

Path of Thorns: Soviet Mennonite life under communist and Nazi rule.

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Path of Thorns: Soviet Mennonite Life under Communist and Nazi Rule. By Jacob A. Neufeld. Harvey L. Dyck, ed.; Harvey L. Dyck and Sarah Dyck, trans. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 2014. Pp. 444. \$85, cloth; \$37.95, paper. Path of Thorns is a collection of three works originally written in German by Jacob A. Neufeld (1895-1960). Born in the Molochna colony in southern Ukraine, Neufeld served as a medical orderly in the Mennonite alternative service program during World War I. After enduring the Bolshevik Revolution, the civil war, and the 1921-1922 famine, Neufeld assumed the position of chairman of the Gnadenfeld (Molochna) branch of the Menno Verband (Union of Citizens of Dutch Ancestry) in 1922. The Verband was a Mennonite-organized cooperative that obtained Soviet-government permission to provide food and economic relief to Mennonite families and facilitate the reconstruction of Mennonite settlements in Soviet Ukraine. Neufeld worked for the Verband until 1927, when Soviet authorities liquidated the organization and arrested some its leaders, including Neufeld. He was given a five-year prison sentence, but was released after serving only five

months. During the early years of Soviet collectivization and dekulakization (1928-1933), Neufeld tried to make a living by farming, but dire economic circumstances forced him to work in a kolkhoz (collective farm) for approximately a year. In 1930 he found employment as a bookkeeper in the Gnadenfeld consumer cooperative in Molochna, which enabled Neufeld and his young family to endure the severe economic deprivations and hardships that accompanied collectivization and the 1932-1933 famine. It is at this point in Neufeld's life that the first of the three works in Path of Thorns begins. "Part One: Five Years in the Gulag, 1933-1939" commences with Neufeld's dismissal from his job at the Gnadenfeld consumer cooperative in mid-1933 and his subsequent arrest on charges of being a parasite and untrustworthy person with a counter-revolutionary background. Along with other Verband leaders, Neufeld was held for months at the Dnepropetrovsk prison, where he suffered extended periods of hunger and endured more than twenty interrogation sessions. Exhausted, starving, and under extreme duress, Neufeld signed a confession in early 1934 acknowledging the charges against him; he was summarily sentenced to a five-year term of imprisonment in labor camps. Much of part one describes the horrendous conditions that Neufeld experienced in Soviet prisons, on prisoner trains to and from Siberia, in Soviet labor camps (including Bamlag in Siberia and Ukhtpechlag in the Komi Republic), and in a sovkhos (state farm) on the Ukhta River. Neufeld repeatedly refers to the important roles that his religious faith, his companions, and his desire to be reunited with his wife and children played in helping him endure the brutal living and working conditions. The gulag experience left Neufeld a broken man: when he returned to his family in Molochna in 1939 he suffered not only from crippling rheumatoid arthritis, but also psychological trauma. Neufeld found it difficult to secure employment because of his criminal..

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