

“Becoming a Public Charge”: Russlaender and the Threat of Deportation

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On May 18, 1931, David Toews, the Chair of the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization (CMBoc), returned to his office in Rosethorn, Saskatchewan, from one of his many trips and opened a letter from J. H. Unger of Rush Lake, Saskatchewan. In the letter, written a few days prior, Unger reported that he had just received news from his brother that his nephew Cornelius Unger had been deported because he had become a public charge. Cornelius had arrived from the Soviet Union under the auspices of the CMBoc a few years earlier and had settled in Herbert, Saskatchewan.¹ He was one of the twenty-one thousand or so Mennonites who were able to immigrate to Canada from the Soviet Union between 1923 and 1929.²

These Mennonites had settled in Ukraine in the eighteenth century, and in the nineteenth century expanded throughout the Russian Empire. The years of revolution, civil war, and anarchy during and following the First World War decimated Mennonite religious, economic, and community life. During the war, the German language was suppressed and there were threats to expropriate Mennonite and other German colonist lands. In February 1917, the Tsar abdicated and a provisional government was established. The October Revolution brought the Bolsheviks to power and the country was thrown into civil war. For the next three years, Mennonite colonies in Ukraine faced alternating occupation by German, Red, White, and anarchist armies. Mennonite colonies throughout the country

experienced trauma in the form of bloodshed, rape, and the loss of property. By 1921, the Bolsheviks had prevailed, and the Russian Empire had given way to the Soviet Union. As the new Communist regime took hold, it imposed its ideology and economic system on the countryside. Industries were nationalized, large Mennonite estates were expropriated, and forced grain requisitions by the state contributed to famine. The new regime was antithetical to Mennonite sensibilities and a desire to leave the Soviet Union soon dominated Mennonite thinking and energies.

An earlier migration of Mennonites from the Russian Empire settled in Manitoba in the 1870s, and these Mennonites expanded into the Saskatoon and Swift Current areas of Saskatchewan in the 1890s. In response to the plight of their coreligionists these Canadian Mennonites created the CMBoc to assist relatives and coreligionists in emigrating from the Soviet Union. There were, however, obstacles to overcome. In the aftermath of the First World War, amendments to the Immigration Act allowed the government to prevent the immigration of those “deemed undesirable owing to their peculiar customs, habits, modes of life and methods of holding property, and because of their probable inability to become readily assimilated or to assume the duties and responsibilities of Canadian citizenship within a reasonable time.”³ Orders-in-Council emanating from these amendments specifically banned Mennonites, Hutterites, and Doukhobors. The CMBoc’s first task was to have the ban on further Mennonite immigration withdrawn and then to coordinate travel and settlement in Canada of as many Mennonites as possible from the Soviet Union. From the CMBoc’s offices in Rosthern, David Toews worked tirelessly in the face of almost insurmountable financial and bureaucratic challenges conspiring to derail the effort at every turn. Mennonites from earlier migrations to Canada referred to the new immigrants as *Russlaender* (Russians). Like those 1870s migrants to Manitoba, the *Russlaender* hoped to settle on farms.

Although letters to the Board from the Unger family suggested he had been healthy when he arrived in Canada, Cornelius Unger was admitted to the Weyburn Mental Hospital in 1930 after becoming despondent and withdrawn.⁴ It is not clear what the process was for his admission. However, in their history of the Weyburn hospital, Erika Dyck and Alex Deighton suggest patients were admitted under three categories: medical, criminal, or voluntary. Most patients in the medical category were committed by family who were then responsible for a payment of \$2.00 per day to the institution.⁵ This seems to have been the case with Cornelius Unger. The family was distraught upon hearing the news of Unger’s deportation, particularly because letters they had received from Cornelius had pointed

to an improvement in his condition. The May 1931 letter notifying Toews of Unger's deportation touched off a flurry of letters and telegrams from Toews to government officials and to the family to try to determine what had transpired. In his letters to immigration officials Toews pleaded for the young man to be taken off the train if he was still in Canada or, if he was underway to Europe, to be taken off the ship in England or Germany. It would all be too late; Cornelius Unger had been returned to the Soviet Union.⁶

Although Unger was one of the only 1920s Russlaender immigrants to be deported because he had become a public charge, the threat of deportation hung over all interwar Mennonite immigrant families who received social assistance from a municipality or required institutional care. It was a particular burden to the CMBoc, who had made their emigration from the Soviet Union possible. The organization had promised the government that none of the immigrants would become a public charge. There were a few other deportations. For example, the entire H. P. Janzen family was deported to Germany in 1935 after a long series of misfortunes that had required extensive financial support from both the Board and various municipalities. According to Grant Grams, Heinrich Janzen became a German citizen after he left the Soviet Union, demanded repatriation to Germany, and regretted ever having come to Canada.⁷ Having a criminal record was also cause for deportation, and Isaac Braun of the infamous Friesen-Braun trials was deported to the Soviet Union in 1932 after serving his sentence in Prince Albert Penitentiary.⁸

The deportation of Cornelius Unger and the fact that he was the only one to be unwillingly deported under the public charge category graphically illustrates the confluence of Canadian society's fears about "racial degeneration" (most often attributed to "mentally defective" and "feeble-minded" immigrants), the economic problems brought on by the Great Depression, and the resulting financial burdens faced by municipalities. The Unger case also offers insights into how the immigration bureaucracy bowed to pressure from an organized immigrant advocacy group with political influence. A final dynamic was the reality that for deportation to occur, the receiving country (in this case the Soviet Union) had to acknowledge the deportee as one of its citizens and recognize the documentation they came with. In this respect, Unger became a test case for the Immigration Department in working out a framework for deportation procedures involving immigrants from the Soviet Union. Although the Board was successful in forestalling deportation of others, in Unger's case the failure of advocacy along with a

series of oversights and omissions resulted in tragic consequences for him and his family.

The threat of deportation for Russlaender immigrants came at a time when deportation of immigrants dramatically increased in Canada. During the first years of the Depression, deportations for all reasons increased significantly. Those due to deportees becoming a public charge increased from 444 cases in 1928–29 to 2,106 in 1929–30 and 2,245 in 1930–31. In 1931–32, the period in which Cornelius Unger was deported, the rate doubled to 4,507 cases. The number of persons deported under the public charge category peaked a year later in 1932–33, when 4,916 persons were deported.⁹ Many of these were British-born, unemployed men and the Department of Immigration argued they were voluntarily repatriating. Barbara Roberts counters that the categories under which persons were deported were used as needed to conceal the “real economic functions of deportation” during the difficult days of the Depression.¹⁰ The real reason for deportation was to “maintain a balance between the need for cheap labour” during periods of economic expansion and “the desire to cut welfare costs in times of economic contraction.”¹¹ Roberts is particularly critical of the Immigration Department bureaucracy, which she accuses of being “dishonest and malevolent.” She argues that a pattern of behaviour became systemic in the department. Immigration officials were only doing their jobs, even if those jobs required them to break, or at least abuse, the law and conceal from the public the extent of their duplicity.¹² Another focus of scholarship suggests that deportation was used to rid the country of radicals, particularly in the context of the Winnipeg General Strike. In 1919, almost the entire workforce of the city of Winnipeg went out on a general strike. The strike took place at a time when the threat of Bolshevism seemed very real and caught the attention of the nation. It provoked a reaction against radicals and stimulated the federal government to amend the Immigration Act to prevent the entry and allow for the deportation of “persons who believe in or advocate the overthrow by force or violence the Government of Canada.”¹³ Lyle Dick has argued that the deportation of radicals was driven by the conservative views of the Borden government of 1919. It also reflected a strong desire to completely assimilate immigrants into an Anglo-Saxon way of thinking and to rid the country of those who challenged that view.¹⁴ Henry F. Drystek challenges both of these portrayals of the interwar deportation wave. He argues that the causes for deportation can be found in the reluctance of the Canadian middle class to fund necessary social services.¹⁵ One of the few studies of the deportation of the mentally ill in this period is Robert Menzies’s analysis of deportations of the mentally ill in

British Columbia. Menzies argues that the deportation of immigrants suffering from mental illness was "an opportune and generally permanent device for ridding hospitals of their least-wanted inmates."¹⁶ Other than Grant Grams's specific example of the H. P. Janzen family, discussion of the threatened deportation of Mennonite immigrants of the 1920s is limited to Frank H. Epp's account of the 1920s migration story. Epp places the threat of deportation within the context of "projects and problems" associated with the "rescue and resettlement" of Mennonites from the Soviet Union.¹⁷

The immigration of Mennonites from the Soviet Union in the 1920s took place in the context of increasing concern among Canadians about the negative influences of "foreigners" and "aliens." The immigration policies of the Clifford Sifton era from 1896 to 1905 had created a virtual open door for immigrants. With Sifton's replacement by Frank Oliver, immigration regulations began to tighten, particularly with respect to those viewed as undesirables. The 1906 Immigration Act introduced the provision that those who "become a charge upon the public funds . . . may be deported and returned to the port or place whence such immigrant came or sailed for Canada."¹⁸ The Act also created the legal framework necessary for deportation and, as Valerie Knowles points out, "a small coterie of government officials could legally employ an administrative procedure to deport newcomers according to the functionaries' own extralegal and informal system of justice."¹⁹ The 1910 amendments to the 1906 Immigration Act created more prohibited classes, including "idiots, imbeciles, feeble-minded persons, epileptics, insane persons, and persons who have been insane within five years previous." According to the Act, a person who fit these categories was not to be admitted into Canada and could also be deported, "unless he is a Canadian citizen, or has Canadian domicile."²⁰ The definition of domicile was originally a two-year residency, but in 1910 it was increased to three years. By the time Mennonites arrived from the Soviet Union in the 1920s, it was five years.²¹ In 1919, the Immigration Act was again amended to bring immigration policies in line with Canadian society's fears of what immigration was doing to the ostensibly superior British character of the country. The list of undesirables was expanded to bar those with "constitutional psychopathic inferiority," "chronic alcoholism," and "those mentally or physically defective to such a degree as to affect their ability to earn a living."²² The 1919 amendments to the Immigration Act also allowed for the Order-in-Council that closed the door to Mennonite immigration that same year. The conflict over education with the more conservative Mennonites in Manitoba and Saskatchewan soured the climate to further Mennonite admissions and resulted in

the emigration of the more conservative groups to Mexico and Paraguay in the 1920s.

The progressive restrictions on the immigration of the “feeble-minded” coincided with the rise of the eugenics movement in Canada.²³ By 1919, psychologists and psychiatrists were devoting considerable energy to changing the country’s approach to immigration. As Ian Dowbiggin notes, Charles K. Clark, one of Canada’s leading psychiatrists, had a “magnetic attraction” to a policy of restricting immigration. Clark was also the medical director of the Canadian National Committee for Mental Hygiene. He was convinced that central and southern European immigrants were “defectives” when compared to their British counterparts.²⁴ Psychiatrists like Clark were part of an active eugenics movement focusing on how immigrants, who were believed to have high rates of mental problems, were dragging down the quality of the nation’s population. In the interwar years, as Angus McLaren argues, the charge was taken up by other professionals. Doctors, social workers, and a variety of organizations “dredged up from the files of asylums, orphanages, rescue homes, penitentiaries, industrial schools, and psychiatric clinics sensational accounts of the social cost of admitting immigrants to Canada.”²⁵

Widespread fear of what mentally ill immigrants were doing to the cause of mental hygiene was a factor in deportations. However, Unger’s deportation and the threatened deportation of other institutionalized Mennonite immigrants did not usually fall under the medical or mental health exclusions of the Act. The most commonly used provision in the Immigration Act was to deport someone for becoming a “public charge.” In the context of the 1920s and 1930s, becoming a public charge could mean a person was unable to pay for an extended stay in a hospital or mental health institution or, by being unemployed, relied on municipal or provincial assistance. Immigrants who became a public charge before they were domiciled could be deported.

In a letter, written by David Toews, petitioning the federal government to remove the 1919 restriction on Mennonite immigration, the Board had pledged “to provide maintenance, support and employment for these people, so that none of them at any time would become a burden or inconvenience to the Canadian government or any Provincial or Municipal Government.”

The Immigration Department circled this paragraph on the original letter. For the Board of Colonization, the promise became the proverbial albatross around its neck.²⁶ In most cases, the threat of deportation was averted by the Board taking responsibility for maintenance costs when families were unable to pay. However, the

Board's resources were severely taxed because of the destitute financial condition of the incoming Russlaender. They were also responsible for the transportation costs for two-thirds of the immigrants. By 1931, the Canadian Pacific Railway had advanced almost two million dollars and over one million of debt was outstanding. The Board had the unenviable task of collecting this transportation debt from immigrants already experiencing difficult circumstances while trying to establish themselves in a new country. To pay for the institutional maintenance costs of immigrants, the Board initially used relief funds donated by American Mennonites. Eventually, affiliated provincial aid committees were forced to charge immigrants five cents per month on top of their travel debt in order to pay for the costs of institutional care.²⁷ These funds were difficult to raise and necessitated appeals in the immigrant newspaper, *Der Bote*.²⁸ A particularly impassioned plea from B. B. Janz, one of the primary organizers of the Soviet side of the migration, defined the spectre of deportation not as "deportation to Russia, but deportation into ruin."²⁹ The financial impossibility of keeping up with all these obligations frequently put the Board in a position of contesting the charges for institutional care.

The case of an immigrant child, Johann Ketler, illustrates the nature of these conflicts. Johann suffered from epilepsy. He arrived in Canada with his parents in August 1923. On June 25, 1926, he was admitted to the Weyburn Mental Hospital because of "comparatively frequent and fairly severe seizures."³⁰ On January 8, 1927, the Board was advised that the costs of maintenance were to be their responsibility. In response, the Board wrote a number of letters to determine the details of the case, what charges had accumulated, and who had paid for the care of the six-year-old boy to that time. The Board received conflicting reports about who had committed the boy to the hospital. The family suggested the municipal government had seen to his admission whereas the hospital suggested the father had brought him. In any case, the municipality had been paying the maintenance fee. The Board suggested that funds for Ketler's maintenance would have to come from donations. It hinted at paying future costs, but said that the municipality should cover the maintenance fee to that date. Nothing happened for a number of months. In November 1927, the Board received a stiffly worded letter from the Department of Immigration and Colonization reminding them that the boy was "admitted to Canada without complying fully with the provisions of the Immigration Act solely on account of the guarantee . . . that he would not be allowed at any time to become a public charge in Canada."³¹ When Toews appealed to the Saskatchewan Department of Public Works for relief from payments, he

justified his request because the Board had brought “about 8,000 people” to the province—“all of whom have become ratepayers.” The deputy minister countered that it “would be quite unfair to expect the state to provide for this boy who was a defective when brought into the country,” but acknowledged “it would be great hardship to deport him . . . back to Russia.”³² The case of Johann Ketler also illustrates the problem of minors subjected to deportation. The Immigration Act was not definitive about such cases and only suggested that when a minor was subject to deportation and the family either wilfully neglected or failed to support their dependent, “all the members of the family may be deported at the same time.”³³

For a few years the Board paid the maintenance fees for Johann Ketler. After the father became a Canadian citizen, they renewed efforts to obtain relief. In his letter to the Saskatchewan Department of Public Works, David Toews argued that the family had been in Canada seven years and “since our immigrants who have come to this country are paying taxes as well as the others for the upkeep of these institutions,” it was reasonable that the charges should stop. The Department did not relent. The deputy minister simply replied, “We cannot see how the naturalization of the father should have any bearing on this Department’s continuing to collect sustenance charges.” He reminded Toews that deportation had not been pursued solely because of the agreement with the Board. Therefore, they would continue to look to the Board for payment.³⁴ By the time Johann Ketler died in 1938 at the age of seventeen, the Board had paid more than \$2,600 for his care.³⁵ In another case involving a patient at Selkirk Mental Hospital in Manitoba, the Board again argued that since the family had been in Canada for six years and the father had been naturalized, the charges should stop. The Province of Manitoba countered that the naturalization of the father had no bearing since “the son was not a minor, and therefore, could not be naturalized under his own right while a patient in this institution.” The province again threatened to hand the case over to the Department of Immigration for deportation if the Board refused to pay the \$1.00 per day maintenance fee.³⁶

In Cornelius Unger’s case, it appears he was healthy when he arrived in Canada in May 1926 but began to deteriorate about two years later. He entered the Saskatchewan Mental Hospital at Weyburn on January 23, 1930.³⁷ In some of the correspondence in Unger’s file there are veiled references suggesting his mental illness may have been connected to events in the Soviet Union some years earlier. A minister from Herbert intimated that the young man had been “drawn into” the “difficult war years” and they had left their mark on him.³⁸ In a letter to F. C. Blair, the assistant deputy minister

of immigration, David Toews suggested that "the after-effects of the harrowing experiences in Russia" had resulted in Cornelius becoming despondent and ultimately resulted in his hospitalization.³⁹

The Board first became aware of Cornelius Unger's institutionalization in a letter from the division commissioner of the Department of Immigration, Thomas Gelley. On March 20, 1930, Gelley noted that the case has been referred to the Department "with a view to the deportation of Cornelius Unger."⁴⁰ The Board replied with a promise "that the accounts of Cornelius Unger at the Weyburn Mental Hospital will be paid." The writer indicated that the Board would approach Cornelius's father about what he could do to contribute, but the Board chair reiterated that they would be "responsible in any event that the accounts will be paid."⁴¹

This pattern occurred often in cases of an immigrant placed in a hospital, mental institution, or sanatorium. Immigrants were usually reluctant to advise the Board that a family member had entered an institution, especially when they were unable to pay maintenance. Often the first news of an immigrant becoming a public charge because of a stay in an institution came in the form of a letter from the Department of Immigration threatening deportation. The Board then assured the Department that they would be responsible before proceeding to investigate the circumstances. The Board's reluctance to pay maintenance often resulted in delays arranging payment while it exhausted all other options. The Department frequently expressed exasperation with the Board's slow response and used the threat of deportation to force it to pay the institution in question.

The political clout of the Board, and particularly that of David Toews, who was a friend of Prime Minister Mackenzie King, was often effective in preventing or undoing deportation.⁴² The case of Anna Hildebrand, an immigrant who arrived in Canada in November 1925, demonstrates how the political capital of the Board could be instrumental in averting deportation. She was admitted into a mental hospital in Hamilton in July 1928 and subsequently threatened with deportation. In contrast to the deportation of Cornelius Unger, the Department of Immigration proceeded with considerable deliberation. In October, B. B. Wiens, the chair of the local Mennonite Immigration Committee, made the Board aware that there was a threat of deportation. In the Board's intervention, David Toews assured the local pastor working with the family that he did not believe deportation was imminent. He suggested that, up to that point, "the soup has never been eaten as hot as it has been cooked."⁴³ Further, Toews provided the commissioner of immigration with assurance that the Board would pay the costs of Hildebrand's care. On

December 28, two months later, the commissioner responded that deportation would proceed under the authority of the Immigration Act because it was believed that Hildebrand “will eventually become a permanent institutional care.”⁴⁴ On January 2, 1929, the Department of Immigration issued a deportation order to all the people involved. The order justified deportation because Hildebrand had “contravened Section 40 of the Immigration Act by becoming an inmate of a hospital for the insane.” Noting that passport and reception arrangements were in place with the Soviet consulate at Riga, it sought arrangements for rail and steamship travel as well as a female escort.⁴⁵ David Toews immediately fired off telegrams to the Department of Immigration, the minister of immigration, and the prime minister protesting the deportation. The response of the prime minister’s secretary, Harry Baldwin, reflected commonly held eugenic arguments about the effect of immigrants on the quality of the nation. Baldwin pointed out “that were immigration officials to release their vigilance in respect of the feeble-minded who may come to Canada from other countries, our asylums would soon be overcrowded.” He also noted that “more than a reasonable proportion of the inmates of these institutions are . . . immigrants to Canada.”⁴⁶ On Friday, January 19, the Board received a wire from their local contact that Anna Hildebrand was to be deported the following Monday. Another round of telegrams sent to the minister and the prime minister called the deportation “an act of cruelty” and “barbarism.”⁴⁷ On January 21, the minister of immigration sent a telegram agreeing to stop the deportation provided the Board send a written guarantee that Hildebrand would “not become a public charge in Canada during period of her lifetime.”⁴⁸

Despite having exercised Toews’s influence at the highest levels, the Board soon faced a new attempt to deport Anna Hildebrand. At a Mennonite church conference in July, David Toews reported that the “the law that stands above all laws” had been victorious in preventing Anna’s deportation earlier that year.⁴⁹ A few weeks later, the Department of Immigration advised the Board that due to pressure from provincial authorities, she was again being deported. On July 30, Anna Hildebrand was sent to Montreal. Despite another flurry of telegrams to exert political pressure to stop her deportation, her status and whereabouts remained unknown for several days. Local Mennonites became involved and met with provincial authorities to prevent her deportation. In a long letter to David Toews, a pastor in Waterloo, Jacob Janzen, explained that a Hamilton doctor was particularly bent on deporting Mennonite immigrants. When the doctor had been contacted about the case, he had retorted that “the asylums were full, and they could not carry the additional burdens of these

“foreigners.” Janzen believed agitation for Anna Hildebrand’s deportation was primarily the work of this doctor.⁵⁰ In his response to David Toews, the deputy minister of immigration offered the explanation that provincial authorities “required the space occupied by Anna Hildebrand,” and hence the Department “had no other option than to put into effect the order for deportation.” Nevertheless, Anna was eventually returned to Hamilton.⁵¹

One of the complicating factors in allowing the emigration from the Soviet Union was the lack of a valid passport. If potential immigrants did not have or could not get a passport, the Canadian government had agreed to accept a document from a reputable organization that vouched for their identity. One possible reason for the Department of Immigration’s constant pursuit of deportation appears in a 1927 letter to the Board and was related to the passport dilemma. The Department was replying to a complaint by David Toews that certain immigrants lacking valid passports had not been processed. He had reminded Commissioner A. L. Jolliffe that the Department and the Board had an understanding that such cases would be accepted. In his response, the commissioner expressed concern that, if necessary, the Department would be unable to deport immigrants in such cases. He worried that “in the event of trouble developing later in Canada the responsible organizations would have to carry a heavy burden.”⁵² The Department seemed to have reservations about the ability of the Board to care for those immigrants who would not have the means or family network to provide for their own care should they become hospitalized and, particularly, should they require lifetime care. Deportation would then serve as a safety valve to protect municipal and provincial governments from the burden of care in such cases, but could only be achieved if the immigrants possessed a valid passport. However, on a bureaucratic level the problem of passports was also likely one of the most important reasons why there were not more deportations.

The Cornelius Unger file in the records of the Department of External Affairs suggests the government used his case to work out the administrative procedures involved in deporting someone to the Soviet Union.⁵³ Despite the CMBoc’s assurances in March that they would be responsible for the costs of Unger’s care, the Immigration Department began pursuing deportation with External Affairs on May 7, 1930. A series of letters were exchanged between External Affairs, the British Embassy in Moscow, and various departments in London between May and December 1930 to work out passport, visa, and transport details, and admission to a psychiatric institution in the Soviet Union. Unger was ultimately deported in April 1931. The file remained open until 1934, when A. L. Jolliffe provided O. D.

Skelton, the undersecretary of state for external affairs, information required for him to respond to a query from the United States legation about the deportation of Soviet citizens. Jolliffe noted that up until 1932 the Department had negotiated with various departments in London. After July 1932, they had been able to adopt "a uniform procedure." He then outlined Canada's process with British and Soviet authorities and provided a detailed outline of Soviet requirements for accepting a "deport."⁵⁴ Given all the correspondence in Unger's file, including the response of the Department related to queries from the United States some three years after his deportation, it certainly appears that his case was used to work out the uniform procedure Jolliffe refers to.

Cornelius Unger did have a valid Soviet passport. While the Soviet Union accepted persons being deported without one if extensive documentation was provided, the lack of a passport complicated the deportation process considerably. For example, the Department's attempts to deport John Grunau were held up for some time due to "the question of obtaining a suitable passport," a process that apparently had to be pursued in London, England.⁵⁵ In the case of Dietrich Rempel, the Immigration Department's response to the City of Vancouver's request for his deportation noted that he had been admitted without a passport and "that in view of the fact that he is a native of Russia there is little possibility of being able to effect deportation."⁵⁶ Rempel had become a public charge in the city, and although the Department would eventually seek his deportation, it appears the government was reluctant to pursue deportation in such cases. The CMBoc seems to have recognized the Department's need for a valid Soviet passport to proceed with deportation and used this knowledge to its advantage in slowing down deportation proceedings. For instance, in the case of Justina Langeman the Board had her passport sent to its office. Despite repeated requests from Commissioner Gellely, they neglected to send it to the Department for eighteen months.⁵⁷

Cornelius Unger was removed from the Weyburn Mental Hospital on April 24, 1931. According to correspondence from the family, he was taken without warning. In a letter to the Board, his mother claims they had no letter advising them "that they wanted to send him back, they only wrote to tell us that he was already gone."⁵⁸ David Toews was livid when the circumstances of Cornelius Unger's deportation became clear to him. In a harsh exchange of letters with Division Commissioner Thomas Gellely, who was responsible for the deportation order, Toews initially accused the Department of acting outside the law. Toews claimed that Unger "had acquired domicile in Canada" because he had been in the country for six years and was

therefore not deportable. Gelley replied curtly that Toews was incorrect, because Unger had been admitted to the mental hospital less than four years after his landing. An angry David Toews responded by comparing Gelley's actions to what was common in the Soviet Union and assured Gelley that, if Unger "had been sentenced to be shot or to be thrown off the ship in mid-ocean, that would have been an act of mercy compared to what has been perpetrated in this case."⁵⁹ Toews then took his protest to higher levels in the government. Writing to F. C. Blair, the assistant deputy minister of immigration, Toews called the deportation "a cruel act" and assured the deputy minister that the deportation "means as much as a death sentence."⁶⁰ In subsequent letter to A. L. Jolliffe, the commissioner for immigration, Toews went on:

If the Officers responsible for the deportation of this man still are capable of human feelings, they can well imagine the state of mind of the parents, they would rather see him dead than deported to Russia, because they know only too well what it means for their son to be put into a psychotherapeutic hospital in Leningrad.⁶¹

A copy of the letter was also sent to Mackenzie King. Unfortunately for Toews, his trusted confidant was no longer prime minister but now served as leader of the official Opposition. Toews's assertion that Mennonites would rather see a family member shot than deported to the Soviet Union was a recurring assertion in his correspondence with the Immigration Department. In the case of John Grunau, Toews declared "anybody, especially the mother of the boy, would rather see him dead than to have him deported to Russia."⁶²

For its part, the Department of Immigration was careful in responding to Toews's angry letter about Unger's deportation. Commissioner Jolliffe claimed the accusation that the Department was responsible for a "cruel act" was "hardly understood." He maintained that the "individual concerned was properly subject to the law in this respect" and implied that the reason for deportation was that Unger would be a "permanent institutional case." Referring to the Board's initial letter promising to pay for the maintenance of Unger, he acknowledged that there had been "an undertaking" by the Board but it "could not be accepted as a basis for suspending proceedings." Although he offered no further explanation of why the Board's guarantee in Unger's case was inadequate, he admitted that in the past the Board's argument that they had received no invoices had been enough for proceedings to be "stayed under these conditions." He also expressed "regret that the circumstances were not such as would permit of favourable consideration" in the Unger case and offered the hope that, if the Board could make satisfactory

arrangements to have accounts for maintenance of mentally ill patients forwarded to the Board directly, no further deportations would occur.⁶³

Though he expressed frustration with the Department, Toews was also at a loss to understand the behaviour of immigrant families. In a letter to C. C. Peters, a minister in Herbert, Saskatchewan, who had been in contact with the family, Toews was bewildered that the Board only found out about the deportation of Unger two weeks after the family had received word from the Weyburn Mental Hospital. He reiterated his conviction that Unger's deportation was akin to a criminal act, but acknowledged that if the Board had paid the maintenance costs, deportation could have been averted. He was also perplexed over why, in this case, they had not received notification from the Immigration Department's Winnipeg office.⁶⁴

After Cornelius Unger left Weyburn Mental Hospital on April 24, he boarded the SS *Duchess of Atholl* in Quebec City on April 30, 1931. The ship docked in Liverpool, where he was transferred to the Leningrad-bound steamship *Alexey Rykoff* on May 16. The Immigration Department reported that on arrival he was to be admitted to the Leningrad Psychotherapeutic Institute. The family had no further word about his condition or whereabouts until October 1934, when efforts by the Soviet Embassy in London resulted in them receiving a "medical affidavit" that provided some information about their son. The affidavit reported that Unger had been transferred on June 20, 1931, to the Skvortsov-Stepanov Psychiatric Institution. There was nothing noteworthy about his physical condition, but the psychological report was not encouraging. He was reported to be unaware of his surroundings or circumstances. He spent excessive amounts of time in one place or position and only seldom answered questions posed to him. He was absorbed in himself, sat with his head in his hands, whispered something to himself, smiled, and grimaced. He occasionally helped with the work but performed poorly. The file offers no further account.⁶⁵

Mennonites coming to Canada in the interwar years entered the country through a narrow window of opportunity. Russlaender Mennonites were seeking to enter at the same moment that some of their coreligionists were leaving the country under the shadow of conflict with the state. As a result of their more conservative brethren's resistance to, and exemption from, military service during the First World War and their opposition to state-run assimilationist schooling, Mennonites had been categorized as undesirable and were banned from further immigration. This occurred just a few years before the new group of Mennonites from the Soviet Union sought entry to the country. Under these circumstances, the Board's

success in influencing the government to remove Mennonites from the list of groups specifically prohibited from entering the country due to their "strangeness" and resistance to assimilation was remarkable.

On one hand, the constant threat of deportation for institutionalized Mennonite immigrants and the ultimate deportation of Cornelius Unger were entirely consistent with the prevailing notions of the effect of immigrants on the genetic quality of the Canadian people. All immigrant Mennonites that were committed to institutions faced the prospect of deportation under the public charge provisions of immigration laws. For those suffering from mental illness, the sense that they were defectives came through in the Department of Immigration's correspondence with the Board and reinforced the notion that they contributed to the weakening of Canadian society. Cornelius Unger's deportation also came at a time when the Immigration Department was ramping up its deportation efforts in response to pressure from provincial governments and municipalities who wanted to reduce their social welfare costs. This included the operation of mental health institutions and hospitals as the effects of the Depression descended upon their financial resources.

On the other hand, the Board's success in turning aside deportation orders suggests that despite great cost and unending frustration for the Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization, the Department of Immigration did make significant concessions to those immigrants supported by an organization that advocated on their behalf. The Board had the ear of government to the extent that the Immigration Department bureaucracy was mindful of the consequences of their deportation orders. It seems the loss of one of the Board's greatest political assets, Mackenzie King, may have contributed significantly to the deportation of Cornelius Unger. The Liberals under King lost the July 28, 1930, election as the internal proceedings to deport Cornelius Unger were underway. By the time Unger was removed from the Weyburn Mental Hospital, Mackenzie King was no longer prime minister and could not intervene in the way he had before, even if the Board had known in time to make such a request. From an advocacy point of view, Cornelius Unger's deportation was the result of an unfortunate series of missed opportunities to intervene, including excessive zeal on the part of District Commissioner Gelley and misunderstandings of the gravity of what was happening on the part of the family. In all the other cases, the advocacy of the Board was effectively able to turn aside deportation proceedings.

Notes

- ¹ J. H. Unger to David Toews, May 14, 1931, Mennonite Heritage Archives (MHA), Winnipeg, Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization Collection (hereafter CMBC), vol. 1261, file 556. The CMBC collection at MHA contains files pertaining to all aspects of the migration and extensive correspondence files of its chair, David Toews. The correspondence related to potential deportation cases are usually in files labelled with the person's name.
- ² For a history of 1920s immigration of Mennonites to Canada, see Frank H. Epp, *Mennonite Exodus: The Rescue and Resettlement of the Russian Mennonites since the Communist Revolution* (Altona: D. W. Friesen & Sons, 1962).
- ³ An Act to Amend the Immigration Act, S.C. 1919, c. 25, s. 13, https://www.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.9_08048.
- ⁴ Heinrich and Margareta Unger to David Toews, June 1, 1931, CMBC, vol. 1261, file 556.
- ⁵ Erika Dyck and Alex Deighton, *Managing Madness: Weyburn Mental Hospital and the Transformation of Psychiatric Care in Canada* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2017), 52.
- ⁶ The correspondence can be found in CMBC, vol. 1261, file 556.
- ⁷ Grant Grams, "Deportation from Saskatchewan During the Great Depression: The Case of H. P. Janzen," *Mennonite Life* 64 (2010), <https://mla.bethelks.edu/ml-archive/2010/deportation.php>.
- ⁸ *Der Bote*, Oct. 26, 1932. The Friesen-Braun trials arose from a disputed financial transaction that resulted in ten trials. Isaac Braun was ultimately convicted of perjury and sentenced to five years in the Prince Albert Penitentiary.
- ⁹ Barbara Roberts, *Whence They Came: Deportation from Canada, 1900–1935* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1988), 46.
- ¹⁰ Roberts, *Whence They Came*, 52.
- ¹¹ Roberts, *Whence They Came*, 8.
- ¹² Barbara Roberts, "Shovelling Out the 'Mutinous': Political Deportation from Canada before 1936," *Labour / Le Travail* 18 (Fall 1986): 77–110.
- ¹³ An Act to Amend the Immigration Act, S.C. 1919, c. 25, s. 3(6).
- ¹⁴ Lyle Dick, "Deportation under the Immigration Act and the Canadian Criminal Code, 1919–1936," (master's thesis, University of Manitoba, 1978), 7.
- ¹⁵ Henry F. Drystek, "'The Simplest and Cheapest Mode of Dealing with Them': Deportation from Canada before World War II," *Histoire Sociale / Social History* 15, no. 30 (Nov. 1982): 441.
- ¹⁶ Robert Menzies, "Governing Mentalities: The Deportation of 'Insane' and 'Feeble-minded' Immigrants out of British Columbia from Confederation to World War II," in *Crime and Deviance in Canada: Historical Perspectives*, ed. Chris McCormick and Len Green (Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press, 2005), 161.
- ¹⁷ Epp, *Mennonite Exodus*, 203. In addition to these studies, there is one other study examining the deportation of a specific ethnic group; see Grant Grams, "The Deportation of German Nationals from Canada, 1919 to 1939," *International Migration and Integration* 11 (2010): 219–37.
- ¹⁸ An Act Respecting Immigration and Immigrants, S.C. 1906, c. 19, s. 28, https://www.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.9_07188.
- ¹⁹ Valerie Knowles, *Strangers at Our Gates: Canadian Immigration and Immigration Policy, 1540–2006*, rev. ed. (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2007), 108.

- ²⁰ An Act Respecting Immigration, S.C. 1910, c. 27, s. 3, https://www.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.9_07184.
- ²¹ An Act Respecting Immigration and Immigrants, S.C. 1906, c. 19, s. 71; An Act Respecting Immigration, S.C. 1910, c. 27, s. 2(d); An Act to Amend the Immigration Act, S.C. 1919, c. 25, s. 2(1).
- ²² An Act to Amend the Immigration Act, S.C. 1919, c. 25, s. 3(6).
- ²³ The fascination with eugenics in the interwar period was not limited to Canada but also gained currency Europe, the United States, Australia, and other countries. See, e.g., Nancy Stepan, *"The Hour of Eugenics": Race, Gender, and Nation Latin America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991); and Ian Dowbiggin, *Keeping America Sane: Psychiatry and Eugenics in the United States and Canada, 1880–1940* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).
- ²⁴ Ian Dowbiggin, "'Keeping this Young Country Sane': C. K. Clarke, Immigration Restriction, and Canadian Psychiatry, 1890–1925," *Canadian Historical Review* 76. no. 4 (Dec. 1995): 599–600, 608.
- ²⁵ Angus McLaren, *Our Own Master Race: Eugenics in Canada, 1885–1945* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1990), 66. See also Eleoussa Polzoi, "Psychologists' Perceptions of the Canadian Immigrant Before World War II," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 18, no. 1 (1986): 52–65.
- ²⁶ David Toews to the Minister of Immigration, July 6, 1922, Library and Archives Canada (LAC), Ottawa, RG 76, vol. 196, file 79160, https://heritage.canadiana.ca/view/oocihm.lac_reel_c7349/1443. Correspondence between David Toews and the Department of Immigration in the CMBC collection is also in RG 76 at LAC. Digital images of this correspondence can be found on the Canadiana Héritage website.
- ²⁷ Epp, *Menonite Exodus*, 211, 281.
- ²⁸ See, for instance: "Wo sind den die Neun?," *Der Bote*, Dec. 20, 1933, 3; "Etwas Weiteres zum Nachdenken," *Der Bote*, Apr. 13, 1932, 1.
- ²⁹ "Nacht," *Der Bote*, Mar. 23, 1932, 1–2.
- ³⁰ R. M. Mitchell, Medical Superintendent, to David Toews, Nov. 12, 1927, CMBC, vol. 1228, file 359.
- ³¹ A. L. Jolliffe, Commissioner of Immigration, to David Toews, Nov. 15, 1927, CMBC, vol. 1228, file 359.
- ³² Letter exchange between J. J. Smith, Deputy Minister, Saskatchewan Department of Public Works, and David Toews, Dec. 8 and 13, 1927, CMBC, vol. 1228, file 359.
- ³³ An Act Respecting Immigration, S.C. 1910, c. 27, s.42(5).
- ³⁴ Letter exchange between J. J. Smith and David Toews, Dec. 9 and 11, 1930, CMBC, vol. 1228, file 359.
- ³⁵ CMBC to Jacob Ketler, Apr. 12, 1938, CMBC, vol. 1228, file 359.
- ³⁶ Letter exchange between S. Hardyment, Fiscal Supervisor of Public Institutions and Relief, and Chairman, CMBC, Dec. 11 and 30, 1930, CMBC, vol. 1222, file 335.
- ³⁷ J. H. Unger to Canadian Menonite Board of Colonization, May 14, 1931, CMBC, vol. 1261, file 556; Heinrich and Margareta Unger to David Toews, June 1, 1931, CMBC, vol. 1261, file 556.
- ³⁸ C. C. Peters to David Toews, May 28, 1931, CMBC, vol. 1261, file 556.
- ³⁹ David Toews to F. C. Blair, Assistant Deputy Minister of Immigration, May 29, 1931, CMBC, vol. 1261, file 556. Linda Klassen Reynolds found significant mental health problems among Russlaender immigrants in her study of

- Russlaender immigrants. Linda Klassen Reynolds, "The Aftermath of Trauma and Immigration: Detections of Multigenerational Effects on Mennonites who Emigrated from Russia to Canada in the 1920s" (PhD diss., California School of Professional Psychology, 1997).
- ⁴⁰ Thomas Gelley, Division Commissioner, to CMBC, Mar. 20, 1930, CMBC, vol. 1261, file 556.
- ⁴¹ Chairman, CMBC, to Thomas Gelley, Mar. 24, 1930, CMBC, vol. 1261, file 556.
- ⁴² Epp, *Mennonite Exodus*, 252.
- ⁴³ David Toews to B. B. Wiens, Oct. 30, 1928, CMBC, vol. 1218, file 311.
- ⁴⁴ Letter exchange between David Toews and A. L. Jolliffe, Oct. 30 and Dec. 28, 1928, CMBC, vol. 1218, file 311.
- ⁴⁵ A. L. Jolliffe to H. B. Beaumont, CPR Passenger Agent, Jan. 2, 1929, CMBC, vol. 1218, file 311.
- ⁴⁶ Harry Baldwin, Secretary to the Prime Minister, to David Toews, Jan. 9, 1929, CMBC, vol. 1218, file 311.
- ⁴⁷ Copy of a telegram sent by David Toews to Robert Forke, Minister of Immigration, Jan. 19, 1929, CMBC, vol. 1218, file 311.
- ⁴⁸ Robert Forke to David Toews, Jan. 21, 1929, CMBC, vol. 1218, file 311.
- ⁴⁹ *Konferenz-Bericht der 27. Konferenz der Mennoniten im mittleren Canada*, July 8–10, 1929, 19.
- ⁵⁰ Jacob Janzen to David Toews, July 19, 1929, CMBC, vol. 1218, file 311. The letter was written in German but used the English "foreigners" in the text.
- ⁵¹ W. J. Egan, Deputy Minister of Immigration, to David Toews, Aug. 15, 1929, CMBC, vol. 1218, file 311.
- ⁵² A. L. Jolliffe to David Toews, Oct. 5, 1927, CMBC, vol. 1270, file 605.
- ⁵³ "Deportation to Russia of C. Unger," LAC, RG25, vol. 1559, file 1930-60-E. I am indebted to Anna Lehn for digitizing this file as part of Library and Archives Canada's DigiLab initiative. A digital copy is available at <http://central.bac-lac.gc.ca/.redirect?app=fonandcol&id=1831329&lang=eng>.
- ⁵⁴ A. L. Jolliffe to O. D. Skelton, Sept. 19, 1934, "Deportation to Russia of C. Unger," LAC, RG 25, vol. 1559, file 1930-60-E.
- ⁵⁵ Thomas Gelley to David Toews, June 28, 1931, CMBC, vol. 1214, file 289.
- ⁵⁶ A. E. Skinner, Division Commissioner, to G. D. Ireland, City Relief Department, City of Vancouver, July 26, 1927, CMBC, vol. 1249, file 479.
- ⁵⁷ See CMBC, vol. 1231, file 384.
- ⁵⁸ Heinrich and Margareta Unger to David Toews, June 1, 1931, CMBC, vol. 1261, file 556.
- ⁵⁹ Letter exchange between David Toews and Thomas Gelley, May 18, 20, and 22, 1931, CMBC, vol. 1261, file 556.
- ⁶⁰ David Toews to F. C. Blair, May 29, 1931, CMBC, vol. 1261, file 556.
- ⁶¹ David Toews to A. L. Jolliffe, June 3, 1931, CMBC, vol. 1261, file 556.
- ⁶² David Toews to C. E. S. Smith, Division Commissioner, Winnipeg, July 4, 1932, CMBC, vol. 1214, file 289.
- ⁶³ A. L. Jolliffe to David Toews, June 10, 1931, CMBC, vol. 1261, file 556.
- ⁶⁴ David Toews to C. C. Peters, May 28, 1931, CMBC, vol. 1261, file 556.
- ⁶⁵ A. L. Jolliffe to David Toews, night letter, May 30, 1931, CMBC, vol. 1261, file 556; David Toews to F. C. Blair, May 29, 1931, CMBC, vol. 1261, file 556. The results of the family's search and a translation of the affidavit are in a letter from J. H. Unger to David Toews, June 10, 1935, CMBC, vol. 1261, file 556.