

# **The Graewe Family Story**

## **by Irene Plett**

### **Contents**

<b>1. Johann Graewe: the blended family</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>2. Jacob Johann Graewe: a new start in Russia</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>3. Isaak Graewe: new roots in Sagradovka</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>4. Isaak Graewe, the teacher</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>5.1 Aganete Graewe, the traveller</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>5.2 Anna Graewe, the guitarist</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>5.3 Isaak I. Graewe, the accountant</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>5.4 Agathe Graewe, the barrel-maker's wife</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>5.5 Maria Graewe, the singer</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>5.6 Margarete "Gredel" Graewe</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>5.7 Katharine "Katya" Graewe, the brave</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Final message</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Photos</b>	<b>19</b>
1. Graewe family photo	19
2. Isaak Graewe with Sagradovka school leaders	20
<b>Acknowledgements and sources</b>	<b>21</b>

As a child of immigrants, the only relatives we had nearby were the families of my dad's three cousins, related on his maternal Graewe side. Now I'm discovering new connections through genealogy. What a surprise when I learned that Graewes began arriving in North America in the 1800s! Their story—our story—is shared below, along with where descendants can be found today.

Often I refer to GRANDMA, the helpful Mennonite genealogical database of the California Mennonite Historical Society which now lists over 1.4 million individuals. It isn't perfect and can always use updates, but provides a window into Mennonite family history not seen elsewhere. These days it's also marvellous to have online access, available for a small fee. I've made some of my own corrections below; if you notice errors or have information to add, I'd be happy to hear from you.

### **1. Johann Graewe: the blended family**

The first of our Graewe line recorded in GRANDMA is my father's great grandfather times three, Johann Graewe (alternately Graeff or Graew), born about 1744, GRANDMA #7666. His wife was Gertrude Peters #7667, born 10 Oct 1740.

Gertrude Peters was first married to Aron Reimer #509630. They married on 25 Nov. 1764 in Danzig, Poland and are said to have had three children:

1. Reimer, Helene #509629
2. Reimer, Franz Johann, born about 1770, baptized 1794, #46371
3. Reimer, Aron, born 14 Nov 1775, baptized 1795, #10962

There is a story here that I cannot explain, as the last son arrived while Gertrude was with Johann, and rather productively so. Did Gertrude return to her ex, just months after the birth of another child? It seems more likely that her ex was involved with another woman. This new son ended up marrying Gertrude's daughter Elizabeth. Marrying an unrelated step-sister is one thing, but a half-sister? One can only hope. Aron and Elizabeth's many descendants are chronicled in the book by Adina Reger, *Familienstammbuch und Geschichte der Familie Reimer: 1740-1995*.

Back to Johann and Gertrude's time together. In 1772, they were living in Klein Mausdorferweide, Gross Werder, Prussia (now Łączki Myszewskie, Poland). Johann was described in that year's census as an *Eigener*, a homeowner but not a farm owner. They were living with a son and daughter, both under 10 years of age. I wonder if these children were from Gertrude's first marriage. The family attended the nearby Rosenort Mennonite Church, where three daughters, Anna, Maria and Elizabeth, were baptized as adults.

In 1803, Johann applied for the family to immigrate to Russia. The new Mennonite settlement of Molotschna was being developed, offering 175 acres of land to each family. That summer, 162

families left West Prussia for Molotschna; a similar group followed in spring. These were mostly experienced farmers who sold their farms and brought capital, wagons, farm animals and furniture with them.

But Johann died on 7 Feb. 1804 before he could fulfill that dream. Gertrude immigrated to Molotschna in 1818 with her Reimer daughter's family. She died there on 23 Jan 1830.

The children of Johann and Gertrude include:

1. Graewe, Anna, baptized 1788, Rosenort, Gross Werder, Prussia #515203
2. Graewe, Elizabeth, born 11 Nov 1774, baptized 1793, #10963
3. Graewe, Maria, baptized 1795, Rosenort, Gross Werder, Prussia #594707
4. Graewe, Johann, born 11 Dec 1778, #7668
5. Graewe, Abraham, born 30 Aug 1781, #7669
6. Graewe, Agatha, born 10 Nov 1783, #7670
7. Graewe, Peter, born 2 Jan 1786, #7671
8. Graewe, Margaretha, born 15 Jan 1786, Prussia #7661 (twin of Peter?)
9. Graewe, Jacob Johann, born about 1790, Prussia #265749 → our line

Daughter Margaretha had six children, three of whom left Russia for North America in the 1870s along with about 15,000 other Mennonites. At the time, the Russian government withdrew their exemption from military service, which had been a major draw for the pacifist believers when settling there. Those who remained in Russia negotiated a new arrangement for alternative, non-military service. Of the settlers to America, descendants of Margaretha and her husband Jacob Harder have lived in Minnesota, California, Washington state, Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and even metro Vancouver, B.C. (Doell and Friesen families).

## **2. Jacob Johann Graewe: a new start in Russia**

The youngest son of Johann and Gertrude, Jacob Johann Graewe (alternately Grave and Grev) was born about 1790 in Prussia; probably at his parents' home in Klein Mausdorferweide, Gross Werder, Prussia (now Łączki Myszewskie, Poland).

On 24 October 1813, he married Anna Ens #265750, born about 1790 in Prussia. She was the oldest daughter of Isaac Ens #64257 and Anna Boen #64258, from the neighbouring village of Zeyervorderkampen, West Prussia (now Kępiny Małe, Poland).

Jacob agreed with his father's wish for more opportunity in Molotschna, and arrived there with his family in 1817. They soon settled in Neukirch (now Udarnik, Ukraine), a village on the north bank of the Yushanly River in Taurida Oblast (district). Each family received 175 acres of land, while homes were centred on either side of the village street. After modest beginnings of earthen or wooden huts, villagers were able to build more substantial homes. By 1848, Neukirch had 48 homes, a village school, a dye works, and a brick factory.

GRANDMA says that Jacob died in Neukirch on 19 April 1852.

The children of Jacob and Anna include:

1. Graewe, Anna, born about 1818, Neukirch, Molotschna #265752 (married a Goertzen)
2. Graewe, Johann, born Neukirch, Molotschna #265751
3. Graewe, Jacob, born about 1820, Neukirch, Molotschna #101952
4. Graewe, Peter, born about 1822, Neukirch, Molotschna #265753
5. Graewe, Johann, born about 1824, Neukirch, Molotschna #265754
6. Graewe, Isaak, born about 1827, Neukirch, Molotschna #26610 —> our line
7. Graewe, Maria, born about 1829, Neukirch, Molotschna #265755
8. Graewe, Heinrich, born 18 Feb 1834, Neukirch, Molotschna #265716

Our ancestor, son Isaak Graewe, is discussed below; but first a few notes about some family members who travelled to America.

Son Heinrich Graewe arrived in New York on 9 Sept. 1884 aboard the S.S. Ems. He died on 9 May 1917 in Goessel, Kansas. His obituary states: "He married Katharina Giesbrecht in Muntau [in Molotschna] in 1858. He settled in the village of Krefeld [likely Kleefeld, Molotschna]. They had 7 children, 5 sons and 2 daughters, of which 2 sons preceded him in death. He emigrated from Russia to Asia on Aug. 17, 1880. His first wife died Sept. 27, 1882. He emigrated from Asia to America in 1884. In 1886 he married a second time, to Anna Schmidt. On May 2, 1917, he had a stroke and intracranial pressure, from which he was released by a gentle death on May 9. His simple, child-like faith gave him great strength on his sick bed. The funeral took place in the Alexanderwohl [Mennonite] church, Goessel, Kans." (Sources listed below.) The historic church still exists today. Heinrich's descendants can be found in Kansas, Idaho, and Washington state.

Heinrich's daughter Helena #88939 wrote about her family's difficult trek to Asia, where she lost a brother and her mother: "[Heinrich #265718], at 19 years of age, died on the trip to Asia after we had been travelling by wagon for 18 weeks. The winter was quickly approaching and we stayed in the city of Tashkent [in Uzbekistan] for the winter, where we all got typhoid fever. He had to die from it after he was laid up for 40 days. He was buried in a cemetery for soldiers.

"Then a year later, when we were still on the trip ... our beloved mother [Katharina Giesbrecht #265703], became so sick, and had to ride in the wagon so sick for several weeks, then on camels through the desert, which was almost impossible, then on an open barge on the water. Then she died and was buried in a wild forest in the country. And we drove on and never saw her grave again." (*Rundschau* 1916)

But there were blessings on the trip, like when the Muslim community of Serabulak welcomed the Mennonite wanderers. Helena was baptized there in a mosque, along with 24 others. The group finally settled in Ak Metchet near Khiva, where "locals still remember their excellent wood craftsmanship, agricultural productivity and the introduction of new technologies including photography." (Reimer, *Canadian Mennonite*) But the Graewes soon left for America, settling in Newton, Kansas. Descendants can be found in Kansas, Idaho, and Washington state.

Another son of Jacob Johann and Anna, named Jacob Graewe #101952, stayed in Russia, but two of his sons moved to the United States:

- Peter Graewe #95065 arrived in New York aboard the S. S. Nuernberg on 5 June 1884, with his wife, Susanna Reimer, and their children. Peter died in Mountain Lake, Minnesota, with descendants in North Dakota, Oregon and California.
- Jacob Graewe #28864 arrived in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on 24 Jun 1879 aboard the S. S. Switzerland with wife Elizabeth Quiring and their children. After arriving in America, they had a son, Heinrich Graves #28868, who has many descendants in California, Oregon, Oklahoma, and Texas. Jacob Graewe Jr. #28865, one of the original immigrants with the family, has many descendants in California.

### **3. Isaak Graewe: new roots in Sagradovka**

My father's great grandfather, Isaak Graewe #26610 (alternately Graf and Graeve), was born in about 1827 in Neukirch, Molotschna (now Udarnik, Ukraine), a village on the north bank of the Yushanly River.

In 1850, Isaak married Aganetha Boldt #26611, born about 1833 in Neukirch, Molotschna. Her parents were Dietrich Boldt #101821 and his wife Anna #101822 of Neukirch, who came to Russia in 1829. (Aganetha's sister Agatha #6440 actually travelled to Canada in 1874, and is buried in the Steinbach Pioneer Cemetery with her husband, Peter Enns. Her descendants are in Manitoba, Alberta and Kansas.)

Isaak and Aganetha soon moved to Kleefeld, Molotschna, three villages to the west of Neukirch on the south bank of the Yushanly River.

After Aganetha died, Isaak married Anna Wiebe #101319, born 15 Sept 1809. As she was a widow of Peter Reimer #101318, Isaak became a stepfather to many Reimer children.

I learned of this family connection by a letter to the *Rundschau* of Anna's son Abraham Reimer, dated 22 April 1891. He writes: "My mother died in 1886. After a year, the father Isaak Graeve married the widow of Ab. Reimer. He sold the farm in Kleefeld, and moved to Sagradovka, where he bought a farm. Then on Nov. 24, 1888 the father died."

Thanks to this letter, we also know that Isaak Graewe married a third time, a widow of another Abraham Reimer, in about 1887 in Kleefeld, Molotschna. The marriage was unfortunately short-lived, as Isaak died on 24 Nov. 1888. But it was at this time that the family found new roots in Sagradovka, where they were when my father was born.

The children of Isaak Graewe and Aganetha Boldt include:

1. Graewe, David Isaak, born in Molotschna #599467
2. Graewe, Aganetha, born 1 June 1853, Molotschna #95066
3. Graewe, Anna, born 10 Apr 1858, Kleefeld, Molotschna #26612

4. Graeve, Agatha, born 8 Aug 1860, Kleefeld, Molotschna #1014337
5. Graewe, Isaak, born 1866, Kleefeld, Molotschna #1083368 —> our line
6. Graves, Johann Isaac, born 26 Jul 1875, Kleefeld, Molotschna #27683

Our ancestor Isaak Jr. is discussed below; here are a few notes about his siblings:

1) I learned about David Isaak Graewe from letters he wrote to the *Rundschau* from Alexanderpol, Memrik Mennonite Settlement, where he moved to in 1888. He travelled over 200 km each year to visit two sisters and his brother Isaak in Friedensfeld, Sagradovka. I have placed him as the oldest based on the birth year of his wife. David married Maria Schroeder #34917, born about 1851. They had thirteen children, five of whom were still living in 1910.

We have a Canadian connection through one son. David Graewe #468059 died after contracting typhoid fever while serving as an orderly in a Moscow hospital. His son David Graves #468060 was born in 1919, a few months after the father's death. David Graves joined his mother Katharina Neufeld #458058 in Canada in 1927. At age 54 in 1974, he married Eva Koop #1059027, and they worked a 40 acre farm together. David died on 9 Jan 2009 in Steinbach, Manitoba, and was buried there on 12 Jan 2009 at the Heritage Cemetery. My dad's cousin Henry Graewe visited David and Eva several times in Manitoba, and attended their 25th wedding anniversary in 1995.

2) Aganetha Graewe married Abraham Reimer #513459, the author of the 1891 letter mentioned above. Although both died in Friedensfeld, Sagradovka, their daughter Anna Reimer and husband Abram Kroeker came to Canada on 2 Oct 1929 aboard the S. S. Empress of Scotland, arriving in Quebec City. They settled in Coaldale, Alberta, with many descendants in British Columbia. My father worked for Aganetha's grandsons Abe Kroeker and Jake Kroeker, without knowing that we were related! Other descendants are in Manitoba, Alberta, Russia and Paraguay.

3) Anna Graewe married Johann Holzrichter #13405. On 20 Jun 1884, they arrived in New York aboard the S. S. Eider. They had a large family with 11 children and descendants in Kansas.

4) Agatha Graewe married Heinrich Wiens #1014338. They had at least six children. Son Heinrich Wiens was the father of my dad's war buddy, Johann Wiens, born 30 July 1919 (new to GRANDMA). Johann arrived in Canada on 28 July 1948 and first lived in Port Rowan, Ontario, later moving to St. Catharines or Kitchener, where he owned a motel. He may have had a wife named Helen and a daughter Annie Wiens. We would love to hear from him or his surviving family.

Two of Agatha's daughters also arrived in Canada:

- Daughter Katharine Wiens #1030148 and her husband Daniel Willms arrived in St. John, New Brunswick on 29 Nov 1926 aboard the S. S. Melita. They have descendants in Michigan, Kansas, Alberta, Ontario, and British Columbia.

- Daughter Aganetha Wiens #1031911 arrived in Quebec City on 9 May 1930, settling in Saskatchewan before moving to Abbotsford, B.C. with husband Heinrich Klassen. Most of their descendants live in Saskatchewan.

5) Johann Graves migrated to the United States in 1893. He married Russian-born Aganetha Bartel #27118 in Kansas. They had ten children. In about 1911 they moved to Saskatchewan, where their last three sons were born, and tragically where firstborn son John Graves died at age 16 in 1917. The family soon moved to California, where many descendants are located.

#### 4. Isaak Graewe, the teacher

My dad's grandfather, Isaak Graewe #1083368, was born in 1866 in Kleefeld, Molotschna. He died in 1933 in Friedensfeld, Sagradovka. Friedensfeld was one of 17 villages in the Sagradovka Mennonite Settlement, located in Kherson Oblast (district) roughly 100 km northeast of the city of Kherson and 50 km south of Kryvyi Rih.

Isaak likely took over the family farm started by his father Isaak, but may not have arrived until 1895, seven years after his father's death. His first daughter was born the year before some 800 km east in Hochfeld, Rostov Oblast.

The Friedensfeld property was a large dairy farm with about 20-25 cows. In addition to farming, Isaak was a gifted musician. He taught music at Sagradovka's secondary school located in the next village, Neu-Schoensee, and directed a choir.

In 1909, Isaak was elected *Oberschultz* (chief mayor) of the Sagradovka settlement. Gerhard Lohrenz explains: "The *Oberschultz* with his secretary and assistant were the executive for the area, while the local mayors had that function in the villages. Usually the men elected to these positions were men of influence; most were highly respected in their community." Unfortunately, two years later, a wealthy grain dealer closely connected to Isaak's superior in government succeeded in having him removed from office. Isaak won his lawsuit for wrongful dismissal, but by then his term had expired and another leader had been appointed.

However, Isaak continued to be involved in school leadership, and served on the Sagradovka school board. This role was mentioned when a group of Sagradovka school leaders were photographed in May 1913 (see Photos).

Isaak married our ancestor Anna Thiessen #1254181 born 7 May 1873. Sources differ on where she was born. Anna was the daughter of Johann Thiessen #1417407 and Aganetha Wall #1417406. Anna died on 2 Oct. 1929.

Isaak and Anna had these children, all seen in a 1927 family photo (see Photos):

1. Graewe, Aganete, born 1 Sep 1894, Hochfeld, Rostov #1192981
2. Graewe, Anna, born 27 Sep 1896, Friedensfeld, Sagradovka #1397891 —>our line
3. Graewe, Isaak I., born 21 Nov 1898, Friedensfeld, Sagradovka #1035940

4. Graewe, Agathe, born 6 April 1904, Friedensfeld, Sagradovka (new to GRANDMA)
5. Graewe, Maria, born 23 Sep 1907, Prangenu, Molotschna #1417411
6. Graewe, Margarete "Gredel", born 23 Nov 1910, Friedensfeld, Sagradovka #1417402
7. Graewe, Katharine "Katya", born 22 Mar 1913, Friedensfeld, Sagradovka #1417302

In 1930, Isaak married Maria Plett, born 18 Aug 1894 in Friedensfeld, Sagradovka #763885. Maria had never been married before, but had an 18-year old son, Johann Plett, born 5 Feb 1912 in Friedensfeld, Sagradovka #769149. Maria's parents were Peter Plett #54351 and Maria Friesen #63834. This Peter Plett was a brother to my dad's grandfather, Heinrich Plett, and also had many descendants.

The marriage was unfortunately short-lived, as Isaak died in 1933.

Below is the story, in brief, of each of the children and grandchildren of Isaak and Anna.

### **5.1 Aganete Graewe, the traveller**

Aganete was born on 1 Sept. 1894 in Hochfeld, Rostov Oblast (district), some 800 km east of Sagradovka. The following year she moved to Friedensfeld, Sagrovka with her parents. She received five years of primary education at the local Friedensfeld school.

Nevertheless, Aganete became fluent in Russian and regularly travelled on her own to the public market in the city of Kherson. There she would sell goods produced by local farmers, who would pay her expenses.

Aganete also had an excellent singing voice. She often went with her sister Maria from Friedensfeld to their sister Anna's home in neighbouring Neu-Schoensee to spend evenings singing together. When Anna's husband died, Aganete led an impromptu, forbidden hymn at the graveside. (Communists prohibited any expression of faith.)

In 1912, Aganete married my father's uncle Peter Plett, 25 Apr 1885, #476148. He soon died of a snake bite. They had one son, Peter Plett, born in 1914 in Friedensfeld, Sagradovka #1258664. He had two sons, Harry and Peter Plett, with his first wife Agatha Loewen. Peter's second wife was Anni Hueck of Hochheim-am-Main, Germany, where my family visited them in 1975.

In 1918, Aganete married Franz Klassen, born in 1894 #1353495. In 1936, he was arrested by the Russians and sent to a Gulag, where he died.

In 1937, Aganete married Johann Langemann, born 1 Nov 1891 #1192982. This widower brought ten children from his first two marriages, who thrived in Aganete's care. Unfortunately, Johann was taken away by the Russians that same year. In 1941, two stepsons were also taken away.



Aganete and her remaining family lived in Friedensfeld until 1 Nov. 1943, when they travelled by horse-drawn wagon and on foot to Poland. In 1945, they were repatriated to Russia. Later they immigrated to Germany. In 1982, my father visited Aganete in Lage, Germany where she settled and is believed to be buried. Her son Peter was the driver who facilitated the visit.

## **5.2 Anna Graewe, the guitarist**

My dad's mother, Anna Graewe, was born on 27 Sep. 1896 in Friedensfeld, Sagradovka. She received five years of primary education at the local Friedensfeld school. Her early years were likely taken up with helping her mother look after the younger children, and with music. Anna had an excellent singing voice and played the guitar.

On 22 Dec. 1918, Anna married Johann Plett #476150, born 15 July 1889 in Alexanderfeld, Sagradovka. He was the son of Heinrich Plett and Katharina Teski, who were then living in the nearby village of Nikolaifeld, Sagradovka. Anna and Johann married in Friedensfeld and had two sons there, probably living at the Graewe family farm.

After a few years they moved to Volodyevka, Trubetzkoye. The small settlement of Trubetzkoye was south of Sagradovka near Beryslav, still within Kherson Oblast (district). It was one of three small daughter settlements of Sagradovka, created to provide land for a growing population. Johann and Anna built up a prosperous farm and a general store there, and two more sons and a daughter were born.

In 1929, the Communists took over their spacious home, and the family relocated to Neu-Schoensee, Sagradovka. While staying briefly with the Graewe grandparents, Johann built a two-room house with hand-made bricks, a dirt floor and straw roof. Later a brick extension was added to shelter a cow. A handmade brick stove fuelled by straw and manure was used for cooking and to heat the house. All property had been collectivized and everyone from an early age had to work on the collective farm.

Four more children were born in Neu-Schoensee. But in about 1935, Johann was taken away by the Russians. He spent about three and a half years at the Vladivostok Gulag working on the final leg of the Trans-Siberian Railway. He was released early, but soon after was arrested on another false charge. Although he was released after a few months, Johann died at home on March 23, 1940 from injuries sustained from torture. Anna's sister Aganete led an impromptu, forbidden hymn at the graveside.

Anna's sisters Aganete and Maria often joined her in the evenings singing spiritual songs, while Anna sang and played guitar. The activity was no longer forbidden after the German army occupied the area in 1941.

On 30 October 1943, Anna and six children travelled by horse-drawn wagon and on foot to Poland, led by the retreating German army. Son Johann had already joined the *Wehrmacht* as

an interpreter, unhappy with how his father was treated by the Russians. Isaak, renamed Bruno, had also been drafted into the *Wehrmacht*. Heinrich and Peter were drafted in Poland.

After over a year in Poland, Anna and four children moved to Jena, Germany, where Anna's sister Agathe lived. To escape nightly bombings, they moved to the neighbouring village of Krippendorf, where my dad later met my mother.

But they weren't in Krippendorf when my father returned from war. In 1945, after the area became part of East Germany under Russian control, they were repatriated to Russia. They were sent to a Gulag in the forest called "15 Kilometer" about 60 km from Kharovsk, Vologda Oblast (district). There they endured forced labour for inadequate food, clothing and shelter.

Anna died there in March 1947. She sang and played hymns on her guitar right to the end.

Anna and Johann had these children:

1. Plett, Johann, born 30 Aug. 1919, Friedensfeld, Sagradovka #1405605
2. Plett, Isaak (Bruno), born 28 Feb. 1922, Friedensfeld, Sagradovka #1405606
3. Plett, Heinrich, born 20 Apr. 1924, Volodyevka, Trubetzkoye #1405607
4. Plett, Peter Henry, born 7 May 1926, Volodyevka, Trubetzkoye #809854 —> our line
5. Plett, Anna, born 3 Apr. 1928, Volodyevka, Trubetzkoye #1405608
6. Plett, Tina, born 1930, Neu-Schoensee, Sagradovka #1405609
7. Plett, Jakob, born 10 Oct. 1934, Neu-Schoensee, Sagradovka #1236260
8. Plett, Rudolf, born 10 Jun. 1939, Neu-Schoensee, Sagradovka #1405611
9. Plett, Aganete "Neta", born 10 Jun. 1939, Neu-Schoensee, Sagradovka #1405612

Son Johann became a high-ranking officer in the German army, where he served as an interpreter. When Stalingrad was besieged, he was allowed to fly out with a transport of wounded people. Later he was captured by the British army, who simply released him. When his mother and siblings were repatriated to Russia in 1945, Johann joined them. Then working for the mayor in Halle, Germany, he could have avoided repatriation, but chose to help his family survive. After four years with his family in the forest camp, he was sent to the infamous Vorkuta Gulag. The coal mine gulag was located in Komi Republic, Russia, just north of the Arctic Circle. In 1955, he returned to the forest Gulag. There he married Hilda Rueb and had the first two of three children. In 1960, the family moved to Kazakhstan, where he died on 13 Jan 1971 in Rentabelnyi. Johann's descendants live in Germany.

Son Isaak was required to change his name to Bruno when he was drafted into the German army. He is believed to have died in 1945 in Budapest, Hungary, where he was serving in a difficult campaign.

Son Heinrich recovered early from an accidental gunshot wound received while playing with a handmade gun with his younger brother Peter. Heinrich and Peter were also skilled partners at hunting mice during the famine of 1932-33. After Heinrich was drafted into the Germany army,

he was captured as a prisoner of war by the Russians. He suffered greatly from long service in Russian Gulags and was never released. His brother Jakob learned where he was from another survivor, and flew to Aldan, Sakha Republic to see him in 1977. Heinrich died there in 1984.

Son Peter was captured as a prisoner of war by the Americans in April 1945 and spent three months in an overcrowded, roofless prison camp in Bretzenheim, Germany. Later when searching for his family in Krippendorf, Germany, he met his first wife, Ursula Mueller. They travelled to Canada in 1949 with son Rudy, arriving in Quebec City aboard the S. S. Scythia. They lived in Gem, Alberta, then Abbotsford and finally Vancouver, B.C. Their five children now live in Vancouver, Surrey and Prince George, B.C. After Ursula died, Peter married Margaretha Lammert (then Koop). After she died, he married Nola del Carmen Ibarra Gonzales, originally from Nicaragua. In 2020, Peter and Nola celebrated their 22nd anniversary, Nola's 87th birthday and Peter's 94th birthday.

Daughter Anna died in 1951 in Kharovsk, Vologda Oblast (district). The family was then suffering the inhumane conditions of the Gulag. Anna worked in forestry and then was responsible for keeping two kilometers of railway tracks clear of snow. Anna was able to travel to the city to have her lung disease treated, but the damage was too great. Many remember Anna singing and teaching the children Bible stories in her last days in the camp when she was unable to work.

Daughter Tina died as an infant at about age two in 1932 in Neu-Schoensee.

Son Jakob survived the inhumane conditions of the Gulag, which he wrote about in his Life Story (see "Life in a Gulag" <https://ireneplett.weebly.com/blog/life-in-a-gulag>.) He was on his own at age 16 after his sister Anna died, and had harrowing experiences of begging for food in other villages. A teacher arrived and provided his first schooling, where he quickly progressed to the third grade. In the spring he was hired as a tree marker, using paint to show where a tree-cutting quota would be met. Later he operated a steam machine that generated electricity for power saws. In the camp, he married Emma Pressler and had the first two of nine children. In 1957 or 1958 they were released and moved to Kaskelen, Kazakhstan. In 1981, Jakob moved to Germany with his family. After Emma's death, Jakob married Natalie Ortmann. After Natalie died, he married Katharina Ewert. Jakob and many descendants live in the Schwäbisch-Gmünd area.

After his mother's death when he was seven years old, son Rudolf was taken to a home for children with his twin sister, Aganete, where they suffered mistreatment. After eight years there, he returned to his brother Jakob in the camp. In 1958 he moved with Jakob to Kaskelen, Kazakhstan, where he married Elsa. During their seven year marriage, Rudy was drafted into the Russian military service for three years. The marriage was childless and he married his second wife, Tatiana, and adopted her son Oleg. They had another son, Andrej, and daughter Elena. In 1991, they moved to Germany, where Rudy and Tatiana and their sons now live. Daughter Elena is married and lives in Vienna, Austria. Oleg's children live in Abbotsford, B.C.

After her mother's death when she was seven years old, Aganete was taken to a home for children with her twin brother, Rudolf, where they suffered mistreatment. After eight years there, she returned to her brother Jakob in the camp. In 1958 she moved with Jakob to Kaskelen, Kazakhstan, where she died on 11 Nov. 1961 of tuberculosis.

### **5.3 Isaak I. Graewe, the accountant**

Isaak was born on 21 Nov 1898 in Friedensfeld, Sagradovka. An only son, Isaak received more education than his sisters and became fluent in the Russian language. He was an accountant in a government office and progressed to a management position at a hospital outside of Sagradovka, commuting home on weekends.

In 1919, when bands of robbers threatened the peace of Sagradovka, Isaak was one of 40 or 50 young men of the settlement who joined the White Army. Some served in the military while others served as medics or in other work. Isaak returned home, while 13 other Sagradovka volunteers died in the effort. The White Army, led by officers of the Tsarist army, fought against the Bolshevik Red Army, but the Reds prevailed.

On 7 July 1920, Isaak married Maria Richert #1035941, born 25 Dec 1898, Hochfeld, Rostov Oblast (district). They married in Neukirch, Molotschna, then moved to Friedensfeld, Sagradovka. They lived in a lovely summer house on Isaak Sr.'s farm, where my dad visited them.

In 1937, Isaak was taken away by the Russians. He was shot dead a month later. Maria's obituary states: "Our mother stayed behind with six children, the oldest of whom was 16 years old. Material worries, hardship and hard work marked her further life. But the Lord also fulfilled his promise to her, 'not to leave you or forsake you' [Deut. 31:6]"

Maria and her children lived in Friedensfeld until 1 Nov 1943, when they travelled by horse-drawn wagon and on foot to Poland. There they briefly stayed in the village of Bochlevo. In 1945, Maria was repatriated to Russia, and spent four years in a Gulag in the forest near Gorki (likely Moscow district).

In 1974 she immigrated to Espelkamp, Germany with son Johann and his wife Tina. Maria was able to visit her son Heinrich in Canada in 1976. She died in Espelkamp in 1982.

Isaak and Maria had nine children. Three died in childhood. We know the names of seven:

1. Graewe, Maria, born 1 Nov. 1921 in Friedensfeld, Sagradovka #1035941
2. Graewe, Anna, born 2 Feb. 1924, Friedensfeld, Sagradovka #1080991
3. Graewe, Heinrich, born 9 May 1925, Friedensfeld, Sagradovka #773113
4. Graewe, Aganete, born 9 Jan. 1928, Friedensfeld, Sagradovka #1353496
5. Graewe, Abram (Albert), born 21 Dec. 1930, Friedensfeld, Sagradovka #1353497
6. Graewe, Johann, born before 1938, Friedensfeld, Sagradovka #1386853

7. Graewe, Johann, born 22 June 1938, Friedensfeld, Sagradovka #1035938

Daughter Maria had a son, Walter Graewe. Maria was repatriated to Russia, but later immigrated to Espelkamp, Germany. She was at her mother's funeral in Germany in 1982. Maria died in 2009. Her son married and had three children, believed to be in Germany.

Daughter Anna married Reinholt Phillipp. They had four children; one died at two years of age. One son had five children and lives in Russia.

Son Heinrich ("Henry") was one of three Graewe cousins of my father's who immigrated to Canada, and remained very close to our family. Henry was first called Isaak, but had to change his name during the war. He married Martha Zipper, originally of the Czech Republic. They married in Gronau, Germany. They arrived in Halifax, Nova Scotia on 30 Nov. 1949 aboard the R. M. S. Samaria. After starting out in Wembley, Alberta, they eventually settled in Vancouver, B.C. and had six children and many descendants. Henry died in 2008; Martha in 2019. One son lives in Calgary, Alberta, while other descendants live in B.C.

Daughter Aganete married a man named Miesche. They had four daughters. Aganete died in 1999, but three daughters are believed to live in Russia.

Son Abram was required to change his name to Albert during the war, but changed it back. He married Maria and had two sons. Abram died in 2004, but his sons are believed to live in Germany.

The first son named Johann died shortly after birth. His namesake, who went by "Hans," married a woman named Tina. He was repatriated to Russia, but later immigrated to Espelkamp, Germany, with Tina and his mother, Maria in 1974. Hans died in 2014.

#### **5.4 Agathe Graewe, the barrel-maker's wife**

Agathe was born on 6 April 1904 in Friedensfeld, Sagradovka. She probably received five years of primary education at the local Friedensfeld school, as all her sisters did.

In 1924, Agathe married Dumitru "Johann" Boleac (alternately Boljak or Boleacu), born 18 Feb 1896 in Fälticeni, Suceava, Romania. He was a barrel-maker who was captured by the Russians in World War I, then settled in Friedensfeld, Sagradovka. After Johann's first wife died, Isaak Graewe was assigned to take him to meet a woman in another village that he might marry. Johann told him, "I'm not in love with that woman. I'm in love with your daughter Agathe!" When Agathe said that she felt the same way, the wedding was set.

In 1928, after two sons were born, the family moved to the newly founded Savitaya, Amur settlement in Siberia. Daughter Anna was born there in the village of Schoensee. Dimitri worked in a fishery far from his family, who lived very modestly.

As Siberia had not lived up to their expectations, they returned to Friedensfeld in about 1930. Dimitri was once again the area's cooper. They lived simply in a little house with a clay roof. Two daughters were born there, but only Tina survived childhood.

When Johann learned that he might be taken away to a Russian Gulag, he went to Moscow to receive permission for his family to move to his country of origin, Romania. Armed with the permission, they were escorted to the border by Agathe's sister Aganete, arriving in January 1935. Three children were then born in Romania, but only Daniel survived.

After Germany invaded Romania in 1940, the family relocated to Jena, Germany, at 17 Wagnergasse. Along the way, they had another son. Daughter Liselotte was born in Jena the same day as an air raid damaged their home in 1943. Johann was buried in rubble for two days in another bombing, which he miraculously survived. When he returned home, his head bandaged, his nephew Jakob Plett reports, "He didn't greet anyone but said that together we should first thank God. Then he greeted everyone.... Uncle Boljak was a good preacher."

When the war was over, the East German authorities forced them to give up their home and return to Romania. No housing had been arranged when they arrived, and there was much poverty. But the move to Romania probably saved their lives a second time. The family was not sent to a Russian Gulag, which happened to Agathe's sister Anna and many others.

Agathe and Johann hoped to come to Canada, following their eldest sons, but it was not to be. Johann died in Cuvin, Banat, Romania (now Kovin, South Banat District, Vojvodina, Serbia) on 15 Jan 1975; Agatha on 16 June 1981. They are buried there together.

Agathe and Johann had eleven children (all new to GRANDMA):

1. John Boleak, born 29 March 1925, Friedensfeld, Sagradovka
2. Isaak Boleac, born 28 May 1927, Friedensfeld, Sagradovka
3. Anna Boleac, born 7 June 1929, Schoensee, Savitaya, Amur, Siberia
4. Ecaterina (Tina) Boleac, born 11 Nov. 1931, Friedensfeld, Sagradovka
5. Lydia Boleac, born between 1930 and 1935 Friedensfeld, Sagradovka
6. \_\_\_\_ Boleac, daughter born about 1935, Iași, Romania
7. Daniel Boleac, born 18 Aug 1938, Iași, Romania
8. Willie Boleac, born about 1940, Mamuslia [Căscioarele], Constanța County, Romania
9. Wilhelm (Willy) Boleac, born 14 Oct 1941, Maerisch-Kromau [now Moravský Krumlov], Czech Republic
10. Liselotte Boleac, born 27 May 1943, Jena, Thuringia, Germany
11. Peter (Petru) Boleacu, born 16 Nov 1947, Corasinti, Banat, Romania

Son John was another dear cousin of my father's who came to Canada and stayed in close contact with our family. He served in the *Luftwaffe* and was shot down in Austria. After recovering from malaria, he was told that he was heading home, which was then Jena, Germany. Instead he was sent to a Russian Gulag, where he spent five years as a prisoner of

war. After his release, he travelled to Germany, where he met and married Maria Kirlik, born 19 Sept 1926 in Romania. They married at the refugee camp in Gronau-Westfalen, and immigrated to Canada on 23 Nov. 1950. After starting out in Wymark, Sask., they settled in Vancouver, B.C. They had six children. John died in 2008; Maria in 2017. Descendants live in British Columbia. John's obituary, a postcard from the Gulag, and some stories about him are shared in "John Boleak's Story": <https://ireneplett.weebly.com/blog/john-boleaks-story>

Son Isaac was the third dear Graewe cousin of my father's in Vancouver, B.C. He had to change his name to Fritz during the war, and some continued to call him that, but he went back to Isaak. He was drafted into the *Wehrmacht*, where he trained as an anti-tank gunner. Post-war, at the urging of his mother for a better life in Canada, he immigrated on 27 Nov. 1952, sponsored by his brother John. He settled in Vancouver, where he married Hilda Balkon, born 12 Mar. 1929 in Reischwo, Poland. They married on 27 Feb. 1954 in Vancouver, and had five children. Isaac died in 2007; Hilda in 2014. Descendants live in the Vancouver, B.C. area. Isaak shared helpful historical information about himself and his entire family in a 1990 letter, published in "Isaak's Story," along with his obituary: <https://ireneplett.weebly.com/blog/isaaks-story>

Daughter Anna married Mihai (Michael) Acatrinei and had seven children, the last of whom died at birth. They lived in Iași, Romania. Anna was a seamstress who sewed all of her children's clothes and took orders from the community. Her husband Mihai was a chemist for a textile factory. He was also a lay preacher. Anna died in 2004; Mihai in 2018. Descendants live in Romania, Germany, Spain, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom.

Daughter Tina married Avram Popescu. They lived in Arad, Banat. Tina faithfully cared for her mother Agathe in her last years. Tina died on 15 Nov 2003 in Romania, without descendants.

Two daughters died young, one after the other. Lydia died in Friedensfeld, Sagradovka, before the family's trek to Romania in 1935. Another daughter whose name is not known died in about 1935 in Iasi, Romania, shortly after her birth.

Son Daniel married Ludmilla Timus. They had one daughter, and live in Arad, Banat.

One son didn't survive childhood. Willie died soon after he was born in Mamuslia [Căscioarele], Constanța County, Romania.

Willie's namesake, Wilhelm (Willy), married Anna Tjart. They had no children and live in Germany.

Daughter Liselotte also lives in Germany. She married Constantin Nistor and had one daughter.

Son Petru married Ana Antea. They had four children and live in Arad, Banat.

### **5.5 Maria Graewe, the singer**

Maria was born on 23 Sep 1907 in Prangenu, Molotschna, according to her EWZ document prepared in 1944. She was the only child of the family to be born there. Prangenu was located on the right bank of the Yushanlee River, about 50 miles from Berdyansk, some 400 km southeast of Friedensfeld, Sagradovka.

By 2008 Maria was living in Friedensfeld. There she received five years of primary education in the local Friedensfeld school. But music was in the family and Maria had an excellent singing voice. She often went with her sister Aganete from Friedensfeld to their sister Anna's home in neighbouring Neu-Schoensee to spend evenings singing together.

On 2 Nov. 1926, Maria married Heinrich Friesen, born 17 Jan 1906 in Friedensfeld, Sagradovka #1417412. They had five children, two dying in childhood.

On 25 April 1938, Heinrich was taken away by the Russians. May 1941 was the last time the family received any news about him.

Maria and her children lived in Friedensfeld, Sagradovka, until 1 Nov 1943, when they travelled by horse-drawn wagon and on foot to Poland. Maria died in 1972.

Three children are listed in GRANDMA:

1. Friesen, Heinrich "Andrei," born 26 Jan 1928, Friedensfeld, Sagradovka #1417410
2. Friesen, Maria, born between 1930-1934, Friedensfeld, Sagradovka #767788
3. Friesen, Johann, born between 1930-1934, Friedensfeld, Sagradovka #1417408

Daughter Maria married Kornelius Penner. In 1994, they migrated to Germany. They had nine children. Her daughter Maria Penner, who married Peter Friesen, lives in Abbotsford, B.C. Other descendants live in Russia and Germany.

Son Johann married a woman named Linda; they had two children, who live in Germany.

### **5.6 Margarete "Gredel" Graewe**

Margarete (Aunt Gredel to my father) was born 23 Nov 1910 in Friedensfeld, Sagradovka. She received five years of primary education at the local Friedensfeld school.

On 10 Nov. 1929, Margarete married Peter Buhler #1417401, born 12 May 1909 in Grigoryevka, Naumenko. We know of five children, one dying in childhood.

They lived in Friedensfeld until 1 Nov 1943, when the family travelled by horse-drawn wagon and on foot to Poland. They briefly settled in Pepocin, Poland, where son Hans was born. But when Margarete completed her EWZ application in October 1944, her husband had been drafted into the *Wehrmacht*.



Margaret was mentioned in a 1949 letter by her sister Agathe's husband, Dumitru Boleac. He writes to his son John, "... you, dear John, wrote to us that you received a letter from our sister Margaret, saying that she wrote to you that our prayers, which I and your mother prayed to God for you and Isaak every day, were a wall around you that kept you alive." Both John and Isaak were captured after war service; John was imprisoned in a Russian Gulag for five years. Both survived and ended up in Canada. Margaret's encouragement helped her nephew to persevere in the worst of times.

Four children are listed in GRANDMA:

1. Buhler, Peter, born between 1930-1934, Friedensfeld, Sagradovka #1417398
2. Buhler, Willi, born between 1930-1934, in Friedensfeld, Sagradovka #1417397
3. Buhler, Aganeta, born between 1940-1944, Friedensfeld, Sagradovka #1417396
4. Buhler, Hans, born between 1940-1944, Pepocin, Poland #1417394

### **5.7 Katharine "Katya" Graewe, the brave**

Katharine (Aunt Katya to my father) was born on 22 Mar 1913 in Friedensfeld, Sagradovka. She received five years of primary education in the local Friedensfeld school.

Katharine was a woman who stood up for her beliefs. In 1932, when she was 18 or 19 years old, she spent six months in prison because she was against the Komsomol, the Communist youth league.

On 18 Nov. 1934, Katharine married Heinrich Derksen #1417254, born 26 Feb 1911 in Friedensfeld, Sagradovka. We know of five children, one dying in childhood.

The family lived in Friedensfeld until 1 Nov 1943, when they travelled by horse-drawn wagon and on foot to Poland. They briefly settled in Pepocin, Poland, where daughter Liselotte was born.

Katya seems to have then followed her sister Agathe to Jena, Germany. Agathe mentions her in a letter as being missing after Jena and Weimar were bombed in February 1945. But Katya survived the bombing, as she was later found in Romania. She probably again followed her sister Agathe when they had to leave Jena for Romania. The move may have saved her life, as she avoided being sent to a Russian Gulag, as happened to her sister Anna and many others.

In 1957, Katya took another memorable stand when she almost stopped the marriage of her niece, Anna Boleac, in Arad, Romania. Katya found shocking information in the fiancé's coat pocket: Mihai (Michael) Acatrinei was divorced. The marriage went ahead and was a happy union. Anna held no grudge against her aunt and continued to write to her years later.

Katya's nephew Isaak Boleac visited her in Germany in 1989.

Four children are listed in GRANDMA:

1. Derksen, Margarethe, born between 1935-1939, Friedensfeld, Sagradovka #1417253
2. Derksen, Katharina, born between 1935-1939, Friedensfeld, Sagradovka #1417251
3. Derksen, Heinrich, born between 1940-1944, Friedensfeld, Sagradovka #1417248
4. Derksen, Liselotte, born between 1940-1944, Pepocin, Poland #1417247

**Final message**

We are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses, our family, our friends, our angels. Even some we have never met have supported us in their prayers and thoughts. May they ever remain in our hearts.

Irene Plett, June 2020

Updated Dec. 2020

## Photos



### 1. Graewe family photo

This 1927 photo of the family of Isaak Graewe (1866-1933, #1083368) includes, in pairs from left to right:

Maria Graewe and her husband Heinrich Friesen  
 Agathe Graewe and her husband Dumitru “Johann” Boleac  
 Anna Graewe and her husband Johann Plett  
 Katharine “Katya” Graewe and mother Anna Thiessen  
 Margarete “Gredel” Graewe and father Isaak Graewe  
 Maria Richert and her husband Isaak I. Graewe  
 Aganete Graewe and her second husband Franz Klassen

Over the next decade, there were big changes to the men in the family. Father Isaak died in 1933. Franz Klassen was taken by the Russians in 1936; Isaak I. Graewe in 1937; Heinrich Friesen in 1938. Johann Plett was taken by the Russians—twice—but was released and died in 1940 from torture injuries. The Boleacs survived as they left for Romania in 1935. Margarete and Katharine and their husbands (married in 1929 and 1934) survived, along with all the women pictured.



## 2. Isaak Graewe with Sagradovka school leaders

My dad's grandfather, Isaak Graewe #1083368, is on the far right of the second row in this photo of Sagradovka high school leaders taken on 6 May 1913. The photographer, J. Giesbrecht, identified each participant as follows, from left to right:

1. Top row: 1) Johann Toews, Gnadenfeld; 2) Abr. Kroeker, Orloff; 3) Johann Wiens, Altonau; 4) Nik. Hilderand, Schoenau; 5) Heinrich Willms, Alexanderkrone, and 6) Heinrich Voth, Tiede
2. Second row: 1) Gerhard Penner, high school teacher; 2) Otto Weingart, leading high school teacher; 3) Jacob Giesbrecht, Jubilee [?]; 4) Fr. Martens, school board president; 5) S. Ivanov, Russian high school teacher; 6) Isaak Graewe, school board member
3. Third [front] row: 1) Abr. Toews, Blumenort; 2) Jacob Peters, Neu-Schoensee; 3) Peter Peters, Nikolaifeld, 4) Heinrich Baerg, Neu-Halbstadt; 5) Abr. Wiebe, Muensterberg, school board member; 6) Abr. Penner, Alexanderfeld; 7) Jakob Koop, Steinfeld.



## Acknowledgements and sources

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