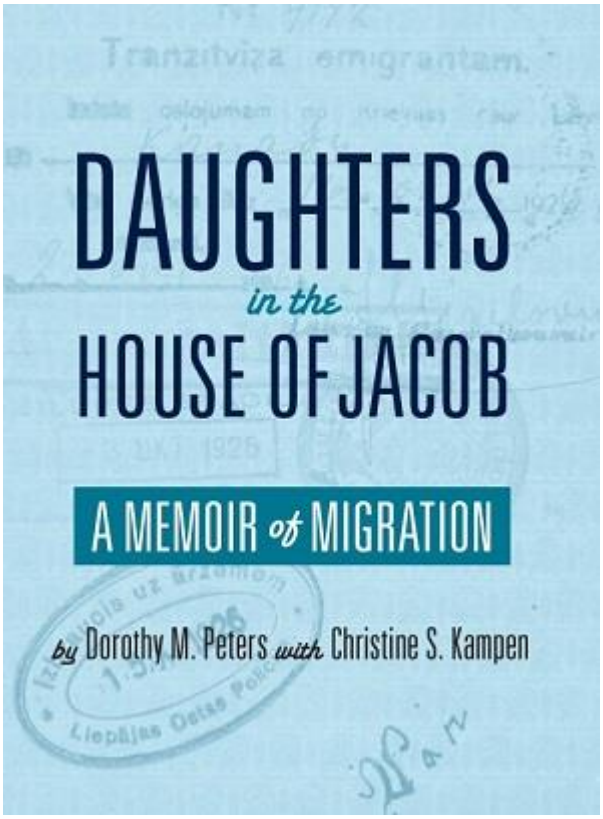
Dorothy M. Peters with Christine S. Kampen. *Daughters in the House of Jacob: A Memoir of Migration*. Winnipeg, MB & Goessel, KS: Kindred Productions, 2016. 275 pp.

Reviewed by Robert Martens



For cousins Dorothy Peters and Christine Kampen, their grandfather Jacob Doerksen was a family icon, a pastoral model. "[B]oth of us consciously carried our vocational calling as a legacy from him, even though we had never met him personally" (5). Jacob had been ill during the family's flight from the emerging Soviet Union in the 1920s, and out of that fact a family legend was born. "The story is that while emigrating from South Russia to Canada in the 1920s, the family was detained in England because 19-year-old Jacob required surgery. But [his mother] Agatha insisted that the family travel together. They would all go to Canada or they would not go to Canada, but they would stay together. She prevailed upon God, promising to dedicate her firstborn son to the ministry, if only Jacob would be healed and released to travel. It happened just as she had prayed" (2-3).

Peters and Kampen discussed writing an article on how a vocational calling can be transmitted down the generations: Kampen is a minister and Peters, a professor of biblical studies. As they researched their family history, however, they discovered than an article would be inadequate to tell the story properly. Three years later, the article had grown into a memoir – but an extraordinary memoir. The writers decided to start with their own brief biographies, then work their way back one generation at a time, culminating in the story of their great-grandparents. Along the way they encountered some major surprises, not all of them pleasant.

Honesty is a hallmark of this book, including the writers' personal stories. Peters tells of a childhood that was reasonably happy, yet marred by a theology of apocalypse and judgement that sometimes frightened her. As she grew into adulthood, she was confronted with a male-dominated church hierarchy that prohibited women in leadership roles. "Had I been born a son, I likely would have followed the calling of my father and grandfather. But I was born a daughter" (17). Then tragedy struck when her 15-year-old son was killed in a car crash. The experience shattered some of her lingering beliefs on the omnipotence of God. "In his steadfast Presence, he showed me who he was, is, and will be – not a rigid, dogmatic theological definition written in a textbook" (46). Peters' spiritual journey is a narrative of questioning, doubt, consolidation, and faith.

Unlike their Mennonite forebears, the spiritual narratives of Peters and Kampen take place in an era of assimilation and growing individualism. Kampen's parents emerged from the

hardships of the Russian Mennonite stream, but her own childhood was relatively free and unencumbered. She had early felt a longing to serve within the church. “You would make a good pastor’s wife,” her mother Betty remarked, and yet, writes Kampen, “my mother’s influence as a deacon and teacher in the church shaped me not for marriage to a pastor, but rather to be a pastor myself” (57). Kampen was to face some major obstacles on her road to a pastoral career. Male church leadership remained reluctant to allow women in authoritative roles, and Kampen’s status as a single woman was also a constraint – until she found a congregation that was accepting of a single woman pastor.

The story now moves back in time to Leonard Doerksen, Dorothy’s father. Born in 1936 in Herbert, Saskatchewan, Leonard’s life follows a more traditionalist Mennonite arc. As a young mischievous and creative boy, he was known for imitating his father Jacob’s pastoral habits: he was once found standing at the church door in order to “Sing and pray and give pennies” (81). Leonard was stunned by the early death of his father in 1953 but went on to university studies and a career as Bible school teacher and pastor in BC. “I’ve always felt very ordinary, blue-collar,” he said, “and related better to people on the fringe of church and faith” (109). This humility had a deep impact on his daughter Dorothy.

Betty, Leonard’s sister and Christine Kampen’s mother, also enjoyed a happy childhood but admitted to feeling abandoned when her parents, Jacob and Anna Doerksen, left home on mission trips for extended periods of time. She, too, was traumatized by her father’s death. After Jacob’s funeral, she was found sitting alone: “*Wie soll ich ohne Papa leben*?” (How can I live without Papa?) she said. Betty also followed in her father’s footsteps. She worked in missions programs, served as one of the first female deacons at Eben-Ezer Church in Abbotsford, and sat on the board of Columbia Bible Institute. She was a pastor, say Kampen and Peters, in all but name.

The narrative thread of the book moves back a generation once again, this time to Anna Kehler and Jacob Doerksen, grandparents to the book’s authors. The stories told here are familiar to descendants of Russian Mennonite refugees. Anna grew up in South Russia on a prosperous farm, and that prosperity set the family up as targets during the civil war that followed the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. During a raid on their village, Anna’s father was shot in the head. Jacob, born to a poor family in South Russia and a sickly boy who may have suffered heart damage from a bout with rheumatic fever, nearly starved to death in 1919 when the troops of anarchist leader Makhno rampaged through the Ukraine. Anna and Jacob eventually met in Canada and were married in 1933 in Saskatchewan.

Here a surprise confronts Kampen and Peters. Research stirred up an disquieting question: is the story of Agatha’s prayer for the sickly 19-year-old Jacob accurate? As described in the book, the answer is not altogether clear.

Jacob seemed naturally predisposed to a life as pastor and teacher. “Jacob lived his faith. He loved people,” says one witness (169). In Saskatchewan he preached at Herbert Mennonite Church and taught at the Swift Current Bible School. Clearly, Jacob was a respected Mennonite leader, and yet – here another surprise greets Peters and Kampen. Jacob Doerksen could be rigid and demanding, controlling to the extent that he even intercepted letters of his Swift Current students. The idealized image of the pastoral grandfather is somewhat tarnished. After his move to BC, Jacob was rebaptized as a Mennonite Brethren and served as pastor in the Fraser Valley. Then, in 1953, at the age of 44, he died. Serious to the end, he remarked on his sickbed, “*Dort wird nur eingehen was etwas gekostet hat*” (Only things that cost something are ultimately meaningful).

Anna Kehler Doerksen had often been Jacob's foil. She was known, when she felt her husband had crossed some line, to rebuke him with "*Aber Jacob!*" (But Jacob!) After his death, however, she became a rather overzealous parent. Perhaps the trauma of his early death, or the loss of her identity in the community as a pastor's wife, affected her behaviour. The bad as well as the good, say the authors, is passed down through the generations. Leonard eventually told his daughter Dorothy that "his own widowed mother had been fearful and controlling. And he had been like that, too. ... How sorry he was, he said with tears in his eyes, looking at me" (221).

And finally the book reaches back to the authors' great-grandparents, Agatha Krause and Jacob Franz Doerksen. Agatha grew up desperately poor in South Russia, working as a serving girl: "I was not allowed to speak to the Russian girls or to their lady," she recounted, "And I was *so einsam* (so lonely)" (227). Meanwhile Jacob Franz Doerksen had lost his wife and was looking for a woman to care for his family. One day, so the story went, he travelled to the village where Agatha was working and proposed marriage. She considered, prayed about the matter, and accepted. The pair eventually had a happy marriage, despite the hardships of emigration to Canada, poverty, and a large immigration debt to pay off. But another surprise awaited the writers of this book. Genealogical research indicated that Agatha was pregnant at the time of marriage and gave birth to a daughter, Anna, who died as an infant. The idealized family story was once again turned upside down. However, say the writers, it is still a beautiful one. The choice of Agatha as Jacob Franz's second wife "went against the wishes of his parents, who may have hoped that their son would marry a girl from a higher standing and certainly not one already pregnant! ... The wife that God had given him in the person of Agatha was and would be a character-filled woman. This was becoming a story of generous grace" (237).

Elder storytelling, write Kampen and Peters, is not always – perhaps rarely – accurate. Life narratives can be adjusted to fit a pattern, or to help deal with trauma. Nevertheless, "When what one person remembers does not agree with another account, the differences are still important. ... The 'storified' past remains revelatory, even if the stories cannot be reconciled, because they reveal what the storytellers value, whether consciously or subconsciously" (269). In this volume, Peters and Kampen have done an impressive job of respecting and knitting together their sometimes contradictory family stories.