



Roots and Branches

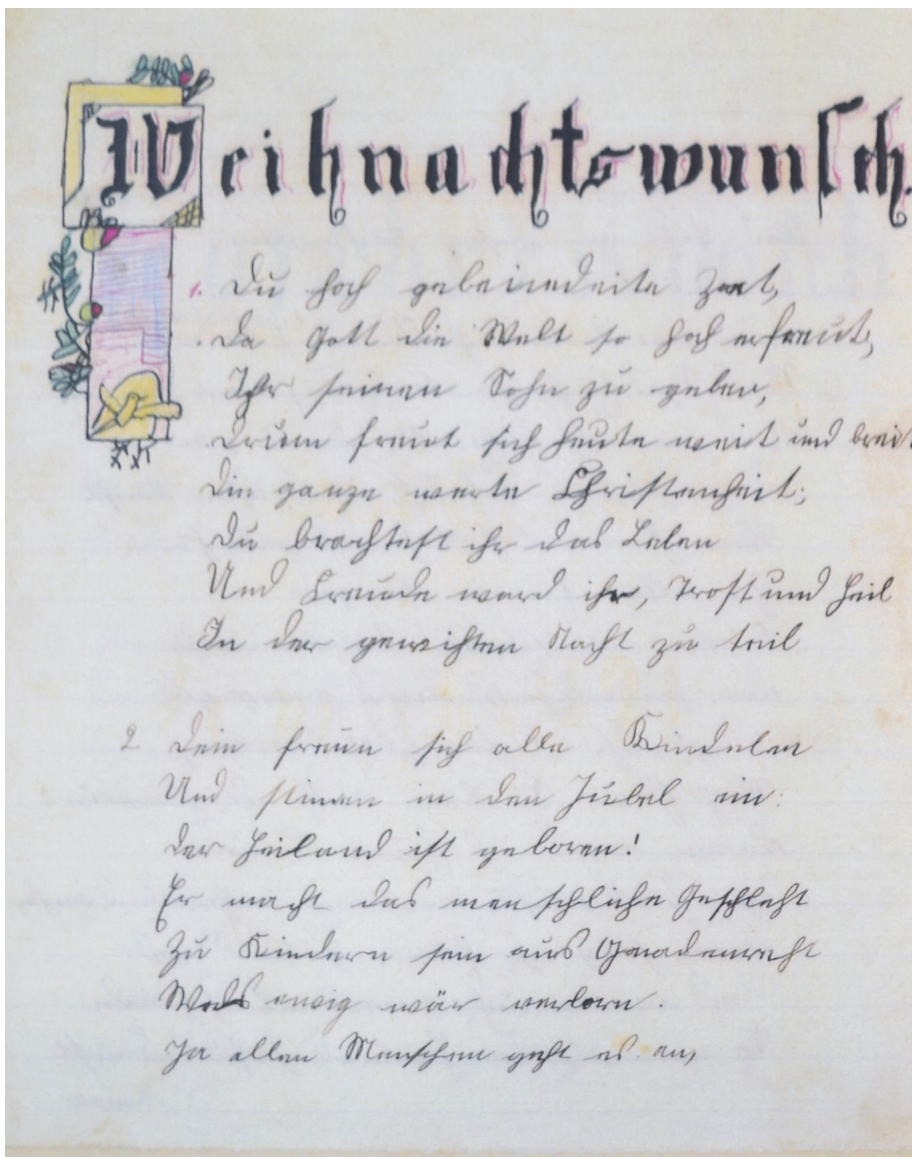
Periodical of the Mennonite Historical Society of BC

"What we have heard and known
we will tell the next generation."

Psalm 78

Weihnachtswunsch

Transcribed and translated by Jonathan Janzen and Julia Born Toews



Du hoch gebenedeite Zeit,
Da Gott die Welt so hoch erfreute,
Ihr seinen Sohn zu geben,
Drum freut sich heute weit und breit
Die ganze werthe Christenheit;
Du brachtest ihr das Leben,
Und Freude ward ihr, Trost und Heil
In der geweihten Nacht zu teil.

Dein freue sich alle Kindelein
Und stimmen in den Jubel ein:
Der Heiland ist geboren!
Er macht das menschliche Geschlecht
Zu Kindern sein aus Gnadenrecht
Welch ewig wär verloren.
Ja allen Menschen geht es an,
Was Gott in dieser Nacht getan.

You, most holy season,
In which God gladdened the world
By the giving of his Son.
Hence rejoices far and wide
All of worthy Christendom;
You brought them life,
And joy, solace, and salvation
Were imparted in this hallowed night.

All little children, celebrate
And join in jubilation:
The Saviour is born!
All humankind He makes into
His children with this act of grace,
Who otherwise would be lost.
What God did this night
Touches one and all.

From a notebook containing handwritten Christmas Wishes to his parents by Heinrich Wiebe, 1913/1914. MHSBC file name "Irene Rempel," donated in 2019.

Photo: Julia M.Toews

Editorial

By Louise Bergen Price

“This is no time for a child to be born, / with the earth betrayed by war & hate.” These first lines from a poem by Madeleine L’Engle (“The Risk of Birth,” 1973) seem fitting for our time with constant newscasts of apocalyptic gloom. And yet, war and hate, epidemics and famine, have been present in our world throughout the ages. But that is not the end of the story. As Christmas draws near may we take comfort to know that now, as in the time of King Herod, “Yet Love still takes the risk of birth” (L’Engle).

It has been a pleasure to work on this third edition of a *Roots and Branches* Christmas Special. We hope these stories and poems bring a little joy and light to a difficult year. We’d also like to remind you that now is a good time to order a gift membership to the Mennonite Historical Society of BC (which includes a subscription to *Roots and Branches*) for those on your Christmas list. If you are donating to MHSBC, please remember that membership subscriptions and donations are separate items.

Sweeping

By David Waltner-Toews, *Three Mennonite Poets*, Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1986, p. 86.

the snow was expected
we were not prepared
for the blizzard
the trees like stiff brooms
quivered
against grey clouds
compulsively tidying
the sky
like trees we stood
out in the swirling
snow
sweeping
sweeping

Christmas in Nieder Chortitza: A Children’s Story

By Louise Bergen Price

It’s Christmas Eve, 1933. Irene Sawatzky – Rena – is at home with her younger siblings. Their mother, who has gone to the prison in Zaporozhye to deliver food to Papa, is not home yet, and Rena is worried. Ma has to cross the frozen Dnieper with its hidden patches of black, icy pools. Night is coming on.

The children are restless, tired and hungry. There is little food in the house except for a bowl of Schnetje that Tante Harms, who lives next door, has brought, but they’re saving those till Ma gets home.

“Come sit on the ovenbench – I’ll tell you a story,” Rena said. She scooped Jascha onto her lap and settled down with Hans and Katie on either side, the brick wall that held the stove pipes warm against her back.

The enamelled bowl with red roses shimmered in light from the saucer-lamp. Rena breathed in deep, filling her lungs with the sharp clean smell of cedar mingled with the aroma of fresh baked biscuits. She let herself be carried back to the last Christmas she remembered.

Hop-skip-jump. Hop-skip-jump. Rena bounces along ahead of her parents, slip-sliding on the snowy road. “Slow down,” Ma calls. “We’re in plenty of time for the service.”

Ma’s hand is tucked into Papa’s elbow. They’re each wearing their new Canada coats and they look very smart.

Baby Katie is at home with a sitter; Rena has her parents all to herself!

Hop. Skip. Jump. Spin. Behind her parents, lights twinkle from dozens of lanterns. Children call to each other, their voices loud in the crisp winter air.

The church smells of candle wax, galoshes, and cedar boughs. There’s a tree in the corner, much taller than Papa, with dozens of white candles fastened to its branches. Rena and Mama sit in the first row. Papa takes a seat up front, be-



Winter - drawing by Woldemar Neufeld on cover of *Die Geschichte der Grafschaft Ebenfeld* by J.H. Janzen, 1944.

side the minister. When Rena catches his eye, he winks.

"Welcome," the minister says. His usually sharp voice is a bit quivery, and he dabs at his eyes with a large white handkerchief. Ma says he is going to Canada soon. To Rosthern, where Manya lives. Rena still misses Manya, but Ma says they'll see her soon.

"Hush, now," Ma whispers. At first, Rena is enthralled by the girls' pretty dresses and ribboned hair. Even the boys look nice with their clean scrubbed faces and starched white shirts. But soon she squirms, impatient. The songs and poems seem to go on forever! She wants it to be Papa's turn, and then the tree in all its glory. And treats in crinkly paper bags.

Finally, there's Papa, straight and tall at the pulpit. He smiles, and begins: "And it came to pass in those days..." Rena has heard Papa practise at home, and loves the old-fashioned words: *And while they were there, she gave birth to her firstborn son, wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, for there was no room in the inn.*

When Papa says the words, "Good tidings of great joy," the minister and another Onkel walk over to the tree. They light one candle, then another, and another. As the room gets brighter and brighter, the glass ornaments blaze and turn. The air smells of hot candlewax. Rena can hardly breathe with excitement.

"Joy to the world." Papa sings, his deep voice flowing like the mighty Dnieper. Ma's voice is like a rippling stream, not always sure if it should be going up, down or sideways. Rena likes Ma's singing; it makes her smile.

Feet shuffle. Everyone stands and the minister prays once more. Papa takes a stick with a small brass cup at the end and snuffs the candles. Sometimes, when a candle doesn't go out right away, a wisp of grey smoke floats to the ceiling. The smoke makes Rena's eyes sting.

"Hurry, Papa, hurry," she whispers, hopping from foot to foot. The crinkly paper bags with nuts and candies will be all gone.

"Sorry, Rena," the Onkel says when they finally reach the door. When Rena's lip begins to quiver, he reaches behind. "Just teasing, child. I've saved one for you."

Stepping out onto the snowy street, Rena stumbles and almost falls. Papa picks her up and sets her on his shoulders even though she's already turned five. In front of her, and behind, lanterns bob up and down in the night.



"Candle in the Darkness." Photo: Louise Bergen Price

Then it's morning, and the tree in the parlour is even more beautiful than the one in the church. And underneath, nestled in its branches, a doll with a real china head. She has curly yellow hair, pink cheeks, and blue eyes that flutter open and shut. Agnes is about the same size as baby Katie, but a lot less trouble. She

doesn't need to be rocked and rocked to sleep and doesn't pee her diapers.

"What happened to Agnes?" Katie asked.

"She fell," Rena said. It was Katie who had dropped her and smashed her head, but she wasn't going to bring that up today.

Jascha, half asleep in Rena's lap, sat up so suddenly he thumped his head against her chin. "Window!" he announced, sliding to the floor. "Mama."

This is an excerpt from The Canada Coat, a children's novel based on the experiences of Irene Sawatzky – my mother – in 1933. Details of publication will be available soon.

Every Little Scrap and Wonder: A Small-Town Childhood

By Carla Funk, Greystone Books, Vancouver, 2019.
240 pp.

Reviewed by Magdalene van der Kamp

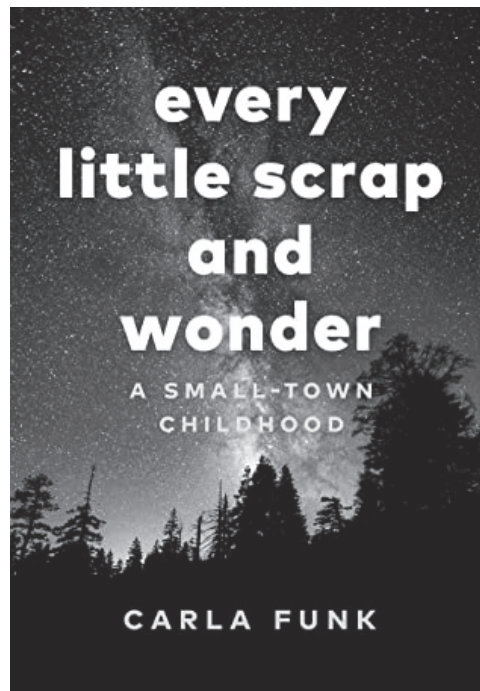
Here's a rarity: a cheerful Mennonite memoir. In *Every Little Scrap and Wonder*, author Carla Funk has lovingly constructed a patchwork quilt of memories from her childhood in the small town of Vanderhoof in central British Columbia. Funk was the inaugural poet laureate of Victoria and is the author of five books of poetry. In this memoir, her first non-fiction work, she is a storyteller whose keen observation and love of language shine. Add to this humour and a charming openness.

Funk introduces us to the members of her close family. Her devout mother of pietist Amish stock instills in Carla the world-fleeing, religious tenets of the faith. Her father, a logging truck hauler, appears to be cut from more robust, world-friendly Mennonite cloth. Her brother is an accomplice and foil in the shenanigans and games of growing up. And in the familial background are the many relatives: grandparents, aunts and uncles, and

dozens of cousins on both sides.

Always present, Funk noted in an interview, is the tension between the two families because of the polarity of lifestyles, familiar in many Mennonite clans, and demonstrated poignantly in the relationship between her parents and the empty place in the church pew beside her mother, where her father would be expected to sit but doesn't. But she loves both and is loved by both.

Present also for the child is the tension between God as the loving comforter and care taker and the "surveillance" God from whom nothing is hidden. Funk, dedicated to the quest for truth in her writing, recognizes in her own actions and decisions, even as a young child, the attraction of the forbidden. During the construction of the family's new home her father tells her not to climb a ladder, but she feels pulled towards it: "I tested my foot on the bottom rung. The sole of my sneaker gripped the grooves, and when I reached higher, the foot still touching the ground seemed to follow naturally in response. I knew the Eden story...." She falls "[f]rom a great height. On stony ground.... All the ways to fall tumbled with me, around me, in me." She had seen "enough to know that height can feel like power. When I plummeted to blackout, that fall, like every fall,



was a falling both forward and back...." As in the Adam and Eve story, the voice that had urged her was "a little hiss that tendrilled from the heart of me."

Along with such tensions there's sadness here that the child needs to come to grips with: Great-Grandfather's open-casket funeral, the annual pig slaughter in the back yard. Her 4-H Club project, Rocky the sheep, is auctioned off "as a future freezer full of meat," her father holding the winning bid. But the tone is never bitter; her touch is light. She delights in the wonders of the town: the mysterious post office, "cool and aloof and satisfyingly eerie"; Mr. Jor-

dan, the grumpy school bus driver who writes a poem for her, and for whom she writes a poem in return; the poet in her waking; the ultra-earnest young Sunday school teacher who preaches repentance to eight-year-olds; Mrs. Giesbrecht, the town's traditional healer-*cum*-osteopath with the "man-sized hands." Funk writes about it all with verve and acceptance.

Magdalene van der Kamp is the author of *Magdalene in Paraguay: A Memoir* (2016) and *New Girl in Canada: A Memoir* (2017). These books can be purchased at the Mennonite Heritage Museum when it reopens. Currently they are available at CommonWord Bookstore and Resource Centre.

New Year's

Source: David G. Rempel, *A Mennonite Family in Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union, 1789-1923*. Toronto: University of Toronto Pr., 2002, p. 101.

New Year's Eve and Day were similarly convivial events. As teenagers, we would band together to pull a few innocent pranks. For the young adults, it was a time for New Year's Eve (*Silvesterabend*) parties, with, for some, the regrettable aftermath many of us experience today.

Looking back, however, the most interesting experience was the time-honoured practice that tied the Mennonites to the broader Ukrainian community. Long before sunrise on New Year's Day, a large number of peasants from the nearby Ukrainian village of Razumovka

descended on our village, each man with a bag of grain over his shoulders. First, the older men would knock and demand entrance to the parents' bedroom, then they would burst in and shower the couple with grain, chanting, "We sow and sow, and bless you, and congratulate you on this New Year" (*Seiem, seiem, provivaïem, s novym godom pozdravliaem*). In return, the parents would give the peasants a bit of our Christmas fare, or some coins. Later, the peasant boys would stroll by in groups, carrying a decorated cross, singing, and likewise tossing grain into the entrance hall. They, too, would be rewarded with sweets and coins. Although it must have annoyed housewives to sweep the grain and sponge up the muddy snow from their floors, no one but the most callous Mennonite would have refused the visitors entrance, for the practice was a firm, nearly sacred custom among our neighbouring Ukrainian peasants.

Christmas in Prison

Die Mennonitische Rundschau, 2 January 1924,
No. 1, pp. 5-6

By Jacob A. Kroeker. Translated and edited by Julia M. Born Toews

One hundred years ago the Spanish Flu raged around the world, the roaring twenties began, and Russia was in the midst of a civil war. The events in the following story, written by Jakob A. Kroeker, took place in the Ukraine after the Russian Revolution; the story was published in the Rundschau four years later.

Born in 1898 in Spat, Crimea, Jakob and his family moved to Halbstadt, Molotschna colony, where his father, Abraham J. Kroeker, was the editor of the Mennonite newspaper Friedensstimme. Jakob graduated from a commercial college and went on to study medicine at the Charkov (now Kharkiv) University. During this time his father had to flee from the Red Army. Jakob came home to check up on his family and was promptly arrested. The following story recounts the first part of his incarceration by the Red Army.

Within three years of conquering the southern Russian steppes, the Red Army soldiers overcame the brave army of General Wrangel [leader of the White Army] who wanted to liberate the people from the Bolsheviks. They also captured the Mennonite colonies in the area, robbing the villages and placing many men, both young and old, in prison and shooting many for no reason.

On November 10, 1920, I, too, was arrested. No reason was given other than that they wanted to arrest my father, who had vanished a short while ago. My father, in his work as a journalist, had constantly fought the Bolshevik ideology, and now this was held against him. When I was repeatedly asked, sometimes in friendly tones, sometimes in threatening ways, where my father

was, I had no answer, for I really did not know where he was. Since no one knew what to do with me, I was led from one place to another, from Pontius to Pilate. This meant walking long distances, sometimes ten versts – [about 10.6 kilometres] – a day. My strength ebbed. I carried all my possessions in a sack over my shoulder. For nourishment we received a piece of black bread mornings and evenings, nothing more. Initially, my fellow captives and I were driven from Halbstadt to Orechovo. There were twenty of us. It was a cold day in December and the road was covered with a thick layer of snow, making walking difficult. When the sun set we still had not received any food. Then the arrested yelled

and swore, “Give us some bread or shoot us, we are too hungry to go on!” So they drove us on to the village of Blumenort (for the night), the same village our German *Selbstschutz* men had guarded for half a year and had in many bloody encounters kept the bandits at bay.

After we had been forced to walk 240 versts in ten days, we arrived at the goal of this trip, Melitopol, where the headquarters of the Red Army was located. Here, I thought, I would soon be freed, for I did not know of any wrongdoing on my part and believed that my father, also, had done nothing in particular that was wrong. But I soon had to give up this hope – there was nothing good to be expected at the

headquarters of the Red Army in Melitopol.

It was evening when I was led into the detention centre. The large room was dimly lit with a small oil lamp, so I did not recognize any fellow prisoners, brothers or sisters. From one corner I heard swearing, in another, a sorrowful Russian melody. A cold blast coming through a broken window provided a substitute for ventilation in this unheated chamber. I searched for a corner, spread my overcoat over the cold floor and sat down. Inquisitive inmates approached me: “Have you been sitting a long time?” “Yes, a long time already,” I answered the group gathered around me. “Ha, here one does not sit long,” a tall fellow responded in a sarcastic voice, then in a whis-



The Kroeker family in happier times, circa 1906, Halbstadt, Molotschna. Jakob, standing far left, Agatha Kroeker (mother), Anna standing in back, Martin in front, Abraham Kroeker (father), Margaret sitting far right. Source: Archives mhsc. ca

per, so that the guard at the door could not hear, added, "I have been sitting here for three days, and am wondering why I'm still alive. Terrible, terrible...." His wide-eyed stare echoed the "terrible, terrible," and it was frightening to look into his eyes. "Do you have a piece of bread?" another asked me, "I am hungry as a wolf." I could only give him a small piece. From another side I heard loud groans coming from those sick with typhus. I was outraged that these ill people were not brought into a warm room, but left to wallow feverishly on the cold, hard floor.

I was tired and put on all my clothes, even the fur hat. Before I lay down, I folded my hands and prayed, as was my custom whenever I arrived at a new place, "Lord, send light and peace into this place, for without you it is eerie (*unheimlich*) here." Then I thought of all my loved ones and friends with the knowledge that many hands were stretched out to me with a

prayer for protection and comfort from above.

On this first night in Melitopol, around midnight I was startled awake by loud voices. The room was full of soldiers, each holding a loaded revolver. Seven prisoners were called and led outside to be shot. The room was deathly quiet; only the ones being led out turned at the door and wished us "*Proschtschajte, druža*" ["God be with you, friends"].... These terrible night scenes were repeated two or three times a week. During the day new captives were led inside, so that the prison never got emptier, but fuller....

Then it was December 24, a day that since my childhood had always filled me with happy expectations. And here I sat in my corner, without courage and without hope. I had no way of communicating with the outside world, and I had not heard any news from home for three weeks. My toasted buns (*Röstzwieback*) were long gone. Our daily food ration of $\frac{3}{4}$ pound of black bread and cold water ... was not enough to satisfy a grown

man. But most of all, my thoughts were heavy because of the uncertainty of my future and the fact that I had had no news of my family. Were they still alive? Would they be able to find me?

Evening came. This Holy Night. Christmas Eve. I was hungry. I had devoured my bread in the morning, so I took a mug of cold water for supper and lay down. I thought back on my time as a young man. I had been granted a happy youth, and the high point of these happy years always had been Christmas Eve, when, under the

lights of the Christmas tree, we tried to surprise each other with our gifts. In light of this happy past, my situation seemed so hopeless that I could not stop my eyes from tearing up. Not even bread for Christmas Eve!

Putting my fur hat under my head I fell asleep. I was startled awake by someone calling my name. Frightened, I jumped up. The thought flashed through my mind, "Death is here!"



"A Package for Jakob." Photo: Julia M. Toews

My neighbour later told me that I became deathly pale. The commandant called my name again, "Here is some food, greetings from your sister," and with these words he handed me a package. "May I see her?" I begged. "No!" was his stern reply, "that is not possible."

Wrapped up in the parcel were some white bread, meat, cookies, bacon, eggs! But the greatest joy was that my brave and resourceful sister (Margaret) was near.... [Having overcome many obstacles], she had followed me the whole time. Baked into the bread was a note with the news that all was well with them. My Christmas Eve nightmare was transformed into a joyful surprise. But why the parcel arrived so late, I could not fathom. Perhaps my sister could only come in the evening. It was only 9 o'clock in the evening, but not too late to celebrate this Holy Evening with my fellow sufferers.

Jakob was released after 7½ months in prison. He immigrated to Canada in 1923 and eventually was able to continue his university education in Salem, Oregon, and at the University

of Manitoba. He trained as a physiotherapist and held Canadian and Manitoba naturopathic licences. He and his wife, Aganetha Konrad, established a practice in Winnipeg.

With his ability as an organizer, he helped establish Concordia Hospital, Crosstown Credit Union, Glen Eden Cemetery and many other similar ventures in Winnipeg. In later years he was especially interested in the Mennonites in Paraguay and helped send medical equipment to their hospitals. Jakob died in 1972.

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New Year's Customs

By Julia Born Toews

Besides gathering together in churches and singing worship songs on New Year's Eve and sometimes New Year's morning – customs we are familiar with in Canada – Prussian and Russian Mennonites adopted some local customs to help celebrate the coming of a New Year. Holiday makers would come around to the houses and chant coaxing songs – *pracha* ditties. In some homes, children and grandparents would stand at the door and hand out *Prachaküake* (beggars' cookies). Other "visitors" were "star boys," *Broomtoppers* (mummers), Russian "beggars," who entered houses and scattered grain on floors and beds for good luck. All were given "gifts" of baking. Such friendly customs ended after World War I.

Here is one such *pracha* rhyme, begging for a handout of *portzelky* (New Year's cookies).

New Year's Wish With Portzelky

Eck sach den Schornsteen roake
Eck wisst woll waut jie moake
Jie bake Niejoasch Koake.
Gew jie mi eene
Dann bliew eck stoane,
Gew jie mi twee
Dann fang eck ann to goane,
Gew jie mi dree, fea, fief toa glick
Dan wensch eck ju
Daut gaunze Himmelrick.

I saw the chimney smoking,
I knew very well what you were making,
You are baking New Year's cookies.
If you give me one,
I'll stand still,
If you give me two,
I'll start to go,
If you give me three, four, five for luck,
Then I wish you the
Whole Heavenly Kingdom.

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Christmas, 1979

By David Waltner-Toews

No one
Is at the door
My father steps in
when I reach out
to check the mail
He bends down
to remove his galoshes
I had not thought
to invite him this Christmas
He has been dead
almost a year
He takes off
his overcoat
After dinner
he sits in the big green
easy chair
reading stories
to my son
Old Macdonald had a farm
The boy laughs
My father laughs
I come from the kitchen
a piece of cold turkey
in my hand
My father looks comfortable
as if he intends to stay
a long time



Artwork source: *Bei uns daheim - Ein froeliches Kinderbuch.*

Klingenburg, Schaal, Wirsching, Burgbuecherei Wilhelm

Schneider Esslingen a. N., 1952, p. 66.

Poem source: *Three Mennonite Poets*, Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1986, p. 87.

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