

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

Spring 2008

Review of *Hard Passage: A Mennonite Family's Long Journey from Russia to Canada* By Arthur Kroeger

Royden Loewen
University of Winnipeg

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Loewen, Royden, "Review of *Hard Passage: A Mennonite Family's Long Journey from Russia to Canada* By Arthur Kroeger" (2008). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 1338.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/1338>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Hard Passage: A Mennonite Family's Long Journey from Russia to Canada. By Arthur Kroeger. Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2007. xii + 269 pp. Maps, photographs, notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95 paper.

Hard Passage is an intelligent, innovative, and eloquently written family history. It recounts the last years of Heinrich and Helena Kroeger's life in Russia, upheaval and exile in the Soviet Union, and their migration to and settlement in Alberta. It also recounts the eventual acculturation of the Kroegers' five sons and a daughter to middle-class, liberal Canadian life. The author, Arthur Kroeger, was one of the sons and the one who was able to attend university—the University of Alberta and then Oxford; he subsequently developed a successful career in Canada's foreign service, earned multiple appointments as federal deputy minister, and finally served as a university chancellor in Ottawa.

To my mind, the book's innovativeness lies less in its rendition of a Mennonite family saga than in its treatment of rural immigration in general. True, the parts that focus on the Kroeger family are told with a keen eye to everyday detail; on a single page, for example, the reader is introduced to the use of kerosene lanterns for wintertime milking, the gathering of cow dung for summer fuel, the fall perusing of the Eaton's catalogue, and the springtime search for evidence of moonshine making. Intensely emotional moments intersect this history, as in all family accounts: the sadness at a mother's death, the terror felt at a local murder, the joy of a bumper crop, the humiliation of Depression-era displacement, the sad sight of a dispirited and disheartened father. There is even the rise and fall and rise again of family fortune: the horror of the Russian Revolution is almost equaled by the horrific hardship in Depression-era Canada, but then come the success stories of the children—the deputy minister, the provincial government minister, the successful businessman, the supervisor, the pioneer teacher.

Still, the Kroegers were atypical Mennonites, and the major sections of the book tell a

much broader story than that of a single family. The fact is that the Kroeger family follows a somewhat mainstream pattern of immigrant integration. For an unexplained reason the Kroegers settle well away from an identifiable Mennonite community, and their religious beliefs outlined in the first chapter do not shape the family saga. Heinrich, in fact, is described as religious only in a "pro forma" sense (in contrast to his only Mennonite neighbor, Johann Klassen), while Helena at one point attends a Pentecostal church. The family's history also often contravenes the stereotypical view of the isolated, quiescent Mennonite clan. The outbreak of war brings no family discussion on the Mennonite teaching on pacifism, the Depression finds the family seeking financial help from local government, and the children eventually all marry non-Mennonites while the family's best and loyal friends seem to be British Canadian. The Kroegers are even at odds with the RCMP on a number of occasions, including the times Helena resisted a police-enforced eviction and the family feared that the moralistic RCMP might stop their Sunday harvest.

The book's real contribution lies in the elaborate context Kroeger creates for the clan's history. Kroeger's own career as a senior civil servant seems to equip him with a special interest in and the ability to outline the workings of the state and its agencies and the effect of government policy on the lives of ordinary people. There is much explanation here of the workings of specific credit systems, welfare programs, citizenship laws, migration trends, orders-in-councils, and so on. In a typical family history, such treatment would be justified as providing necessary context. But in this instance, one might say, the context becomes the core. The family history is the platform on which a meticulously considered history of emigration, immigration, settlement, and integration is told.

The key source of the sections of family history that interweave themselves in the book are the holdings of a single wooden box inherited by the author after his father's death

in 1979. The box's contents included a skeletal diary, an account book, newspaper clippings, official documents, photographs, receipts, and even an RCMP report on Heinrich's suitability for citizenship. The various artifacts, however, do not so much make the book as they index it, give it its framework, dictate its outline, provide its chapter titles, and most importantly take readers by the hand as they are guided in a very personal manner through the maze of an immigrant's departure from Europe and settlement in western Canada. This guiding is strengthened by Kroeger's own personal recollections. He even allows his own musings to filter into the text. Typical of counterfactuals and other personal reflections is the statement at the close of chapter five: "if the election of 1921 had turned out differently . . . I would very likely be living—or, more probably dead—in the former Soviet Union."

The noted Canadian author Charlotte Gray endorses the book as one that exhibits Kroeger's "formidable intelligence and curiosity." She is right in this estimation, but she is also right in suggesting that the book does more than reveal the strains of a Mennonite community. It employs the story of an unusual Mennonite family to tell a more general, first-rate immigration story.

ROYDEN LOEWEN
Chair of Mennonite Studies
University of Winnipeg