

UNCLE ABE THE AVENGER

(1889-1919)

Abram Loewen was born three days before Christmas in 1889 in Nieder-Chortitza to Abram and Susanna Loewen, and named for his father. He had a brother who was born two years later named Heinrich, but Heinrich died on June 27, 1896, at 4 and a half years old. Thus, Abe grew up as an only child. Not much is known about his father, but his mother was born and raised in Nieder-Chortitza and one of six children, so Abe had many aunts, uncles, and cousins in his small town.

As was the custom in Mennonite circles, baptism was delayed until the age of adulthood. Abram and a girl named Maria Penner, also of Nieder-Chortitza, were in the same baptism class, and were baptized on June 8, 1910, at the nearest church building in Burwalde. They were married just over a year later, on October 9, 1911.

They began a family the next year. Their first daughter, Aganetha, was born on June 9, 1912. A son named Abram was born on September 10, 1913, but that child lived just one month. The next year, August 3, 1914, Maria gave birth to a daughter, Sara, who lived 13 months. Another son, Abram, was born in March, 1916, and another son, Heinrich, on September 18, 1918, just two months before Abe's death.

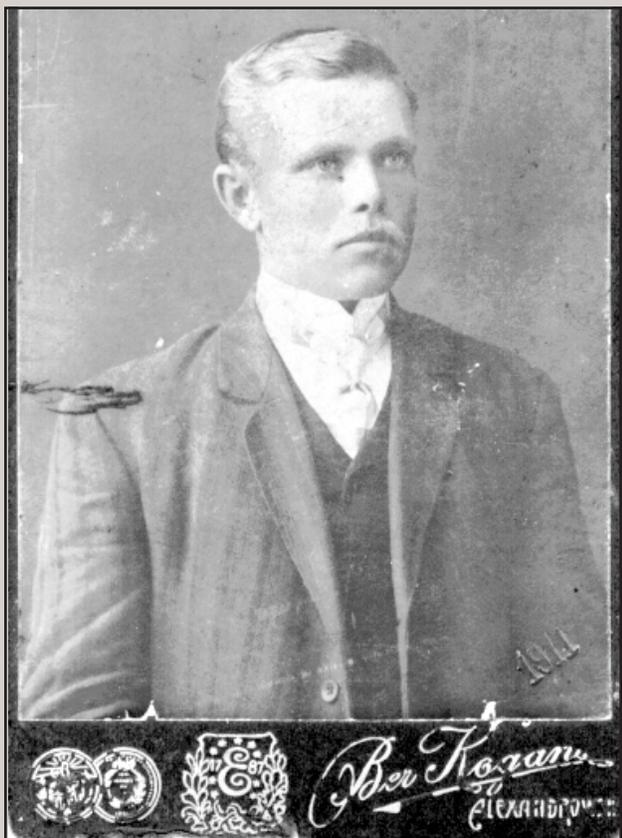
At 28, Abram Loewen was outspoken about defending his village against bandit attacks during the Russian Civil War. He became known as "The Avenger," killing at least seven suspected



16-year-old Abe Loewen sang in the Osterwick choir in 1905.

Makhno bandits in Nieder-Chortitza. He also joined a Ukrainian nationalist group, the Petliurites, fighting for independence, and even led a successful charge against the Bolshevik-held garrison in Nieder-Chortitza.

David G. Rempel wrote about Loewen in his history of Nieder-Chortitza called *A Mennonite Family in Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union: 1789-1923*. Rempel's brother, Johann, was a village soviet (on the governing committee) while Loewen was active, and Loewen caused him a fair amount of trouble. This account relies heavily on Rempel's writing, supplemented with niece Neta Loewen's recollections.



When the German Army retreated in 1918, law and order fell apart in the central Ukraine. Makhno bandits frequently raided the once-prosperous Mennonite villages and farms of the Chortitza colony, causing terror by plundering, raping, and murdering. The violent times challenged deeply-rooted Mennonite pacifism, and some Mennonite men took up arms to defend their communities and their property.

Abe Loewen championed the Mennonite *Selbstschutz* (Self-Defense Units) in Nieder-Chortitza. He "built a reputation as avenger of the wrongs visited upon the formerly prosperous citizenry. He strutted around Nieder-Chortitza with a sawed-off army rifle, short enough to hide under his overcoat, if need arose," wrote David Rempel.

On January 8/9, 1919, four men from Alexandrovsk (Zaporozhia) arrived at the office of the village soviet, claiming to be peasants who had joined the Petliurite (Ukrainian independence) forces

Abe Loewen in 1911 at age 21 (1889-1919), the year he was married. Loewen advocated for defending the community against Makhno bandits, becoming something of a vigilante.

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and were now fleeing the Makhno bandits. They demanded a ride to Tomakovka. Something did not sit well with Loewen, who himself had strong pro-Petliurite feelings. Loewen and his friends, Abram Gunter, Jr., David Neufeld, and Jacob Toews, identified the four men as bandits, and insisted that they be shot at once.

The crowd that gathered wouldn't let Loewen and his friends kill the men. Loewen relented and permitted someone from the village to drive them towards Burwalde. As soon as the crowd dispersed, however, Loewen and his three friends hitched a team of horses to a nearby wagon and pursued them. Near Schöneberg, Loewen and his gang caught up with the men and killed them as they fled. All four deaths were attributed to Loewen, although there is some possibility that David Neufeld killed one of the men. Loewen and his friends abandoned the bodies in the field.

When Burwalde villagers heard about the shooting, they feared that their town would be punished for Loewen's actions. They sent a party out to bury the bodies, and reported the incident to the district soviet. In Nieder-Chortitza, reactions were divided. Some villagers wanted to reorganize the self-defense unit and make Loewen commander. Others wanted him to be arrested, to show other villages that the town did not condone his violence. The village assembly met and sentenced Loewen to a week under house arrest. His friends released him the next day.

Whether Loewen's gang had additional information on the four peasants they had killed, or whether they were carried away by fear or bloodlust, is unclear. They may have been right in suspecting them to be Makhnovites, because afterwards, Nieder-Chortitza became a specific target for Makhno raids, which became more frequent and more terrible. Bandits raided houses day and night, demanding that Loewen be turned over to them. When he was not found, the bandits robbed and plundered households, raped women, and speared men. Makhnovites murdered ten Nieder-Chortitza Mennonites in 1919.

In February, 1919, Loewen cornered two bandits



Abe was said to carry a sawed-off rifle under his long overcoat, given to him by German soldiers in 1918.

just after they had raided Heinrich Pankratz's home. These bandits had beaten a Mennonite man, Gerhard Rempel, a shop owner and father of source David Rempel, earlier that day. Loewen shot at both, killing one and wounding the other, who escaped. The

crowd gathering at the scene supported Loewen's action. Rempel's son, Johann, shouted at the bandit, "You beast, you had it coming to you for the way you beat my father earlier on this day."

After that killing, community feelings towards Loewen became divided. Some feared repercussions, and others were troubled by the immorality of Loewen's actions. Pacifism was, after all, a tenant of the Mennonite faith. Others, particularly those who had been wealthy farmers or mill owners and had been targeted by the bandits, defended Loewen.

After the February shooting, two armed men rode into town and demanded that the local soviet help find Loewen. Local authorities arrested these men and turned them over to Loewen. Abe Loewen later claimed that the men "vanished of their own accord." It was widely believed that he had helped them vanish permanently.

In May, 1919, nineteen heavily-armed Ukrainian soldiers marched through Nieder-Chortitza, on their way towards Belenkoe, a Ukrainian village. Upon learning that they were Petliurovites, anti-Bolshevik forces who were occupying a hill called Lysaia Gora, Abe Loewen rushed to join them. Two weeks later, he led a raiding party on the Red Army garrison in Nieder-Chortitza. Loewen and his men captured the Red Army soldiers, taking them back to Lysaia Gora and killing one Jewish soldier along the way in Petliurovite fashion. A Red Army soldier escaped and reported the event to Johann Rempel, chairman of the village soviet in Nieder-Chortitza, before heading on to Chortitza to report the incident.

The Bolsheviks sent a new detachment of soldiers to wipe out the Lysaia Gora group. Loewen

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said that his group fooled the Red Army soldiers by displaying a “three-inch artillery piece” made from a tree trunk and two carriage wheels. He returned unharmed to the village, and the rest of the Ukrainian band melted back into the surrounding villages from where they had come. Loewen’s heroics were applauded by Nieder-Chortitza’s dispossessed local farmers who hung around the soviet headquarters.

From March to June, 1919, both bandits and Red Army soldiers increased their requisitioning. The army ordered Nieder-Chortitza to produce Abram Loewen or pay a fine of tens of thousands of rubles. Loewen evaded capture, and the town had to pay repeated fines. Sometimes, to ensure payment, army officials took innocent hostages. This turned public opinion against Loewen.

In June 1919, the front shifted and battles between the Red and White Armies played out in the Chortitza colony. Many soldiers in the Bolshevik units stationed in the villages were really bandits.

Johann Rempel, Mennonite head of the village soviet office, was often asked for Loewen’s whereabouts. Once, a heavily armed man with wooden legs entered his office, placed two revolvers on the desk, and asked, ‘Who among you is Loewen?’ Rempel replied that no one in Nieder-Chortitza liked Loewen, and that outsiders asking for him usually wanted something else. It turned out that this man, Batko Pravda, needed a morphine fix. Rempel got a few tablets of morphine from the village midwife, and Pravda left, apparently forgetting about Loewen. Another time, Loewen had been caught by the Bolsheviks but escaped. One of his captors came to the soviet office and threatened Rempel if he couldn’t produce Loewen. Rempel fled town and didn’t return to Nieder-Chortitza for several days.

In Nieder-Chortitza, the bandits justified their ferocious attacks as part of their search for Loewen, who seemed to always escape them. Many villagers had supported Loewen’s goals and had even hidden him occasionally, but most disapproved of his violent tactics. By October, everyone was tired of the bandits’ retaliations for Loewen’s misdeeds. His only available hideout was among former boatman co-workers in the poor *Nippaenja* quarter of town.



Abe was discovered hiding in a hayloft. The Makhno bandits shot him, stabbed him with pitchforks, and threw his body to the ground below, where they continued mutilating it and insisted it remain until the next day.

Loewen’s wife, Mary, had moved in with her mother. As the fall grew cold, Abe grew tired and discouraged. He came close to home and hid in a house near his family that belonged to relatives, Martin and Helena Klassen.

On November 5, 1919, having grown tired of always being inside, Loewen went into the yard to chop wood. Someone saw him and shot at him. He ran, wounded, into the hayloft to hide.

Someone informed the Makhnovites of his hideout, possibly a Ukrainian girl named Dunka who had denounced several farmers already. Bandits gathered below the Klassen hayloft. Finally, one of them climbed into the hayloft, located Loewen in the hay because of his gurgling, ragged breathing, and shot him several times more. The rest charged up to the loft, speared Loewen with pitchforks, and threw him down to the yard below. “Their further mutilation of Loewen’s body defied description,” wrote Rempel. The bandits did not allow anyone to move the body until the next day, when they gave it to his grandmother.

News of Loewen’s death spread quickly through the village, and his three friends, Abram Gunter, Jacob Toews, and David Neufeld, fled. The bandits did not attack their families.

David Rempel, who recorded these events, accompanied his mother to bring food and comfort to Loewen’s family. “Father, who believed the Makhnovites were watching our house, was apprehensive and urged her not to go. But Mother was

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adamant, arguing that whatever we thought of Loewen, his family deserved our compassion,” he wrote.

“On entering the cottage, we found Loewen’s body stretched out on the floor of the main room, with Loewen’s wife grieving beside it. Just as Mother handed her the food, the cottage door burst open. In stormed several Makhnovites. They kicked Loewen’s body, then raised their short-handled, lead-tipped whips (*nagaiki*) as though to strike us. Amidst their cursing and menacing gestures, Dunka (the girl suspected of alerting the bandits to Loewen’s whereabouts) arrived, shouting, ‘Don’t hit him! This is the wife and son of Yehor Yeorovich.’ Father’s general store had often carried her father on credit for winter ‘purchases’ of kerosene, flour, and syrup.” After the Rempels left, bandits ransacked the house. Loewen’s mutilated body was buried shortly afterwards in the Nieder-Chortitza cemetery without a funeral. He had been 28, and father of three.



Likely the same Abe Loewen, covered in flies. While his widow grieved over his body, the Makhnos ransacked the house and kicked his body. He was buried without a funeral.

Photo from the Mennonite Archival Image Database Center.

The Makhnovites ransacked Nieder-Chortitza. They arrested four young men from the village: Peter Penner, Peter Pauls, Jacob Epp, and Jacob Rempel. Three had been *Selbstschutz* members, and 16-year-old Jacob Rempel had been misidentified as a White Army soldier. The bandits whipped Penner and Pauls, but let them live; but Jacob Epp, who had shot at some Ukrainian peasants, was beaten unconscious over the course of several days until he died. The bandits released Jacob unharmed.

Two years later, on January 27, 1922, the Cheka (Bolshevik secret police) arrested and executed six men from Nieder-Chortitza, including Loewen’s three allies from the *Selbstschutz* – Gunter, Neufeld, and Toews. All six were accused of banditry, a common sentence placed upon those who had opposed the Bolsheviks. The Cheka never released the bodies, probably because they had tortured the men before killing them.

Abe Loewen was a contested figure in his day, a folk hero to some, who encouraged him to vindicate their loss of property or the lives of loved ones, and a hothead to others, whose violence jeopardized his community. It would be helpful if there were clear evidence as to why he identified the four men headed for Burwalde as bandits in January, 1919 and killed them. That action set the course for his demise and his village’s scourge as well.

In the end, Abe Loewen was a tragic figure. He was both an activist who stood up to terrorists and a vigilante. His actions made Nieder-Chortitza a special target for Makhno terror, and brought disaster upon the people he tried to protect, and grief for his own family. Neta Loewen said that his wife never got over his death.

His wife, Maria Loewen (Neta’s mother’s sister) and their children moved into her parents’ home in Nieder-Chortitza. They had to endure Makhnovite control for several months, but the Makhnovites did not further trouble their family. A month after Abe was killed, the typhus epidemic claimed the lives of Maria’s father, Heinrich Penner, and her two brothers, Hein and Peter Penner.

Maria remained single for the next ten years. In 1930, she married Heinrich Thiessen of Nieder-Chortitza. Aganetha Loewen, Abe & Maria’s eldest daughter, was baptized on May 31, 1931, in Chortitza. She grew up with Neta Loewen.

Aganetha Loewen, eldest daughter of Abe & Maria Loewen, ~ 1930.



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Aganetha Löwen, eldest daughter of Abe & Maria Löwen.

Abram Löwen's Family

Abram Löwen was born three days before Christmas in 1889 in Nieder-Chortitza to Abram and Susanna Löwen. He was named for his father. His future wife, Maria, was born one year later, two days after Christmas, on December 27, 1890. Her parents were Heinrich and Anganetha Penner.

As was the custom in Mennonite circles, baptism was delayed until the age of adulthood. Abram and Maria were in the same baptism class, and were baptized on June 8, 1910, at Burwalde, which was the nearest church.

They were married just over a year later, on October 9, 1911. The following year, their first daughter was born, Aganetha, on June 9, 1912. They next had a son whom they named Abram on September 10, 1913, but that child lived just one month. The following year, August 3, 1914, Maria gave birth to a daughter, Sara, who lived 13 months. Another son, Abram Löwen, was born in March, 1916, and another son, Heinrich, was born on September 18, 1918, just two months before his father's death.

Abe was killed during his 29th year. After he died on November 5, 1919, his wife Maria and their children moved into her parents' home. The town was under Makhnovite control for several months, but the Makhnovites, seemingly satisfied with having killed Löwen, did not further trouble his family. A month after Abe was killed, the typhus epidemic claimed the lives of Maria's father, Heinrich Penner, and her two brothers, Hein and Peter Penner.

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**An alternative spelling for Löwen is Loewen. Since David Rempel was my primary source, I used his spelling; although Neta Loewen, who grew up with Aganetha, used "Loewen." Löwen (Loewen) was a common name among Mennonites, and Abe was no relation to Neta's future husband, Isaac Loewen.*

***David Rempel gives November 5, 1919, as the date of Lowen's death. The archives in the Mennonite Heritage Museum in Abbotsford, B.C. have his death date listed as November 18, 1919. The Russian calendar was 13 days behind the Western calendar, accounting for the discrepancy.*