

## Foreword

Wilma von Mende was born in Riga<sup>1</sup> in 1873, just three years after the Franco-Prussian war that ended in the formation of the modern German state. By the time she wrote these memoirs (*Aufzeichnungen*) at age 77, Wilma had gone through some of the worst times in Baltic German history: World War I; the Russian Revolution; the Depression; the forced “resettlement” by Hitler of Baltic Germans to Germany in 1939 and 1940 (as part of his pact with Stalin in 1939); World War II, and the deprivations from the Allied occupation.

Despite all that, her memoirs here reveal a spirit that survived with a cheerful dignity.

Wilma was the sister of one of the many Heinrichs von Mende (she will explain the frequency of the name), who in turn was the father of Ilmar Roman von Mende, who in his turn was husband to Elinor von Mende (née Strauss) and “Papi” to Hans, Elfi, Hita and Aki, and “Opa” to Hillery, Sarah, Jesse, Kim, Todd, Sascha, Christopher, Stephanie and Brie.

At the request of Ilmar’s half-brother Heino, in 1950 Wilma wrote this account of her family, starting with her grandfather Heinrich von Mende, the man responsible for earning the honorific “von” of nobility (*Verdienstadel*) granted by the Russian Czar.

She lived in times when so much of what we take for granted in modern medicine was sadly absent. Thus, what is very striking throughout this narrative is the tremendous loss of young life that the von Mende clan suffered and which must have been quite common in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Wilma’s father’s brother alone, for example, her Uncle Sascha and his wife Anna, lost a dozen children in infancy before having a surviving child, Johannes, who lived into adulthood. Johannes became father to Gerhard von Mende, a famous scholar, linguist, government adviser and professor at the Institute for

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<sup>1</sup> The Germans founded Riga in 1201, and gradually it became the largest and most beautiful city in the southern part of the Baltic Sea. With the arrival of the German Crusaders, the development of separate tribal realms of ancient Latvias came to an end. In the 1200s, a confederation of feudal nations developed under German rule that was called Livonia. Livonia included today’s Latvia and Estonia. In 1282, Riga was included in the Northern German Trading Organization, or the Hanseatic League (Hansa). From this time, Riga became an important point in west-east trading. Riga, being the center of the eastern Baltic region, formed close cultural contacts with Western Europe.

Latvia proclaimed independence shortly after the end of World War I – on November 18, 1918. The first to recognise Latvia’s independence was Soviet Russia, which relinquished authority and pretences to Latvian territory. But in 1919 the Bolsheviks invaded Latvia, but they were then driven out by a joint Latvian-German force. The Treaty of Versailles then forced the Germans to leave, allowing the Latvians to assert their independence for the first time in more than 600 years.

The brief rule of the Bolsheviks in 1919, however, had dreadful consequences for the von Mende family, as you will discover here.

Non-Russian Central Asian Peoples of the Soviet Union (not the exact name, but close enough), which he founded in Berlin.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the heavy dark bleakness, the many losses and the obvious sorrows that Wilma and her generation experienced, there are also images from the romantic and innocent times of her youth that are like wisps of forgotten dreams, Cinderella places of the mind. Here and there in her chronicle pop up those endearing little stories in people's lives that stick to them forever, the seemingly random odd tidbit, like the time Wilma's mother, out of a passion for wanting to hear just one more concert played by the pianist and composer Anton Rubenstein, sacrificed the money she had been saving for a blouse to buy a ticket instead. That blouse would have been worn and discarded. But her Rubenstein story followed her her entire life, and it lives on here.

Or those times when she sailed in the little rowboat pulled by a steamboat that her brother Robert made from little parts he machined in German factories while serving as an engineer apprentice. The thing was just big enough to fit him and strong enough to pull the rowboat, and the picture of this little flotilla sailing across the family lake seems as carefree and pastel as a Renoir painting.

Or the heart throbs she and her sister must have had in the summers of their budding teenage years, when her country relatives gave balls in their honor and dashing young gentlemen from the nearby school ("all over the age of 20") would dance the night away with them.

It's interesting to see what precious fleeting little things, besides the grave, remain.

I thank Heino von Mende *in memoriam* for asking Wilma to record her memories that are here translated. For any mistakes in the translation I ask forgiveness from Wilma's enduring spirit, a spirit that lives on in the genes and souls of her grand-nephews and nieces, her great-grand-nephews and nieces, and their offspring, and so on and on, forever, to all of whom my effort here is lovingly dedicated.

Larry Johnson, Snohomish, 2001.

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<sup>2</sup> As fate would have it, Wilma is not the first von Mende whose German I have translated. While a graduate student at Harvard and needing some additional income, I was hired by a professor in the political science department to translate a book of Gerhard von Mende's about the political movements of Central Asian countries during the 1920s. What a coincidence!

# Memoirs

by Wilma von Mende

begun in November, 1950, in Bad Nauheim, Germany

At the wish of my dear nephew Heino von Mende I will write, as much as is known to me, a brief narrative about his ancestors.

I begin with my grandfather, Dr. Heinrich von Mende, M.D.

I never knew him personally, I know only that he studied in Dorpat<sup>3</sup> and was one of the co-founders of the student fraternity "Fraternitas Rigensis". He was born in Riga<sup>4</sup> on April 22, 1803 and practiced medicine in Riga, where he particularly distinguished himself during the great cholera epidemic in the 1850s.

Since at that time there were few known remedies against this terrible disease, many people died. A Russian Grand Prince, however, who was staying in Riga at that time and fell ill with cholera, was able to be saved, for which he was especially grateful to Dr. Mende.

After he returned to St. Petersburg he asked my grandfather which he would more like to have: a high decoration which would allow him to appear before the Czar without an appointment (and, according to Ilmar von Mende, would also give him a life-long pension), or a grant of nobility, of which only two were handed out in Russia every year. The doctor chose the latter and received the grant very soon thereafter. He (the doctor) specified that the eldest son shall always inherit this diploma of nobility and shall always bear the name Heinrich.<sup>5</sup> As long as possible this stipulation was implemented.

My grandfather lived to be only 65 and was blind in the end. He died in Kokenhusen in Lithuania on December 2, 1866.

His wife, whom he married in 1828, was Charlotte Baehr (granddaughter of Georg Baehr, architect and builder of the famous Frauenkirche in Dresden), born September 15, 1805 on the Menkenhof manor in Lithuania, died October 16, 1889 in Riga. Of my grandmothers I got to know this one and was 16 at the time of her death. In old age she was a somewhat strange person, a little senile I would say, and we grandchildren enjoyed her oddities.

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<sup>3</sup> today Tartu, Estonia

<sup>4</sup> then part of Czarist Russia, now Latvia

<sup>5</sup> the original ornate document was destroyed by Heinrich (Heino) von Mende's wife in 1945 while fleeing the oncoming Soviet Bolshevik troops

She had 13 children, 7 of whom died young. I knew well all of the remaining 6 who survived. First I'd like to give a brief summary about these six:

1. Eisabeth ("Betty"), born circa 1830, married her cousin Robert Stauwe and died in 1884.
2. Wilhelmine ("Minna") born April 17, 1832, married Wilhelm Haase and died on June 9, 1907.
3. Roman Andreas, born January 23, 1837, married on February 14, 1861 Marie Louise Lauenstein, who was born October 24. 1842 (my mother) and died on November 19, 1894.
4. Alexander ("Sascha"), born May 31, 1838. He married Anna Plessing, born June 26, 1845 and died on January 9, 1898.
5. Blanka, born February 7, 1844. She married the gynecologist Dr. Felix von Hübner, M.D., and died on November 19, 1918.
6. Eduard, born July 7, 1844. He married Marie Graff and died on June 17, 1918.

After these dry statistics I will now try to say something about the personal things that happened in the lives of these six.

#### No. 1: Aunt Betty

For 33 years she was married to her cousin, Robert Stauwe, an Elder of the "Great Guild" and "the Black Heads." The marriage was very happy but childless. The couple therefore adopted a little girl, Ella von Sander, who later married attorney Johann von Bünger and had 5 children from him: Hanna, Liesy, Fredy, Erni and Otto. The 3 boys are dead, the two daughters are perhaps still alive. Hanna married the head physician of a sanatorium, a Dr. Meyer. Liesy had tuberculosis, yet she was married, too, to a rich banker by the name of Holtz, who also had tuberculosis. The couple is said to have had a daughter. Since I was only 11 at the time of Aunt Betty's death I remember very little of her. She was a seriously ill person with heart disease, we children were seldom permitted to visit her. But a big attraction was a large closet full of beautiful, interesting toys, and we were thrilled to be allowed to play with these nice things.

The Stauwes took many magnificent trips abroad, one time they also brought my mother along. In general they lived like lords; I was especially impressed back then that there was also a servant in the house, Ado Laur.

#### No. 2. Aunt Minna.

She was married to the merchant Wilhelm Haase. He was some years younger than she, a great big comic and jolly man. He was a brother of Anna Stahl, née Haase, later to be your [Heino von Mende's] grandmother. Unfortunately he became incurably insane but was able to live at home. The Haases had 5 children: Willy (son), who died at 12; Betty, born 1860; Anny, born 1862; Elfriede, born (1866) and Willy (daughter) born 1874.

Now something about the four daughters of Minna Haase, née von Mende.

The oldest daughter, Betty, at 24, married her old Uncle Robert Stauwe, age 66, who 2 years earlier had lost his first wife Betty von Mende. Unfortunately this marriage also produced no children for the old man Stauwe. The second Mrs. Betty was an amusing woman full of *joie de vivre* and many interests. She liked to engage in lively discussions about the issues of the day and accordingly assembled around her an interesting circle of personalities. She had severe heart problems and died young, not even reaching the age of 40, and her old husband followed her a few days later. He had phlebitis and one of his legs was amputated. The couple was buried on the same day in May, 1899.

Aunt Minna's second daughter was Anny whom, dear Heino, you surely will remember. She was a sickly person and had a sweet, friendly and always helpful disposition. She lived for many years in the house of her uncle, Dr. Felix von Hübner, and helped him with the patients in his clinic and also assisted in minor surgeries. At over 80 years of age she died in Posen im Warthegau [today Poznan, Poland] where some 38,000 people from Riga were re-settled in 1939 and 1940 [and where Aki and Hita were born].

The third daughter of Minna's was Elfriede Haase, born 1866. She led a very rich and active life. After getting her teaching degree she went to Russia, was employed in the German church schools in Petersburg and Moscow, and eventually became one of the 36 tutors for the two children of the Grand Prince Paul [Pavel]: Maria Pavlovna and Dimitri Pavlovovich. These children lived in the house of their uncle, the Grand Prince Sergei and his spouse the Grand Princess Elisabeth (Yelisaveta Fedorovna) who was a Hessian princess and the oldest sister of the later-to-be Czarina Alexandra Feodorovna (Princess Alix von Hessen), the wife of Czar Nicholas II. In this house Elfriede saw and experienced many interesting things. After her pupil Maria Pavlovna married the second son of the King of Sweden, Elfriede went to Sweden to visit her. Elfriede now lives (1950) in a home for the elderly in Gaislingen, is 84 years old, and she feels just fine but suffers from being cut off from her closest relatives, but there's nothing to be done about that.

The fourth daughter, Willy Haase, born 1874, married a homeland German<sup>6</sup> by the name of Fritz Saniter, whom she got to know through the exchange of postcards. The couple

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<sup>6</sup> The Germans living in the Baltic area of Imperial Russia (after 1918, the countries of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia) referred to Germans from Germany proper as "Imperial Germans" ("Reichsdeutsche"). I use the term "homeland Germans," though "mainland Germans" might also work, even though the Baltic Germans shared the same continent with the "Imperial Germans."

had only one daughter, Wilma Saniter, born January 17, 1906. After the death of her father she lives with her mother in Neumünster in the state of Holstein.

### No. 3. Roman von Mende.

The third child of my grandparents was Roman von Mende, my father. After he attended school in Riga he learned agriculture under Mr. Wiegand, the administrator of the Wolmar Estate, whose large family was bound for life to ours by a great friendship. At Wolmar in August of 1860 he made the acquaintance of the 18-year-old Marie Louise Lauenstein (born 1842), they became engaged in November of the same year, and married on February 14, 1861. These were my parents.

My father was always very loving with his children, I never heard an unfriendly word from him. Whenever he had to take someone to task for something, it was always in a friendly manner. Yet we children always had the greatest respect for him. My parents' marriage was always an especially harmonious and happy one. I never heard a quarrel between my parents, even though by the time of my father's death I was 21.

His great love for agriculture caused my father in 1875 to buy the little ancestral manor called "Schreienbusch."<sup>7</sup> It was 200 lofstelles<sup>8</sup> in size and was a distance of 5 versts<sup>9</sup> from Riga. Two years later he acquired the neighboring estate of "Neuhof" that bordered on "Schreienbusch." It was on Lake Stint and was also 200 lofstelles. It was here that we children spent our wonderful childhood. We always had lots of guests, the residence was very spacious, it had 18 rooms, a very large veranda, there was a big garden, a park with 100-year-old oaks, and, best of all, the house lay directly on Lake Stint. I always had the feeling that there could be no place in the world as beautiful as Neuhof. Even now my heart is full of thanks to God that He let me live such a beautiful, carefree childhood. Yes: Memory is the only paradise that one cannot be driven out of.

My father was an early riser and liked to see us get up early, too.

By-and-by there came to Schreienbusch many suitors who wanted to buy a piece of it, mostly plain folks: gardeners, factory workers, etc. My father parceled out Schreienbusch and through extended installment payments sold small lots of 1 to 3 lofstelles. In that way there arose a small settlement which in a short time grew to 10,000 people. The big residence along with its garden was sold to the coffee merchant William Janisch, who lived there and built a factory. As long as the buyers in Schreienbusch were only slowly paying off their parcels, *one* property had to be retained by us, that was required by law.

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<sup>7</sup> Literally, "screaming bush"

<sup>8</sup> A unit of measurement of about 3710 square meters. According to an Internet source (<http://www.sizes.com/units/lofstelle.htm>): "In Estonia, -20th century, a unit of land area whose magnitude varied with locality. In Tallinn (formerly Reval), about 1855 square meters; the Livonian lofstelle was about 3710 square meters.

<sup>9</sup> Defined from the same Web site: "In Russia, a unit of length, about 1.067 kilometers (about 0.66288 miles). Also romanized as *werst* and *versta*."

It was this one lofstelle of land, dear Heino, upon which later your father, after his father's death, built a house with about 10 workers apartments, each one with one room and a kitchen. One room with a veranda your father retained for himself as an office.

Now something from the life of my dear mother, Marie Luise von Mende, née Lauenstein. On October 24, 1842 she was born as the daughter of the City Secretary Eduard Lauenstein in Bausko. At age 8 she lost her parents and along with her two younger sisters, Natalie and Molly Lauenstein, was raised by her older sister by 10 years, Henriette, who later married the blind theologian, Alexander von Stryk.

My mother, who in those days rhapsodized over the famous pianist and composer Anton Rubenstein, once traveled to Riga from Bausko in order to buy herself 6 blouses. Since Rubenstein happened to be in Riga giving concerts, she of course went to them. When Rubenstein gave into the demands of his public to give an additional concert, my mother wanted to hear it but did not have the money, so she quickly decided to buy one less blouse and instead went to the concert. For the rest of her life she was teased about this.

At 18 she was again in Riga and happened to make the acquaintance of Mrs. Wiegand from Wolmar who was looking for a nanny for her two oldest children, then 8 (Hermann) and 6 (Sally). My mother quickly decided to take the job and sent to Bausko a short message: "I have accepted the position of governess with the Wiegand family and am going there, i.e. to Wolmar." That was in August of 1860. As already noted, by November she was engaged to my father and married him on February 14, 1861. I will come back later to the four children of the couple: Heinrich, Robert, Mary and Wilma.

No. 4. The fourth child of my grandparents was Sascha von Mende, born 1839. This uncle was always very friendly towards us children. He was a somewhat weak character who found a good complement and the necessary grounding in a particularly capable and purposeful wife, Anna von Mende, née Plessing, who was from Lübeck. He had a bank where the government played a major role by using it to make payments on lottery tickets, and that made for a nice profit. The appearance of his house succeeded in creating an impression of wealth. Since his dwelling had large rooms, not only was his silver wedding anniversary celebrated there in grand fashion, but also, two years before, the silver wedding anniversary of my parents.

I was especially impressed back then by the fact that there were 8 outside cooks with assistants working in the huge kitchen that was two stories high. Particularly beautiful in the house was the so-called "picture room," a big, rectangular room with a parquet floor inlaid with designs of black leaves and garlands. All four walls of this room were painted with pretty, large mountain landscapes depicting beautiful distant panoramas. Almost every Sunday all the relations would get together at Uncle Sascha's house, and the most pleasant years of my youth were spent in this house.

There was a lot of dancing, singing and music making.

Uncle Sascha and Aunt Anna had many children. The first 12 died when they were little, mostly from convulsions. They therefore adopted a very cute little boy whose name was August Immak. Unfortunately the boy gradually turned into a mentally retarded child whom the adoptive parents had to put in an institution for such children, in Kikemühle, Germany. Only the 13<sup>th</sup> child of the couple lived, it was their son Johannes, called Hans for short, born on June 14, 1875, later to become the father of Gerhard, Irene, etc. Then two years later a daughter was born to the couple, Elsa, who unfortunately reached only the age of 3. She was a very specially developed child and very pretty, whose death was something the father could not get over for a long time. In October, 1878, came a son Roman, nicknamed Romo, who still (as of 1950) lives as a retired ophthalmologist in Überlingen on Lake Constance. And finally there was another daughter, Anna, who reached only the age of 2. Later I'll get back to Hans and Romo.

No. 5. Aunt Blanca. She was a very popular aunt. In her house we also spent many beautiful hours. She was a very original human being, she had a way of bringing a lot of gaiety into our lives. She had no children except one who died in infancy. Her husband, our Uncle Felix von Huebner, was a very popular and intelligent gynecologist in Riga who had a very big practice. He provided very well for his wife. After his death he left her not only a sizeable estate but also annuities funded by medical pension funds in Riga and Petersburg which he had purchased so that after his death his wife would, from a pecuniary point of view, live a comfortable and carefree life. But because of World War I (1914-1918) she lost her capital and the annuities would by their terms expire upon her death, so that she was unfortunately unable to leave anything to her nephews and nieces, a fact that caused her great sorrow. You, dear Heino, certainly must have a memory of old Aunt Blanca, since you were already 15 at the time of her death.

No. 6. Uncle Eduard von Mende. He was an official with the Telegraph Office. At 32 he married the 16-year-old Marie Graff from Libau, then went to Russia and became the director of the Telegraph Office in Yelabuga and Kazan. A severe blow struck him. Due to scarlet fever and diphtheria, in a very short time he lost first his oldest, 10-year-old daughter Alice, then the youngest daughter Katinka, then his wife one day before her 30<sup>th</sup> birthday, and then also the second daughter, Blanka. When a few months later his only son Paul passed away from the same disease, Uncle Eduard could not take it there anymore and returned to Riga with the only daughter still alive, the then 5-year-old Maria (born 1883), where he lived for a number of years. Maria was later employed by the Telegraph Office but became mentally ill from the many excitements during the time of the revolution in 1905. There were times when she was again completely healthy. Whether she is still alive (as of 1950), I don't know.

So much for the 6 children of my grandfather. Now I'll turn to the next generation.

I begin with your father, dear Heino, my dear brother Heinrich von Mende, born November 8, 1861.

He attended primary school in Riga, and during that time he and his brother Robert were boarded at the home of Pastor Karl Walter, and then he went to high school (*Gymnasium*)

from which he graduated at age 19.<sup>10</sup> He went to the University in Dorpat (Tartu, Estonia) and studied law and received his law degree. His closest friend in Dorpat was Reinhold Walter, who later became a pastor in Kreuzburg and married Mieke Stauwe, a cousin once removed of Heinrich's.

After completion of his military service with the *Sapeurs* in Riga he found a position with the Riga Office for the Poor, later known as the Welfare Office. At first he was a *Notar*,<sup>11</sup> then later administrator, and he worked there for the rest of his life. He was active in all welfare institutions, in two orphanages, the St. George's Hospital, the Leprosy Home, the jail and many others. His work was full of variety and gave him pleasure. With great patience he often listened to the many complaints and cares of the old women from the homes, comforted them and was always friendly and full of concern for them, who returned his kindnesses with love and gratitude. He was also well liked among his fellow workers and superiors.

The Bolsheviks occupied Riga in 1919. One night his house was searched and nothing wrong was discovered, but he was arrested and put in prison anyway, completely without justification. His coachman, a Latvian named Salit, succeeded after some time in getting him released, but from the highly unsanitary prison he caught typhoid fever and died in the hospital on June 10, 1919.

On New Year's Eve of 1900 he was engaged to Anna Bresinsky (born 1870), the adopted daughter of Pastor Hermann Bresinsky of Pleskau, and he married her on April 6, 1901. The wedding was celebrated in Pleskau over the course of 8 days, and the bride's father, Pastor Bresinsky, who was well known in the city and had a large congregation, found his church packed to the rafters for the wedding. Very many rich members of the congregation, most of them homeland Germans, sent the wedding couple valuable gifts of silver; counting just the moka spoons alone, there were 8 dozen. All the many gifts piled high in a separate room resembled a jewelry store!

The marriage was a very happy one. The couple understood and complemented each other in every way. The wife was a ray of sunshine, was friendly to people and won over everyone's hearts. Unfortunately the marriage of this extraordinarily happy couple was of only short duration, 2 ¾ years. On September 4, 1902, a daughter, Wiltrud, called Trudchen ("Little Trudy") was born to the couple, and on December 6, 1903, came a son, Heinrich, called Heino. Trudchen died one day before her third birthday on September 3, 1905. Heino was born in Arco, where his mother had gone for the waters [*Kur*]. But 4 weeks later she died on January 3, 1904. It was a very hard blow for the husband who, once learning of the serious illness of his wife, had immediately gone to her and found her still alive. Old Aunt Mila von Schroeder, a sister of Pastor Bresinsky's wife, who had accompanied her niece Anna to Arco, witnessed the birth of the little Heino and the death of his mother.

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<sup>10</sup> The *Gymnasium* was and is a secondary school for the elite, and graduation typically occurs at age 19, with a graduate having the equivalent education of 2 years of college in the U.S.

<sup>11</sup> more than just a notary, but a person invested with minor quasi-judicial functions

Heino got an Italian wet nurse who, however, once she arrived in Berlin was overcome by an insurmountable homesickness for her husband and children so that she had to be sent back to Arco. With the help of nice Miss Becker, the sister of Paul Becker who was a friend of the whole family and a hospital director in Berlin, an immediate search was undertaken for a wet nurse. One was found, a pale, blond Lisbeth who was prepared to make the long journey to Russia, first to the grandparents Bresinsky in Pleskau and two months later to our house in Riga.

Aunt Mary, my sister, became particularly attached to the two children, Trudchen and Heino. Unfortunately, dear Heino, you lost your little sister very early. She was, like most children who die young, a very special child, one very developed for her age. Always very tender, she was careful not to display too much love to anyone so that others might feel slighted; rather she went from person to person, giving everyone equal measures of her sweetness. She was also very shrewd. Whenever she was naughty and feared scolding from Aunt Mary, she would go to a picture that stood on Aunt Mary's dresser that was the likeness of a lady much admired and loved by Aunt Mary, a painter from Stuttgart by the name of Paula von Wächter-Spittler, and she'd say, "Tusu (that's how she called herself) loves Aunt Paula very much." She wanted to deflect Aunt Mary's thoughts from punishment and quickly change the subject to one which she knew would be to Aunt Mary's liking.

We were all truly very sad when our dear little Trudelchen was taken from us. The child received a lot of love in her lifetime, something that was reflected by the large turnout at her funeral. Old Uncle Hermann Wiegand, who had a particular soft spot for the little girl, came to the funeral with a huge wreath made up of forget-me-nots.

Before I close the chapter on my brother Heinrich, I'd like to emphasize something special: after the death of our father, in his kind way and in exemplary fashion he supported his mother and both of us, his sisters, and in all moments of need he was there with his help and advice.

A few months before the death of our mother on November 6, 1907, Brother Heinrich was engaged to the best friend of his departed wife, Hedwig Raymann, the daughter of Dr. Raymann, M.D., in Pleskau. Since she had lost both of her parents she had lived at that time in the house of Pastor Bresinsky, where the wedding took place on April 6, 1908. From this marriage only one son was born on August 14, 1909, your step-brother Ilmar, who unfortunately at 10 lost his father.

Now I come to my second brother, Robert von Mende, born on February 8, 1863. He was a particularly talented person, but unfortunately completely without perseverance. He was mother's favorite, probably because he caused her the most worry and in addition knew how to ingratiate himself. He was lazy in school. In the *Gymnasium*, I believe it was when he was in his third term (7<sup>th</sup> grade), after he flunked for the second time he had to leave this school. He then went to the *Realschule* in the fourth term and the same thing happened again, after failing twice to be promoted to the next grade he had to leave the school. He was 17 years old at that time.

He would have liked most to become a sailor, he felt particularly attracted to this vocation and it would have been the right one for him. Unfortunately, however, both parents were against it, something that was actually a real pity. He regretted it all his life.

Since Robert also showed interest in mechanical engineering, Father sent him to the Technical School in Mittweida, where he was to be educated as an engineer. He lived a splendid life there. His studies were surely not the main thing, but when it came to silly pranks he was always the instigator. He was very popular with his fellow students, but less so with his teachers. When he left Mittweida his teachers said, "Thank God that Mende is finally leaving us!"

Robert seldom wrote home, only when he needed money, completely the opposite of his brother Heinrich who was studying at the University of Dorpat at the same time. Heinrich wrote often and at length, and he always asked, "Just don't send any money. Here everything is put on a tab and paid at the end of the month. If you wind up with money left over everybody tries to hit you up for some."

Robert was very musical and talented, but here too he lacked perseverance and diligence. He could play any instrument that landed in his hands. When the violin at first caused him some difficulty he took some lessons. Very soon he mastered this instrument and all other string instruments as well. Singing also gave him joy. He had a deep bass voice which blended well in a mixed quartet.

After he finished his studies in Mittweida, at Father's wish he served for two years as an intern in various factories in Germany. During this time he made little machine parts that he brought home with him and assembled a little steam boat out of them. It was so small that he could sit in front of the boiler and stoke the fire while at the same time being able to reach the boat's rudder. This steamboat pulled our big rowboat, and in this way we had many lovely trips on Stint Lake, which was 4 versts wide and 11 versts long.

Later Robert also built a sailboat which he baptized "Senta." It had a cabin in which a table stood, adorned with a vase that was always filled with flowers, and where four people could sit. He also built a small life-boat with no keel, but he was the only one who could sail it. When we went swimming in Stint Lake and tried to climb aboard this boat it would immediately flip over every time.

A half year before the death of our father, on May 20, 1894 Robert married Hildegard, née Hilda Larssen, daughter of the Revenue Agent<sup>12</sup> Friedrich Larssen. On April 22, 1895 a daughter, Edith, was born to the couple. Edith had a rare musical ear for absolute pitch and was pretty, but after her mother's death she hit the skids and wound up performing in burlesque shows in Riga, and we lost sight of her. She was supposed to have married a Russian, we don't know any more about her than that.

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<sup>12</sup> *Accisebeamte*, which I assume has something to do with taxes, though if the word is related to the English "assizes," then perhaps it is a court position. I'm still working on this one.

On May 10, 1896 Robert and Hilda had triplets, 3 girls: Senta, Gerta and Helga. These children were small and pitiable. They did experience their first birthday together, but soon thereafter Senta and Helga died in close succession and only Gerta remained. She was both physically and mentally retarded, but she always had a friendly disposition and was eager to help. After the death of her mother she, along with her younger siblings, was raised in an orphanage and later sent to the Bergengrün Abbey in Riga. Where she was resettled with the people of this home in 1939 [after the forced “repatriation” of Germans from the Baltic States] was something we never found out. It is possible that she still (in 1950) is alive.

Robert’s fifth child, Gretchen, born in 1900, came to Germany already during the First World War, with a Baltic family by the name of von Bruemmer. She married Willy Jaeckell, who unfortunately a few years later died very young of stomach ulcers. Gretchen survived him as a widow with two children. She had a rough time of it on her own, the children, a daughter and a son, are now full grown, I don’t know anything more about them.

Robert’s sixth child was Robert. He was a lazy good-for-nothing who didn’t amount to anything. He is supposed to have married an older woman who owned a house and then emigrated to America.<sup>13</sup>

Hilda von Mende, the mother of all these children and the wife of Robert, died giving birth to a boy who was also stillborn. They were buried together.

Brother Robert was given the commission from the Knighthood of Livonia<sup>14</sup> to construct a boulevard along the Riga Beach. At the same time and place he also set up a factory for manufacturing pine-needle wool<sup>15</sup> for health resorts, a conifer preparation. Nothing lasted!

After he found a job in Odessa on the Black Sea, he sent for the daughter of a Latvian peasant woman by the name of Dunkel to follow him to Odessa, and he married her. The Dunkel family owned land on the *Majorenhof*, an estate on the Riga Beach. We only found out about these things much later by accident, much to our distaste, as Robert

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<sup>13</sup> The first von Mende to make it to America!

<sup>14</sup> Livonia is the territory that once comprised most of present-day Latvia and part of present-day Estonia, until the Baltic States came into being in 1918 as part of the Treaty of Versailles. The “Livländische Ritterschaft,” or Knighthood of Livonia, was the quasi-governing German authority in pre-World War I Czarist Russia, with its origins going back several centuries. In the year 1561 King Sigismund August of Poland gave to the Knighthood of Livonia certain guaranteed privileges called through the years “*privilegium Sigismundi Augusti*.” These privileges secured the use of the German language, the evangelical religion, government and jurisdiction by native according to German law. These privileges were also granted to the Estonian Knighthood by the King of Sweden. The *privilegium Sigismundi Augusti* became the foundation of the self government of Livonia. The existence of the state depended on it and, therefore, the preservation of these privileges became the chief objective of the Knighthoods. With much effort the Knighthoods succeeded in saving these privileges against the attacks of the Poles, Sweden and Russians without much change into the 20th century.

<sup>15</sup> There really is such a thing.

could have well imagined. Even when the couple came back to Majorenhof from Odessa, Robert did not come to visit us at our house. They had two children, Alfred and Elsa, whom I have never seen.

Brother Robert died in 1918 from stomach cancer. He was operated on, but it was already too late. At his funeral I saw his wife for the first and last time. She made a good impression, she was modest and somewhat educated, she had even gotten a degree as a secondary school teacher and taught. After her husband's funeral we all went to brother Heinrich's house. Whether she is still alive at this time (1950), I don't know, just as I don't know any more about her children, with whom you have become acquainted, dear Heino, as I understand.

Now I come to my only sister, Mary von Mende, born on February 11, 1868. Unfortunately, she was always a sickly person. She attended the Municipal Daughters School in Riga where she felt very unhappy, later then she took private instruction in languages and music. Music in particular gave her much joy. Already at 5 she began her piano lessons with the old Great-aunt Natalie Babst, who lived in our house and was my mother's aunt. After Mary had several years of lessons with a very strict music teacher, Herr Scheibe, he turned her over to Herr Otto Lohse who at that time was the music director of the Riga Municipal Theater. Lohse accepted only advanced students. When Mary came for her audition he asked her with whom she had previously studied. When she mentioned Herr Scheibe's name, he said, "Then I'll take you without further ado, in my eyes he's the best teacher for beginner basics." With Lohse Mary had learned a lot, she practiced very diligently and played difficult pieces. My father was always happy when Lohse came to our house for the lessons, he would perform all the hard pieces, something he did splendidly since he was a great artist.

Mary did not like playing the piano for others, that always upset her. I was often her only audience, and I energetically praised her with applause or criticized her with boos whenever she hit a wrong note.

Mary accompanied Mother several times on trips abroad to spas which Mother took for her health. In 1905 my mother traveled to Silesia for the summer and Stuttgart for the winter, where brother Heinrich and I also went to spend Christmas. Traveling with her were my sister Mary and my mother's sisters, Henriette von Stryk and Natalie Lauenstein, as well as Edith (Robert's 10-year-old daughter), and you, dear Heino (2 years old), along with little Marie, a servant girl. It was a beautiful Christmas that we all spent together.

But back to Mary. In 1939 the resettlement from Riga to Germany took place. At the end of November Mary and I sailed on the wonderful American steamship "Oceana" to Swinemünde where we were greeted with music (!!) and a train was waiting for us that took us to Misdroy.<sup>16</sup> There along with 70 other people we were given good lodgings at a hotel, we lived there without having to pay for anything, we even each received pocket

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<sup>16</sup> 250 kilometers from Berlin, in what is today Miedzyzdroje, Poland

money of 5 Marks every week. Mary remained until March 1, 1940, and then she was granted her wish to be transferred to a home for the elderly, specifically to Uchtenhagen in der Mark where she stayed until her death on October 10, 1944. She was thus spared the flight which all the rest of us had to undertake in January of 1945, a fact that one must be thankful for considering what happened after that. She was 76 years old.

Now I get around to myself: Wilma von Mende, born June 6, 1873. My first school instruction I received at home from the age of 6 through 10, along with Gustl and Rosa Stauwe, from the already mentioned Great-aunt Babst. Since she did not understand a word of Russian, from age of 8 to 10 I took private Russian lessons from Miss Malvine Dietrich. At 10 I then attended the private Daughters School of Miss Emma Reinsch until I completed the curriculum, i.e. the final class work took 2 years, at the end of which I was 17. With the permission of my parents, I did not take the final exams. I would have gotten too worked up over it, and there was no point to taking the exams, since all I could do with a diploma was teach. "I'll never become a teacher," I told my parents, "that's a profession that doesn't suit me at all."

During 1890 – 1893, every August and September my sister Mary and I would go visit the Stryk family relatives in Fellin.<sup>17</sup> Getting there in those days was not an easy matter, there wasn't yet any train that went to Fellin. One had to spend two days in a wagon or a sleigh, with an overnight stay in Volmar. We rode in our own wagon, of course, but the horses had to be changed at every post station stop. These autumn visits meant for both of us a wonderful time because in Fellin we were always welcomed with open arms and lovingly spoiled. The dear relatives even arranged balls for us, to which the senior class of the local *Gymnasium* provided the gentlemen who, most of them landed aristocracy, had taken time to complete their education and were all over the age of 20. Life in the Stryks' home was very extraordinarily cozy and nice.

The Stryks kept society with the whole city as well as the very many landed gentry and their families in the vicinity of Fellin. In the Monastery for Young Ladies, established for the nobility, upon our arrival we would come calling on 12 of the ladies, then in most instances we would thereafter be invited to a coffee, and at the end of our stays we would again come by to make our farewell visits. This monastery was built at the instance of Kaiser Paul.<sup>18</sup> When he once was in Fellin he made the acquaintance of a noble lady who had married a plain but wealthy Fellin merchant. To his question why she had done that,<sup>19</sup> she replied, "In order to be provided for. I was poor and could not otherwise take care of myself." Thereupon the Kaiser commanded that the Fellin monastery be built to which all impoverished noble ladies, young or old, could go. There were 18 ladies in residence at the monastery, overseen by Countess Igelström, who was fabulously energetic. Every lady had a room and a maid to serve her. At all the ladies' disposal was an old monastery coach and an old coachman, and an even older servant. Every Sunday the coachman drove to the nearby church as many of the ladies of the monastery as wanted to go.

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<sup>17</sup> Today Viljandi, Estonia

<sup>18</sup> What she probably meant was Czar Paul I, who lived from 1754 to 1801.

<sup>19</sup> i.e., married beneath her class

What has since become of this monastery? The Estonians surely confiscated it when they came to power.

In the Stryks house there was a lot of communal reading, something we sisters loved a lot, for the most part very interesting reading matter.

Whenever there was any kind of concert, theater production or the like taking place in Fellin's one big hall in the Working Men's Club, not a one of them was missed, and you could see everybody from Fellin there, most of whom one knew. Such a small town (at that time Fellin had 7,000 inhabitants) had its own special charm. It was like one big family.

Like everywhere else in the Baltic Sea provinces, in Fellin the Germans comprised the educated upper class, and the Estonians were the common people and the servant class.

In February of 1894 I was thrilled to be offered a government job with the Council of the Knighthood of Livonia. Before reporting for work I had go through a major battle with my parents. It was not customary in those days for young girls to take up a career. If they were poor they could at best go to work as grade school teachers or as nannies in other people's homes. Otherwise the expectation was: learn languages, take music lessons and do handicrafts, that was the right occupation for women. I eventually emerged as the victor in my struggle with my parents, my father finally gave his permission for me to report to work, and my mother was likewise persuaded by him. How happy I was then! Back in those days, at 20 one was still dependent on one's parents, without their permission you couldn't do anything. At that time I had no idea that 38 years later there would come a time where I would live exclusively from the pension I had earned and would otherwise lose all the money, etc. because of the war.

From the start I got along well with my boss, Herr von Tobien. In later years when I ran the office he gave me free reign to do as I thought best, and I asked him for his decision in only the difficult matters. These years of mine spent in the office were for me a very wonderful and blissful time which I recall with only the greatest of gratitude. On the day I would have ordinarily been able to celebrate my 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary at my job, on February 7, 1919, the Bolsheviks had just taken over in Riga. On that day they fired all employees and paid them with "Kerensky money"<sup>20</sup> that was absolutely worthless. Thereafter the Latvian State was founded and I had the good fortune (?)<sup>21</sup> to be hired by the Latvian State, along with 5 other German government officials, to work in the Ministry of Agriculture. For 13 years, then, I worked among the Latvians and actually got along quite well with my colleagues. One reason for that was probably the fact that I had to perform the subsidiary duty of pay clerk and twice a month paid all the government workers their salaries. That brought me into contact with everybody, and I was thus known by everybody as "Mendes jaunoudze."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> For a brief time during the Russian Revolution in 1917, the non-Bolshevik Alexander Kerensky was the head of the Provisional Government, until toppled by Lenin and his Bolsheviks. By 1919 Kerensky was gone, but his worthless money must have remained in the popular vocabulary.

<sup>21</sup> Parentheses and question mark are Wilma's.

<sup>22</sup> Latvian for something, I'm sure.

On December 30, 1931 the newly-named Latvian boss, a Bolshevik, fired me, effective the next day. He wanted to rid the office of every last German. Until then I had a very decent boss, Mr. Alexander Kuze. I still had to remain employed for another month because I had accumulated vacation time which I was allowed to take, and then, because I supposedly was let go due to budget cuts, I received three months pay and was put into retirement. For 38 years of service I was unfortunately credited for only 26, so that my pension, instead of being 145 La. per month turned out to be only 90 La. Since I lived with Mary at that time and was caring for her, I went looking for free lodging and found one with two rooms in the house of a Young Women's Association on Kronwald Boulevard. There I lived with Mary from 1937 to 1939.

Then came the resettlement, and we went to Misdroy, as I have already described in the story of Mary's life. My dear friend and life-long colleague, Irma Kersten, who had been resettled to Zinnowitz, also arrived in Misdroy at the end of January, 1940, and at our urgings the two of us managed at the end of April to be transported to Posen.

Both nephews, Heino and Ilmar, were waiting for us at the train station. Thanks to your hospitality, dear Heino, we were able to move into our own nice apartment in your house, consisting of three rooms: kitchen, bathroom and alcove. Five wonderful years we lived there and we were in need of nothing. We felt at home.

Then came the horrible 20<sup>th</sup> of January, 1945. In the morning everything was still quiet, although in the city a certain anxiety was already in the air. We were told, "Take it easy, Posen will never be abandoned. New weapons are coming, victory is coming." Towards 4 PM there suddenly came the word: "Go now quickly to the train station, evacuation trains leaving immediately, you don't need tickets."

In two hours we packed the most necessary things, as much as we could carry by ourselves. Since it was Saturday and all the banks were already closed, we had to leave behind in the banks and in our cellars all our cash, jewelry, silverware, entire suitcases full of clothes, etc.

We hurried to the train station where there was already a lot of excitement and people moving about.<sup>23</sup> Until the next morning, Sunday, January 21, 1945, at 6:30 AM, we had to wait. In the meantime, sirens went off, and the station was dark and very damp. Meanwhile, for periods of a time one could sit on wet steps.

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<sup>23</sup> I remember how "Oma" (Ilmar von Mende's wife Elinor) described the horrible confusion and panic going on at the Posen train station on that day in January. She had tried several times in vain to get herself and her four children (the twins Aki and Hita were in a baby carriage) aboard a train. Each time she tried to get on the mob would shove her and her kids aside. An SS man came to her aid, however. When a train pulled up, he stood in front of a car door, took out his revolver and shot it in the air, then said threateningly to the surprised crowd, "This woman gets in the train first, everyone else is to wait!" Everyone stepped back to let her on. She told me if it hadn't been for him, she would have been left stranded in Posen, at the mercy of the advancing Russian troops.

Finally a train took us to an unannounced destination. It kept stopping along the way, so that we did not arrive until the afternoon of the next day, January 23, in Finsterwalde, i.e., not far south from Berlin, where everyone had to get off. That was the end of the line.

Passengers were given the choice of either going to a camp in Finsterwalde or anywhere else at their own expense. All our loved ones, family and friends, had also fled, there was only one cousin to go to, Lilly von Mende, the mother of Gerhard, Irene, etc., whose address I knew and to whom we could risk going to. She lived in Hartenstein in the Erz Mountain region (Erzgebirge).

It was an arduous trip, we were forever changing trains, something that was really hard to do with all our heavy baggage. It was dark when we arrived in Hartenstein. It was a long way from the train station to the castle, near where Lilly lived. We were lucky to catch a little handcart that was going to go back empty to the market place. But once we returned it there, then what?

When we got to the market, a friendly, tall gentleman came up to us and asked us where we were going. He said he was going the same way and offered to help us. He and a little boy carried our bags up the high mountain to Castle Hartenstein. On the next day we discovered that the “friendly gentleman” was none other than the Prince and owner of Castle Hartenstein, an older gentleman around 50.

Cousin Lilly, who was an especially good-hearted and helping person, took us in, in the most friendly way. That could not have been easy for her, since she had so little room. For exactly a month we homeless ones stayed with her. Full of thanks I remember her, she who helped us over the first difficult times.

Thereupon we were bidden to go to Bad Nauheim and headed there. The trip took 3 days and 3 nights, again with constant changing of trains. The room that we took in Bad Nauheim was unfortunately a room facing the north into which no sunshine fell, but it did have a balcony. In this damp, dark room in which shoes turned mouldy and needles rusted, we lived for almost 6 years. Heino and Ilmar and their families eventually also settled here, so that I have all my beloved relatives near me, for which I cannot thank God enough.

My dear friend Irma Kersten is unfortunately separated from all her closest relatives and family members. After overcoming many obstacles and with the intercession of various people who are amicably disposed to us, we succeeded on November 1, 1950 in being accepted by a Catholic Home for the Elderly in Bad Nauheim.

We are excellently provided for here. The Mother Superior is an especially good-hearted person, and the many nuns are also always helpful in making life pleasant for us. We are warm (central heating), there's always hot and cold water in the room, and we have four meals a day that are brought to our rooms and are ample and full of variety. In all events, we thank God and feel as if in the bosom of Abraham: We live without cares and hope

gradually to lose all rheumatic and other pains which until now we have had in the previous cold and damp apartment.

Now I come to the two sons of Uncle Sascha von Mende, Hans and Romo.

Hans von Mende, born June 14, 1875, was my dear playmate throughout all my childhood and youth. Being two years older than he, I was the instigator of stupid pranks, and Hans was up for every kind of infamous act. We were like brother and sister and always got along well.

Hans attended the Löffler School in Riga, thereafter the Municipal *Gymnasium*, then he went to the Polytechnical University to study business and economics. After graduation he lived for a short time in Paris in order to study the French language in its native environment. Thereafter he found a position at the Riga Exchange Bank (Börsenbank) and in 1902 married Lilly König, born in Petersburg on February 11, 1879.

The marriage was a harmonious and happy one. On February 11, 1903, they had a daughter, Irene, and in December of 1905, a son, Gerhard. Thereupon Hans von Mende was offered a good position in Mitau<sup>24</sup> as director of the savings bank of the Credit System.<sup>25</sup> He didn't want to leave Riga and therefore attached all kinds of tough conditions to his acceptance of the offer, but all of them were agreed to. Thus it was that he moved to Mitau. There in the course of time came 5 more children: Elsa, Hinz, Kurt, Walter and Annli. Mary and I went to Mitau for all the baptisms.

Hans von Mende was good company and extremely popular, he knew how to liven up a party. He was a good comic and mimic. With his children he was a very caring and giving father who spent a lot of time with them.

In March of 1919, he and 300 other persons were driven out of Mitau by the Bolsheviks and marched to Riga (40 versts). Many died along the way. Hans was among those who arrived alive in Riga. He was put in the Central Prison, and soon thereafter he was shot and buried in the prison yard. A year later, when the Bolsheviks were no longer in the Baltic States, there was an exhumation of the bodies. My sister-in-law (Ilmar's mother<sup>26</sup>) and I had been asked by Hans' wife Lilly, who had fled to Germany, to attend this exhumation. Right at the second body we could recognize that it was Hans, we could identify him by several marks and features. The body was laid into the coffin standing by and was buried the next day in the von Mende family plot. Thus ended the life of a man who never did anyone any harm.

His wife Lily fled to Germany in 1919, soon after the abduction of her husband, taking with her their seven children, ages ranging from 2 to 15. In June she gave birth to an eighth child, Dieter.<sup>27</sup> A hard life followed Lilly, although one must say that it was a particularly full and blessed one. She wasn't able to raise her 8 children on her own. Hinz

<sup>24</sup> Today Jelgava, about 50 kilometers southwest of Riga.

<sup>25</sup> Literal translation of "Sparkasse des Kreditsystems," which conceivably could have been a state-run or state-sponsored pension program.

<sup>26</sup> Hedwig von Mende.

and Kurt went to an orphanage, Irene was put up with an elderly woman, but Lilly was able to have the great joy of seeing none of her children going astray, all of them turned out to be upright people. Unfortunately, she lost one son, Walter, a career officer, who became a victim of the war. He lies buried in Russia.

On Lilly's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday she had the great joy to see assembled around her the greater part of her children, sons and daughters-in-law, and her grandchildren. Soon after that she then passed away. A rich life, rich in sorrows, but also rich in joys, had found its end.

The second son of Uncle Sascha was Romo.

Roman ("Romo") von Mende was born on October 19, 1878. He went to primary school and then the Municipal *Gymnasium* in Riga, then studied medicine at the University of Dorpat, where he wore the fraternity colors of the *Fraternitas Rigensis*, and he also studied in Königsberg. At first he wanted to be a psychiatrist but then decided to be an ophthalmologist. He joined Dr. Stavenhagen's Eye Clinic in Riga and later moved to Mitau where he had a large practice. In 1910 he married Lissy Stegmann, a daughter of the City Auditor, Richard Stegmann. The marriage was a happy one but lasted only 2 ¾ years. When the wife died at a spa in Germany (correction: in Davos, Switzerland, on January 27, 1914), she left behind two sons, Joachim and Jürgen. Both married, but Jürgen was killed in the Second World War in 1943.

Romo took part in the war from 1914-1918 as the director of an army hospital. His assistant was a physician, Sophia Syrtlaney, who had studied in Geneva. She was Muslim. After the war was over they married and lived in Germany. Later Romo bought some property in Überlingen on Lake Constance and moved his practice there. Just a short time ago he stopped practicing medicine. He is now 72 (1950) and still lives there with his wife in Überlingen.

With that I have come to the end of all the Mende descendants.

I give you these memoirs, dear Heino, on your 47<sup>th</sup> birthday, June 19, 1950. It would please me if you continued to keep track of all the Mendes who have either married, been baptized or died, with the respective dates. In this circle belong, besides your and Ilmar's family, also all Mendes, namely Gerhard and his brother and their families. With this line of the Mendes we have always been quite close.

With the wish: God protect you all!, I close these memoirs.

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<sup>27</sup> Dieter became the father of Axel and Evelyn. Axel von Mende and his wife Sylvaine live in Vancouver, B.C.