



Roots & Branches

Volume 28
December 2022

Periodical of the Mennonite Historical Society of BC

"What we have heard and known we will tell the next generations." PSALM 78

I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day

By Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, adapted

I heard the bells on Christmas Day
Their old, familiar carols play,
And wild and sweet/ The words repeat
Of peace on earth, good-will to All!

And thought how, as the day had come,
The belfries of all Christendom
Had rolled along/ The unbroken song
Of peace on earth, good-will to All!

Till ringing, singing on its way,
The world revolved from night to day,
A voice, a chime /A chant sublime
Of peace on earth, good-will to All!

Then from each black, accursed mouth
The cannon thundered in the South,
And with the sound/The carols drowned
Of peace on earth, good-will to All!

It was as if an earthquake rent
The hearth-stones of a continent,
And made forlorn/ The households born
Of peace on earth, good-will to All!

And in despair I bowed my head;
"There is no peace on earth," I said;
"For hate is strong/And mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good-will to All!"

Then pealed the bells more loud and deep:
"God is not dead, and doth not sleep;
The Wrong shall fail/The Right prevail,
With peace on earth, good-will to All."



"Dark Matter #4." Quilt by Lois Klassen. Displayed at MHM, 2018.

Often, during the recent Russian invasion of Ukraine and the horrors that have followed, I think of my Oma. Most of her family were killed during Stalin's reign – out of a family of eight, only she and her sister survived. Her husband was “disappeared” and later shot. But Oma had no hatred of “the Russians.” She blamed the Communist government, often lamenting, “Oh the poor Russian people. How they've suffered.” It is a good reminder to me today as well, to separate a government's actions from my feeling towards the people. As we head towards the Christmas season, may the message of “Peace to All” find home in our hearts.

Christmas Food and Memories

By Louise Bergen Price

My parents, who were in their mid-twenties when they came to Canada, were eager to start a new life here. Yet our own family traditions remained linked to the past, to a country they called *Russland*. There were the candies that Dad bought by the pound at Funk's: creamy *Krovka/Korovki* “cow” candies with colourful wrappers picturing contented cows; “lobster” candies with a peanutty centre; and hard candies filled with jam. We called them “Russian candies,” but they were likely imported from Poland, as are the ones you can buy at AbbyMate today.

Also from Funk's, burlap sacks of peanuts. Spread out on a cookie sheet and roasted to perfection just before eating, peanuts were a staple in our home in the winter months. Inevitably, some shells fell to the floor, crunching underfoot. Sometimes peanuts took flight across the table. “*Aber Kinder, hört auf!*” Mom would scold. (Children, stop it!)

Of course, Christmas wouldn't be complete without Camel brand halvah in a metal tin in which you could later bake *Syrupsplatz* (syrup cake). Mom and Dad pronounced it *Khalva* (халва), the Ukrainian/ Russian way. Made with sesame seeds and honey, the first written recipe appeared in the early thirteenth century in the Arabic *Kitab al-Tabikh* (The Book of Dishes), although many cultures claim halvah as their own invention. (<https://momentmag.com/open-sesame-the-history-of-halvah/>) In our home, it was a staple over the Christmas season, especially when friends dropped by, and yet, strangely, I have found very few references to halvah in Mennonite literature. It was certainly familiar to at least some Mennonites in South Russia: in an online memoir, Johann J. Maties tells of an incident in the early 1900s in which his former teacher J. Unruh invites him to share a “lovely piece of halvah.” (www.krausehouse.ca/krause/MathiesJJ1965_2.htm)



Cow candies and brown *peroschki*.

Photo: Louise Bergen Price, 2022.

Finally, there were cookies, more cake-like in texture than “English” cookies and made using sour cream rather than lashings of butter or oil. Jam-filled *peroschki* were a staple in Mennonite cookbooks – the *Mennonite Treasury* contains eight recipes. After the *peroschki* had cooled, Mom would slide them into her large bread-kneading pan, pour a generous recipe of seven-minute frosting over top, then gently stir until the cookies were glazed.

Brown *Peroschki*

from Irene Sawatzky Bergen's cookbook

Beat together: 2 eggs, 1 cup brown sugar, 1 cup sour cream, ½ cup honey, ½ cup syrup, ¾ cup butter, 1 tsp baking powder, 1 tbsp baking ammonia (first dissolved in 1 tbsp water),* 1 tsp cinnamon, and 1 tsp star anise.

Add enough flour to make a soft dough – about 5 cups. It will still be sticky. Put in a cool place overnight.

Roll out dough, cut into circles with a drinking glass. Place a tsp of jam in the centre of each cookie, fold in half, press edges together. Bake at 350° until done. Ice with 7-minute frosting.

* I used 1 tsp baking soda in place of baking ammonia.

Roots & Branches

Is a publication of the Mennonite Historical Society of BC and is mailed three times per year to all members.

Editors for this special Christmas issue: Julia M. Born Toews and Louise Bergen Price; MHM section by Jenny Bergen

Associate Editors: Maryann Tjart Jantzen and Robert Martens

Layout: Jennifer Martens, Heather Pauls Murray, and Louise Bergen Price

Mennonite Historical Society of BC

1818 Clearbrook Rd, Abbotsford, BC V2T 5X4

Phone: 604-853-6246

Email: archives@mhsbc.com

Website: www.mhsbc.com

Holiday closure: MHSBC and the Mennonite Heritage Museum will be closed from December 17, 2022 to January 15, 2023.

Give a Subscription to Roots & Branches this Christmas!

Give the gift that helps uphold the memories of our Mennonite heritage. Gift your loved one with an annual membership to the Mennonite Historical Society of BC, and they will also receive the *Roots and Branches* newsletter all year. For a \$35 donation, they gain membership, and the knowledge that their gift helps upgrade archival equipment, support our staff, keep our office and archives open to the public, and sponsor events that tell the Mennonite story. Members also enjoy a vote at the AGM, and emails about upcoming events and news. To give, contact the office at 604-853-6177, email archives@mhsbc.com, or visit our office at 1818 Clearbrook Road in the Mennonite Heritage Museum.

Travelling in Winter to Siberia

By Julia M. Born Toews, with John H. Toews

"Dad, what do you remember about a Christmas time when you were a child?" I was sitting with my father-in-law in the kitchen on a sunny October day. Every autumn he came down to Abbotsford from his home in Enderby, BC and helped peel apples to be put in the fruit dryer. When the fruit was ready it would be stored in two-quart jars for winter consumption. Cutting up fruit was something that helped him feel useful and it was a connection with his own childhood; his parents had been adept at preserving fruit and storing food for the winter.

During this activity, I sometimes asked for stories, and often I switched on the tape recorder in order to capture his words. This time he told a story about a trip in the middle of winter when his family moved from Neu Samara to Slavgorod, Siberia, in 1908. This is how he recounted it.

"As I remember, since I was five years old. Mom, Dad, Uncle Corny, Aunt Sara, four sleighs with one horse to a sleigh, one had a canvas cover, took up a homestead back in Russia in the northern part, the coldest, the cold Siberia. In the one covered sleigh was Mom and my sister Helen who had the measles. They travelled from Dolinsk,

...continued on next page.



John H. Toews
(Hans) circa 1912,
Slavgorod, Asiatic
Russia. Photo:
Family Archives.



Sleigh in blizzard. Arnold Dyck, *Verloren in der Steppe*, p. 160.
Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 1985.

Samara, by horse and sleigh in the wintertime, because in the summertime it was too far to go by land. In the winter they could travel over across the lake with the cold, the Irtysh River, since Dad did not have the money to travel by boat. There were also three other kids: Aunt

“You see, the bag had frozen solid against the wall, it was that cold.”

Sara’s Helen, Corny, and Susie. Mom drove one of the sleighs.

“It took them four weeks to get there by horse and sleigh. At one point one of the horses died. I remember how Aunt Sara and my mom threw their arms around each other and cried. Somehow, they kept going and

when they got there, there was lots of snow and it was cold. They stayed in a village of the ‘kald’ Bagatske, old Russian people. They were very good to us.

“They [we] stayed there for two weeks, then all of a sudden the weather changed: the water was running all over. Dad and Uncle Corny went to find the homestead, their peg number. They stayed over one week, and by then they had built a shelter for each one. Dad, Mom, Uncle Korny, and Aunt Sara. The shack was two feet in the ground, eight feet wide, twelve feet long. The roof was birch trunks and twigs – five feet high.”

“So, what did you do for Christmas celebrations? Were your people able to celebrate at all?” I repeat my question.

“Well,” he replied, thinking hard, “I do remember, when Christmas came around, getting a bag of candy, which I treasured very much. I wanted this candy to last a long time. But where to keep it safe? The place was so small. So I put it under my bed, far back against the wall.”

He paused and a faraway look came in his eyes. “But, when I went to get some candy, I could not get it out.” He stopped and laughed at the memory of his childhood predicament. “You see, the bag had frozen solid against the wall, it was that cold.”

And that’s where his story ended. Hopefully he was able to peel the bag off the wall when spring arrived and the walls thawed out. And hopefully the candy tasted as good as he hoped it would.

Historical background

The Barnaul Colony (later called Slavgorod) was established in West Siberia on the desolate Kulundian Steppes in 1908. Part of the attraction, especially for landless Mennonites, was the arrangement for free land, reduced railway fares, start-up



A sod house (*semelin*) at the Mennonite Heritage Village, Steinbach, Manitoba. Photo: Julia M. Toews, 2015.

loans, and exemption from taxes. Families from all over Russia, not just Mennonites, responded to the Russian government’s invitation to settle in this remote area, among them the Toews family who eventually settled in the village of Gnadenheim.

Sources

Fast, Gerhard. *In den Steppen Sibiriens: Anfänge der mennonitischen Ansiedlungen in den Altai-, Amur-, Omsk- und Pawlodargebieten*. Rosthern, SK: n.p., c. 1957.

Schroeder, William & Helmut T. Hiebert. *Mennonite Historical Atlas*. Winnipeg, MB: Springfield Publishers, 1996.

Toews, Johann J. “My Life Story – According to What I Remember.” Unpublished. (See “A Mennonite Folk Artist,” *Roots and Branches*, July 2017, p. 12)

Toews, John H. Interview by author.



Christmas colouring by Lydia Isaak, decorating her song book from German School, 1936. Source: MHSBC files.

The 12 Books of Christmas

The Canada Coat

The 1st Book Of
Christmas



LOUISE BERGEN PRICE

Louise Bergen Price, *The Canada Coat*. With illustrations by Jenny Bergen, cover art by Jan Martens
Published by the Mennonite Museum Society, Abbotsford, BC, 2021

Reviewed by Connie T. Braun

Louise Bergen Price's debut novel, *The Canada Coat*, is based on the true account of her mother's childhood. Set in the 1930s near the Dnieper river in Ukraine, scenes of the village and schoolhouse are scenes recognizable to families of Mennonites, recalled in their own personal accounts – the details of a modest house and possessions, a “Kroeger clock ticking on the wall, their breakfast dishes ... six plates, cups and forks.... The bowl that just held their potatoes” (7) – and in the oral stories about life under Soviet repression, collectivization and migration, as the “red broom” sweeps through the houses (61). “Don't tell anyone what we talk about at home,” her father tells her. “I know, Papa” (37).

Throughout the book, like vintage photographs of the era, the reader is treated to Jenny Bergen's illustrations.

- In Rena's home, there is a book about Canada, where Uncle Jakob and Tante Lena have gone to, tucked under the floorboards in the attic.
- They ate “ragged cabbages, wilted beets, turnips, sometimes potatoes, seldom bread” (28).
- A neighbour died of starvation, though heart attack is the doctor's explanation (61).
- Rena's parents tell her of a hidden compartment beneath the potato bin, their hope of surviving winter (64).
- In school, pages are missing in books, and a boy who reported on his father for “stealing grain,” then found dead in retribution, is regarded by the teacher as “a martyr who ... died for his country” (63).
- At the newly constructed Dneprostroi Dam, there is a village beneath the water.
- And at school, the children bring the required kopek to donate to “the starving children of America” (39).

The protagonist, Rena, about ten or eleven years old, old enough to be in school, is the age where questions about large ideas begin to form. A child, absorbing trauma, tries to understand why life is unfair, why there is evil, and may even falsely assume responsibility in order to create an explanation for the inexplicable, such as the disappearance of a father. The child wonders if it was her fault; if she did something to bring on catastrophe.

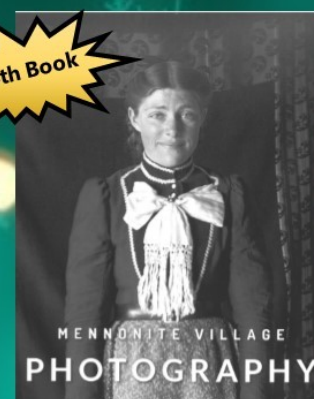
Scenes are not graphic; rather, Price has crafted evocative scenes of school, village and family. In the genre of YA historical fiction, Bergen Price has written about difficult issues with deep respect for the younger reader's ability to absorb the complexity of history and pose questions. More than historical fiction for young adults, and, in the wake of current events and disaster in Ukraine under a different dictator, the tale of Rena offers deep resonance. And while the book addresses difficult subject matter, it invites the younger generation of readers to ask questions of an older one, inspiring conversation and understanding between children, parents and grandparents. I think of classic stories such as *Heidi*. Furthermore, books for young readers should be books that an adult will want to read. This is such a book.

This book was published by the Mennonite Museum Society, a commendable project. *The Canada Coat* captures the experiences of our own parents and grandparents born under Communist repression. These are stories of extremity, endurance and faith. Given the title, and the book's conclusion, *The Canada Coat* leaves me with the impression that it is first in a series of books about Rena, and I hope it is.



1st Book

When her father's dreams to immigrate to Canada fall through, Rena and her family are trapped in Ukraine in the midst of the Holodomor; a famine that will kill millions.



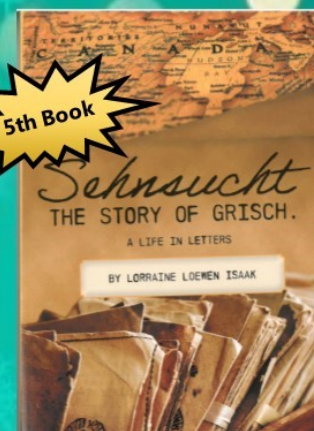
4th Book

Featured here is the work of four young Mennonite photographers from villages in southern Manitoba at the turn of the twentieth century. With the fresh audacity of youth they captured they captured a unique period in history of Mennonite life in western Canada.



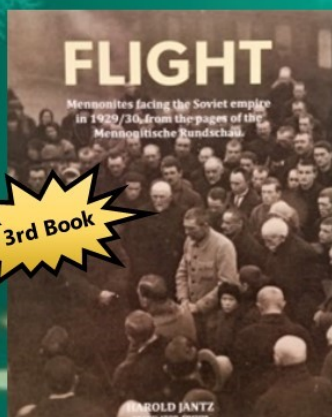
2nd Book

This meditation on the impact of human and ecological trauma explores the cost of survival for three generations of women living between empires.



5th Book

In my early years I felt sadness in my Grandpa Grisch; it seemed to cling to him... Unknown to me, family had stored close to 100 letters for close to 30 years. These letters exposed the truth of what Grisch had carried over his lifetime and confirm what I felt but did not know.



3rd Book

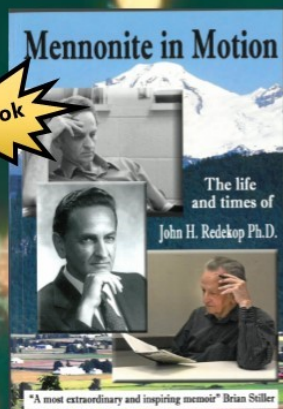
FLIGHT provides a front-row seat to what many Canadian and American Mennonites in the late 1920s learned about the experience of their spiritual kin in Soviet Russia



6th Book

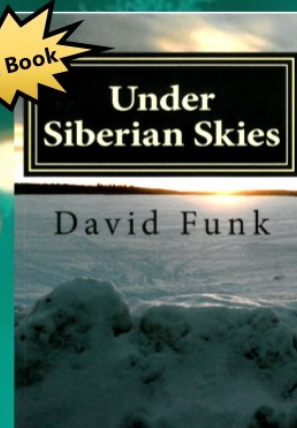
Fourteen year old Anna knows her family must get out of Russia soon. With the devastating civil war, anarchists on the loose, and food shortages, Anna knows that her only hope is to get to Canada where her friend, Johnny, and all her dreams await.

7th Book



This book tells the story of the truly fascinating and full life of Dr. John Redekop and is written in a fast moving, page turning style.

10th Book



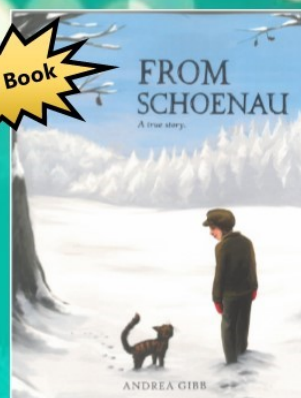
Fired from his previous teaching position because he refused to enforce oppressive communist policies in the classroom, Jacob Enns and his wife, Naomi, move their family to Alexandrovka, a Mennonite village in southeast Siberia.

8th Book



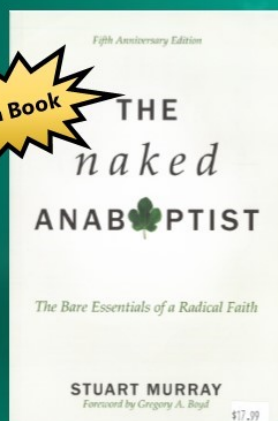
None of This Belongs to Me plots a young woman's coming of age in a time of environmental and socio-economic peril.

11th Book



Hans went searching for an adventure. And two meals a day. And a pair of real shoes. But winter has arrived and with it something dark and lonely. But Christmas is coming.

9th Book



In churches and kitchens and neighborhood centers across the world, communities of Jesus-followers are crafting a commitment to peace and a vision of radical service.

12th Book



The lectures of Paul Toews, the resident historian, provided thousands of cruise participants with the historical knowledge they needed to understand the experiences of Mennonites that had unfolded on the landscapes they were about to visit.