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## Review of: *In the Fiery Furnace: Life in Ukraine, Siberia, Kazakhstan, and Germany: The Autobiography of Johann and Elfriede Steffen—Edward Kline (translation)*

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Review of: **Steffen, Johann and Elfriede (English translation by Edward Kline). 2022. *In the Fiery Furnace: Life in Ukraine, Siberia, Kazakhstan, and Germany—The Autobiography of Johann and Elfriede Steffen (1927-2013)*. Narvon, PA. Pp. 256. \$14.95.**

By Donald Martin  
Markham-Waterloo Mennonite Conference

This is the autobiography of Johann and Elfriede Wall Steffen. They were Russian Mennonites who lived under Communist rule from after World War I until 1988. Russian Mennonites suffered much during the famine of the 1930s, then during the persecution of the “Great Purge” (1936-1938). During World War II, when Germans occupied Ukraine, Russian Mennonites with German heritage had several years of peace. But when the Russians drove the German army westward, Mennonites suffered severely. Thousands were exiled to Siberia where many died due to hard labour and starvation.

Johann Steffen, the main character of this book, was born in Ukraine. Because of his sympathy for Germans, he was given a 25-year sentence in a Siberian labour camp near the Russian city of Krasavino. In the camp, scant food, cold weather, bedbugs, and lice were common place. But there, Steffen remembered his mother’s prayers and yielded himself to the Lord. By God’s hand he was miraculously granted an early release.

Elfriede Wall was raised in a Mennonite community in Kazakhstan, Central Asia. She also endured many hardships during the war years and then the “Great Purge”. She married Johann Steffen in 1955, and they moved to the area where Elfriede had lived as a child. The climate in northern Kazakhstan, east of the Ural Mountains, can be bitterly cold and very stormy in the winter. Johann’s eyes could not tolerate the harsh climate, so they moved south to the warmer region of

Alma-Ata near the border with China. Life on a Soviet collective farm was exhausting.

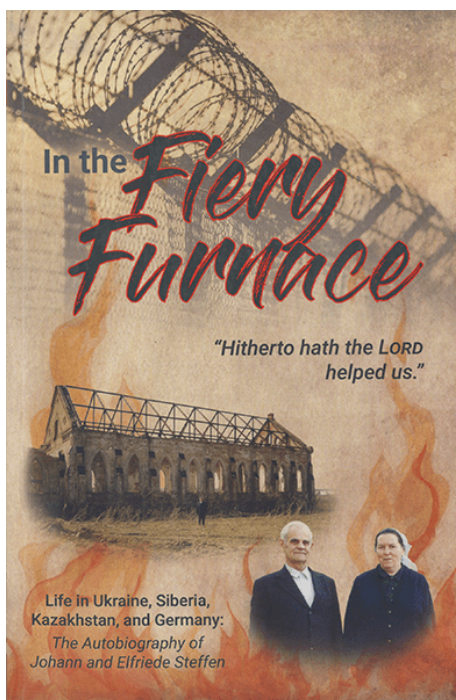
In 1963 Steffen was ordained a bishop of a small congregation and subsequently jailed on four different occasions. He was generally given a five-year prison term. During his imprisonments, Elfriede faced extreme hardships while raising their five children.

After his last and most difficult prison term, Steffen felt that at the age of 68 it was time to surrender his bishop office to the man who had served the growing church community during his absence. Steffen then applied for an exit permit to Germany. In April 1988, the Steffens arrived in Germany. In time, all their children also moved there.

*In the Fiery Furnace* is not a standard story book. It is an account where two extremes of the human family meet. Through the Holy Spirit, Johann Steffen lived a remarkable Christian witness while imprisoned in Communist Russia even though the officials conspired against him. They wanted to get rid of Steffen and would have permitted the other prisoners to torture Johann to death. But through his Christian testimony, Steffen gained the respect of hardened criminals so that they refused to kill or even hurt him. Time and again God demonstrated His power so that Steffen was spared.

Elfriede’s life was no less dangerous than Johann’s. The immorality of society, along with the extreme cold, made her visits to see her husband in prison extremely dangerous. These trips were at times a two to three day journey. Having a train ticket did not guarantee a ride on the next train. Some porters denied some individuals the right to board while allowing other passengers to get on.

I would say that the main theme of this book is Johann’s prison experiences and Elfriede’s life during their repeated separations. Any Christian will benefit from reading this book. Readers of North American heritage will be challenged to comprehend the Steffens’ life. A reader not familiar with



Russian Mennonite history may find this book a little challenging, but the maps and the timeline of events found in the appendices will help the reader stay oriented. Also, a reader with limited knowledge of Central Asian geography will find the appendixes important to understand Steffen's transfers from one prison to another. If you use a World Atlas, you will see that where Steffen was born and raised in the Ukraine is about two thousand miles from where he raised his family and served the church as a bishop.

Steffen was true to his calling to serve the church during a time when his service as a Christian leader was obviously an "illegal" activity within the Communist regime. Even though Johann and Elfriede are very modest concerning their Christian experience, their writings reveal that God was with them and that they understood, believed, and practiced nonresistance.

*Donald Martin resides near Clifford, Ontario, and is a deacon in the Markham-Waterloo Old Order Mennonite Conference.*

*To order, request more information from [Inthefieryfurnace2022@gmail.com](mailto:Inthefieryfurnace2022@gmail.com) or send a SASE to: Fiery Furnace, 2233 Little Hill Rd, Narvon, PA 17555-9389*