

PROFILES

OF MENNONITE FAITH

Jacob and Anna Dick

From Exile in Russia to Missionary Work in India

Jacob Dick and Anna Berg were born in Russia early in the 1900s, when life in Russia was still relatively tranquil. But with the onset of war in 1914, the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, civil war, famine and repression, the situation changed drastically.

As a young lad Jacob lost his parents and had to cope with threats to his life and scrounge for adequate food and clothing.

At the age of 18

the nature of which they could not have anticipated.

Once in Moscow the Dicks secured permission to travel east. For nine days they traveled across the Ural mountains into Siberia, then turned south to Turkestan. By the time they reached

Alma Ata they had traveled 4,500 miles. It was now November and it seemed best to stay there through the winter, but they decided to try to



Jacob and Anna Dick and family

Jacob committed his life to God and joined the Mennonite Brethren Church. In 1925 he married Anna Berg and devoted himself to evangelistic ministry, often facing serious danger. Circumstances in the Soviet Union became increasingly difficult under Stalin in the late 1920s. In 1930 Jacob was sent to a concentration camp near Dnepropetrovsk.

Jacob later received permission to visit his family at a nearby location. Rather than return to the camp, the Dicks secretly left for Moscow. Thus began a long and treacherous journey,

reach Djarkent, about 20 miles from the Chinese border.

It was dangerous to inquire about lodging along the way. After reaching a small town, Jacob decided to seek a temporary job for the remainder of the winter, but changed his mind when he spotted an official whom he had known in southern Russia and who had been responsible for persecuting Christians. One night as they were about to enter a town they were stopped by inspectors who asked them for traveling documents. Jacob responded, "Who in the

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world would be able to live without a document in Russia? Would you?" His bold assertion led the official to wave them on without further questioning.

After six days they reached Djarkent. Dick secured a job as a clerk in a bakery. In spring they proceeded toward the Chinese border. During the day they hid from police in sand holes in the desert. The children were kept quiet by giving them opium. On the fourth night a group of Muslims appeared, who offered to help them cross the border. A small river formed the border. They managed to cross the river, some by holding on to the tails of the horses.

At night the party proceeded again. The Muslims negotiated with the Chinese border police, but soon the Mennonites discovered that they had been sold to the police, who threatened to kill them. For eight days they were moved from prison to prison and dispossessed of their belongings. Finally they were forced to return to Russia. Within sight of the border they refused to walk further, protesting that they would be killed if they returned. The police relented and abandoned the group.

The Dick family set out for Kuldja, about 60 miles into China. At times they crawled through mud in the darkness of night and sought shelter during the day. Providentially they secured documents to enter China. They traveled the final distance to Kuldja by wagon.

There the Dicks fell ill with malaria, but recovered after a month. The city was isolated, with the Gobi desert on one side and the Tian-Shain mountain range on the other. Nevertheless, after a period of three months, the Dicks and several other families decided to risk the trek through the mountains to Kasgar, about 800 miles away.

They left by donkey on 30 August 1932. After several days they reached mountainous terrain. The most hazardous part of the journey was the 15-mile crossing of a huge glacier. Bodies of

refugees who had failed to make the crossing lay scattered along their path. On the opposite side of the mountain range another desert awaited them. One month after their departure they reached Kashgar. There Jacob opened a knitting factory to secure income.

By spring civil war was raging and it became advisable to leave. After securing an emergency permit to go to India, they departed and soon met an English official, Lord Allisworth, who invited them to join his caravan. So they traveled in relative comfort for about 3 weeks. On 5 April 1933 they climbed the Mintekka Pass to an elevation of about 15,000 feet. The snow was deep and the trail very dangerous. At Gilgit Allisworth left them to return home.

In June the Dicks set out to cross the Himalayan mountains. Again, the difficulties they encountered were formidable before finally reaching Srinagar in India.

Once in India, a new life awaited them. They were able to contact the Mennonite Brethren mission among the Telegus in Hyderabad. This totally unforeseen circumstance became the starting point for a remarkable career in missions for the next several decades.

For a more complete story and map of the trek, see the website of the Historical Commission: <http://www.mbhistory.org/>

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No. 29, Winter 2005. Written by Abe Dueck, Winnipeg, Manitoba. Design and layout by Kent H. Gaston. Copyright 2005 by the Mennonite Brethren Church Historical Commission. Email: ajdueck@mbconf.ca.

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