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Our Russian Heritage

Chemodan! Have you ever heard a Friesen use that word? If you see an angry or frustrated Friesen you might hear an under-the-breath muttering of *chemodan*. At least I know there is an occasional Friesen who uses that word because it sounds so appropriate. But it actually is the Russian word for suitcase and is one of several words that could be heard in our home while we were growing up that was not a true low German word. We spoke a low German dialect in our home as did our relatives and neighbors, but this dialect was mixed with English words as well as Russian and Dutch. Our ancestors who had migrated to Russia had spoken the German language in church and in school and used the low German dialect at home, even in Russia. Most of them had learned little of the Russian language during their years in Russia because they had largely isolated themselves from the Russians in order to preserve their customs and traditions. But some Russian words such as *chemodan*, *arbuz*, meaning watermelon, and *bulka*, meaning a special bread, had been assimilated into the low German dialect and remained there. *Schnetke*, a delicious pastry we ate a lot of, obviously comes from our Dutch heritage, as does *Tante*, which means aunt.

I was always so proud that Mom and Dad knew a few Russian words. It seemed exciting to have a heritage connected to a strange and foreign land. Our heritage is very unique and what we were yesterday and are today is a reflection of the Russian and Dutch heritage our ancestors brought to this country.

Our family history of living in America is relatively brief, it is only a little more than a hundred years ago that our great grandparents crossed the Atlantic to make their home on the sparsely settled prairies of Nebraska. This time span of history seems very short when I realize that I can recall a visit to a distant step-relative who was born shortly after his mother, widowed at sea, arrived in the United States. This widowed young mother later became our great grandmother, Mrs. Jacob B. Friesen.

The name "Friesen" is German for Frisian Mennonite. It was first mentioned in Reichenberg in 1547. The Dutch version of it is *Vriezen*, *Friesen* or *von Riesen*. The Frisian Mennonites were a branch of the Dutch Mennonites which originated in 1566 and was transplanted to West Prussia. The Frisians took offense at the too worldly and elaborate dress of the Flemish, and the Flemish in turn, thought the Frisians were not sober enough as to furnishings in their homes.

Loewen (*Lowen*, *Loewens*, *Leewen*, *Liewen*, *Liewens*) is a Prussian Mennonite name of Dutch or Flemish origin which appeared in church records of Danzig, Prussia as early as 1676 (*Mennonite Encyclopedia*).

I found no reference to the name *Heidebrecht*.

The migration from Holland and Friesland to Danzig, Prussia took place about 1529. For over two centuries the Mennonites lived here and many were wealthy land-owners and farmers. They continued to practice their doctrines of Mennonite beliefs but as years went by the government became increasingly disturbed that these Mennonites were not willing