 emigrants.

Among the 1926 group was B.B. Janz, who had tirelessly negotiated with the Soviet authorities over the previous four years to secure the emigration of the Mennonites from the USSR. A few hours after his departure for Canada, the secret police came looking for him.

Life in Rosental had continued to be difficult for the Kroeger family in the mid-1920s. Heinrich's notebooks indicate that he owned some livestock, but give no indication that he farmed any land, possibly because it had by this time been expropriated by the state. In March, 1925 he rented out to tenants half his stable and barn, together with several rooms in the house. In June he was able to buy material to make suits for the two boys. The following May the tenants were unable to pay their rent in cash, and Heinrich had to accept payment in corn stalks.

Despite these difficulties, Heinrich had been disposed to remain in Rosental, and came to a decision in favour of emigration only in response to pressure from his wife. He eventually applied to leave, but there was no certainty as to what the result would be.

Getting permits from the authorities for emigration was a lengthy process, even though some of the paperwork was handled by local Mennonite leaders. Would-be emigrants had to get clearance from the Finance department concerning tax liabilities, then from the military authorities concerning any outstanding service obligations, then from the police, and finally from the Chairman of the Regional Soviet. Various of these officials were located in centres far removed from the colonies, and a failure in one step of the process could make it necessary to start over.

After the Kroegers had submitted their application, life in the spring of 1926 went on as in the past. Heinrich noted on March 8th that he had “bought old boots from J. Siemens for 2.50 rubles. As spring advanced, he planted potatoes on May 5th, ploughed the garden a week later, and hatched twelve chicks in mid-June. If their application were refused, they would need food to live on.

A particular source of uncertainty for those who had applied to emigrate was whether they would be able pass the mandatory medical examination. Dr. E.W. Drury was the Chief Medical Inspector for the CPR and had been delegated authority from the Canadian government to examine prospective immigrants. In June, 1926 his work took him first to the Molochna and then to the Chortiza colony. In each village he examined the passengers who had been selected for emigration, until the quota for that village had been filled. One such village was Rosental, and among those he examined were Heinrich and Helena Kroeger and their children.

On the identification cards issued to the Kroeger family is stamped:

Canadian Pacific
16 June 1926
Passed
Dr. E.W. Drury

Also on June 16th, the family was issued with registration cards by the Russian-Canadian Passenger Agency based in Moscow, which handled the movement of the Mennonite emigrants. The cards bore the notation that they were to be presented when applying for passports for foreign travel. They were also to be presented upon crossing the border of the USSR. On June 22nd the local authorities made an official record of the family’s application to go abroad.

Heinrich and Helena Kroegers’ period of waiting came to an end on August 2nd, when their passports were issued in Zaporozhe. Heinrich paid 200 rubles for each. Helena’s brother George had managed to send some money from Canada to help the Kroegers meet these and other costs. In addition, Heinrich recorded that he had borrowed 41 rubles “from P. Klassen for the expensive immigration papers”. He also had to find funds for the family’s rail trip from Chortiza to Latvia, after which transportation became the responsibility of the Canadian Pacific Railway.

The passports were printed in Russian, Ukrainian, and French (the international language of the time). In the Latin script used in the French section Heinrich’s name was rendered as “Kriger”, Helena’s as “Kryger”. Fortunately, when the passports were eventually presented in Quebec, Canadian immigration officials ignored the capricious spelling and rendered the name as it has been ever since – Kroeger.

To defray the costs he faced, Heinrich proceeded to sell his possessions. The house, barn, and other property were sold to a neighbour for 2,000 rubles. The ruble in 1926 was valued at approximately ten to the Canadian dollar, so the sale of the property netted

roughly \$200. Since the cost of the family's passage to Canada was to be \$ 675, it was clear that they were not among those able to pay cash when they left.

Before leaving, Heinrich also held a sale of the "belongings of our late parents", and listed each item with the price obtained. The items were quite basic, and the returns modest:

1 chest of drawers	50 rubles
1 table	10 rubles
1 old chair	1 ruble
1 large tin bowl	1.50 rubles

And on a second list:

1 iron stove	10 rubles
1 bedstead	15 rubles
1 cow	20 rubles
2 pigs	35 rubles
22 chickens	7.85 rubles
10 forks and knives	3 rubles
1 saw	5 rubles

On a third list:

scales and weights, barrel	10 rubles
flour box	5 rubles
clothes lines, pins	2 rubles

The respective totals on the three lists were 139 rubles, 171.60, and 101.75. A notation indicates that some of the returns from the sale had to be shared with his siblings.

Heinrich must have been depressed at how little money his sales yielded. However, the neighbour who purchased his buildings and livestock eventually fared even worse. Several years after the family's departure the property was seized by the state and the purchaser, together with others from the Chortiza colony, was deported to Siberia.

When Heinrich's younger brother Abram learned that the family was seeking to emigrate, he was very angry and reproached Heinrich for his decision.

Abram was energetic, ambitious, and perhaps the most intelligent of the four siblings. Heinrich used to say that Abram “had modern ideas”, “drove a hard bargain”, and was “proud”, by which he apparently meant, self confident. Abram had eschewed agricultural life. Instead he had taken training in accounting and got a white collar job with a Mennonite manufacturer of farm machinery. During his war service as a medical orderly he had met and married, not a Mennonite, but a Latvian nurse – another unconventional action. When the emigration movement began, he was among those who believed that things were getting better and so chose to remain in the USSR.

In mid-August the Kroeger family boarded one of the box cars in the train at the Chortiza station. There were seven of them: Heinrich, age 42; Helena, 39; and their children: Nick, 11; Henry, 9; Helen, 7; Anna 3; and George, a baby of 7 months. Because of space limitations in the box cars, the emigrants could take little with them. In the Kroeger family’s case, the main items were the carpenter tools that Heinrich had purchased when he joined his brothers-in-law at the Olchowatka wagon plant, the polished wooden box he had inherited from his maternal grandmother, and the family’s Kroeger clock. As was by now established practice among emigrating Mennonites, Helena had roasted a substantial quantity of *zwieback* as the staple fare for the trip.

Among the papers that Heinrich kept to the end of his life was a parting gift in the form of a small booklet of stories in German. On the inside cover was written, “To remember Jakob M. Neufeld, Rosental, August 15” – the day of their departure.

The first stage took the family from Chortiza to Moscow. When they arrived on the 17th they were photographed for their travel documents and issued “nominated immigrant” cards by the CPR. While they were in Moscow, two mishaps occurred: Heinrich’s trousers were stolen during the night (when I once asked him who had done it, he replied, “No address”), and Henry fell down a flight of stairs, with the result that in the photograph he has a bandage on his head.

Once the paperwork in Moscow had been completed, the final phase of the family’s departure was at hand. Together with other Mennonite emigrants, they boarded the train for the Latvian border, where they came to the Red Gate.

It was a landmark graven on the memories of those who passed through it. Each passage was a time of tension for the emigrants. They were questioned, sometimes aggressively, by the border guards. All baggage had to be unloaded. Officials examined their travel documents and searched their personal effects, even small packages, while the emigrants watched with growing apprehension. Finally the baggage was re-loaded, the guards disembarked, and the train slowly started to move again, crossing under the Red Gate. Then, according to one account that captures many crossings, “as the last car passed through, as with one voice, the song, ‘Now thank we all our God’ could be heard from all the cars.” For the first time in years, people were able to breathe freely. Whatever the future might bring, the fears and oppression they had experienced were behind them.

Once the Mennonites crossed into Latvia, the CPR took over the management of their travel. The Kroeger family's passports were stamped at the town of Zilupe inside the Latvian border on August 22nd. While many Mennonite emigrants were processed at the nearby medical and quarantine centre at Rezekne, others including the Kroegers went on to Riga. It was customary for the Mennonites to hold a religious service immediately after disembarking at the station in Riga. They then underwent a process that carried the unvarnished title, "de-lousing and disinfection". Clothes were fumigated, steam baths were taken, and sulfur was applied to disinfect the baggage. Antiseptic smells filled the air.

The new arrivals stayed in facilities that had been established by the CPR in Riga. On August 25th Canadian immigration officials examined the Kroeger family and stamped their passports. On the night of the 27th they and other Mennonites who had arrived in the past few days were placed on a train to Libau, where they arrived the next morning. Their ship was waiting for them.

A member of this party, Abram Martens, later wrote an account of the group's departure:

That same evening we boarded the ship *Baltara* and left for England. We had barely left port when the ship began to rock so much that many of our people became ill. But the rocking soon subsided...The rest of the trip ...was beautiful...we arrived at Kiel...The high bridges over the Canal opened to let the ships go through...On September 1, at seven in the morning we arrived in London. In 83 hours we had arrived...From the Port we were taken by bus to the train station...An electric train with three cars took us ... to Southampton.

During the late stages of World War I, the U.S. Air Force had established an air base, including a set of hangars, some ten miles north of Southampton. At the end of the war the complex was sold to a consortium of shipping companies, White Star, Cunard, and Canadian Pacific, who converted it into a transit centre for immigrants en route from Europe to North America. The centre had sufficient capacity for 3,500 transients at a time, and some 20,000 passed through it in the peak year of 1928. It was given the name of Atlantic Park, and functioned from 1921 until 1931, when the depression effectively brought North American immigration to a halt.

A mid-1920s description of Atlantic Park by its owners said that it, "provides a cosy temporary home for people in transit...where they can obtain comfortable sleeping quarters and meals at a moderate cost and where such amusements are given which help to pass the time pleasantly. Sympathy is the prevailing note and every person is treated with the utmost consideration.

Special attention is paid to Jewish passengers, for whose benefit there is a Kosher cook, Kosher supplies, a special dining room and a rabbi on staff who acts as an interpreter and holds special services for his co-religionists."

For the Mennonites, Atlantic Park did not entirely live up to this description. The hangars were cold, usually no more than 15 degrees Celsius, and the living facilities rudimentary. Men and women were segregated, although families ate together in a large hall. What the transiting immigrants particularly resented was that they were again medically examined, despite having passed medical examinations once or twice en route. Heinrich and Helena faced the prospect that, if they or any of their children did not pass the examination, they could be detained for many months. At one point there were over 700 detainees at Atlantic Park.

The Kroegers were among the lucky ones. Their CPR identification cards, on which Dr. Drury had declared them to have passed his medical examination on June 16th, were stamped, “Atlantic Park Hostel – September 1, 1926 – Disinfected”[again]. A second stamp read, “Atlantic Park Hostel – Medically Examined – September 2, 1926”.

The same day the parents and their five children boarded *S.S. Marloch* and were assigned two rooms in Third Class. Their route took them first to Cherbourg, France, where a further group of immigrants was taken on board, and then the ship proceeded to Quebec City. The passenger manifest shows that of some 1,000 passengers in third class, only about 130 were Mennonites. The balance included Czechs, Yugoslavs, Poles, Lithuanians, Russians, and Austrians.

During the crossing, members of the family recall that some kind of minor collision occurred. No details are available today, but for whatever reason the passage from Southampton to Quebec in all took seventeen days rather than the normal six, thus prolonging the experience of seasickness and other discomforts of people in Third Class. *Marloch* docked in Quebec on September 19th, and the passengers disembarked the following day. The Kroegers’ life in their new, strange land, was about to begin.

The Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization, wherever possible, arranged for new arrivals from Russia to stay with relatives who had come to Canada in previous years. When the Kroeger family left Quebec, therefore, their destination was Monitor, a small town in eastern Alberta, near which the CMBC had settled George Rempel on a farm. It was his address that Heinrich had entered in his notebook. The trip took six days, with several changes of train en route. The CPR provided the family with blankets and meals, and there was some sleeping accommodation on the train, but not enough for everyone..

When their train arrived in Monitor, the Kroegers and their children had been traveling for six weeks: by rail from Chortiza to Moscow and then Libau, by ship to London, by rail to Atlantic Park, by ship to Cherbourg and then Quebec, and finally by rail for 2,500 miles to Alberta.

George Rempel was unable to meet them in Monitor, since his farm was 15 miles to the south and he did not have a car. Instead, the Kroegers were met by George’s neighbours the Liknesses, a Norwegian family with whom Heinrich and Helena were to develop a life-long friendship. The Liknesses delivered them to George’s farm, where the two families were to live together for the next two months.

Heinrich's notes about 1925-26 came to an end with the family's departure for Canada, half way through his notebook. The remaining eighteen pages were later used in Canada by his son Henry for school exercises, because there was not enough money to buy scribblers.

In October, 2003 I visited Latvia to see the route the Mennonites had taken. The Red Gate is no longer standing, which was not particularly surprising. Latvia had been incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1940, after which there was no longer the same logic in having a major border portal. Probably more to the point, after Hitler's armies had occupied the region in the summer of 1941, the inscription urging workers of the world to unite would have been an adequate incentive for them to dismantle the gate. Today, only two low obelisks and a broad white line painted across the railway tracks mark the border between Russia and an independent Latvia.

In Libau (today's Liepaja), substantial brick facilities bespeak a past period of large scale emigration. The 20,000 Mennonites who crossed through Latvia were only a small fraction of the total. Between 1917 and 1929, up to three million people left Russia for Western Europe and, in some cases, North America. In the early 1920s, Berlin had over half a million Russian residents who had fled the revolution. Many of these émigrés passed through Latvia and were processed at the quarantine complex in Rezekne. In Libau-Liepaja, there was a set of large brick hostels to accommodate transient emigrants. During World War II these buildings served as barracks for the German Army, and then for the Red Army in the post-war period. Today they sit vacant, in a decaying condition.

In the twilight at the end of our tour of the harbour, my daughter Alix took a photo. In the foreground the waters were dark. The Western sky was overcast, but the golden rays of the low sun behind the clouds illuminated the sea beyond the harbour gate. The image in her photo of light beyond darkness captured what the Mennonites must have felt as they sailed.