

Peter P. Klassen. *Elisabeth: Aus dem Tagebuch eines mennonitischen Mädchens in Gran Chaco*. (Elisabeth: From the Diary of a Mennonite Woman in Gran Chaco) Asunción, Paraguay: Editora Litocolor, 2009. Published by *Verein für Geschichte und Kultur der Mennoniten in Paraguay*.

Book review by David Giesbrecht

Peter P. Klassen is an uncommonly enjoyable storyteller and published author who immigrated to Paraguay in 1929. After his professional training which included study in Switzerland and Germany, he became a teacher, and was for many years the editor of the *Mennoblatt* (a German language Paraguayan Mennonite periodical).

Klassen's novel *Elisabeth* flows with richly articulated German vocabulary. The story captures the epic experiences of a Mennonite community from its 1930 origins in the Paraguayan Chaco until just after World War II. The era is vividly recalled through the voice of Elisabeth Unruh, poignantly describing her own development and that of her village over a seventeen year span. The Unruh family represents the pilgrimage of many South American Mennonites who against all odds escaped the horrors of Soviet Russia, only to be faced with the staggering difficulty of a new beginning in the torrid Chaco jungle .

With her first tentative entry on 20 October 1932, the sixteen year old Elisabeth Unruh begins to explore the ever-changing dynamics of a tightly knit Mennonite community. There is of course the first-generation longing for that idealized Russian homeland, hauntingly enshrined in the name of the new colony, Fernheim, literally, "distant home". Through succeeding diary entries, readers are introduced not only to Elisabeth's four siblings and her parents, but also to a cast of richly drawn characters around whom community life evolves.

The prescient Elisabeth helps us experience the hope of new beginnings in a new society, patterned after the immigrants' previous Russian Mennonite village life. The first hovels soon become substantial residences. With amazing adaptability, farmers learn how to grow cotton and other tropical crops. And then there is utter dismay when promising crops are ravaged by a vast cloud of voracious grasshoppers, leaving only despair in their wake.

Through entries in her diary, readers accompany Elisabeth to interminable church services in her General Conference church, where Pastor Reimer labours mightily to shepherd his flock in this new setting. Often the spiritual tempo of this community is quickened by the earnest eschatological preaching of visiting evangelists. This is a community acutely aware of tensions between Mennonite Brethren and General Conference members, with frequent comparisons of practices between the two groups, injecting distemper into the village.

Elisabeth's diary effectively allows a variety of village voices to be heard. There is for instance her brother David, a model of piety, often expressing his dour outlook on shallow spirituality, especially among young people. By contrast, her favourite brother Jasch has become impatient with church-dominated, restrictive village life, and has left to experience the big city in Asunción. Her mother mostly languishes over the difficult present circumstances and the fate of her erring children, while Elisabeth's practical father is suspicious of zealous piety, especially the MB variety. In this community young lovers who trespass church standards face serious discipline and shunning. The beautiful Elisabeth herself agonizes on how to respond to the amorous approaches of Heinrich Friesen, who is not a "believer", but passionately in love with her.

With rich insight, *Elisabeth* describes differing Mennonite responses to the Chaco War (1932–1935) which was fought between Bolivia and Paraguay for control of the northern Gran Chaco region. Often front lines traverse through Fernheim. For young Mennonite men the drama of war becomes a welcome diversion from drab village life. Guarding young women from undisciplined troops, caring for wounded soldiers, hauling provision for the next battle are all war-related activities that reflect the travail of this community as it struggles to position itself between allegiance to a historic Mennonite peace position and the sometimes lucrative involvement in the near-by hostilities.

Distinguishing between war and peace becomes an even more pressing theme with the approach of World War II. Given that Paraguayan Mennonites had in significant measure been rescued from Soviet tyranny by Germany, the novel describes how this community formed an uncritical loyalty to Germany, and saw, in the emergence of Hitler, God's provision to defeat all that godless Communism represented in their tortured memories. Thus Elisabeth often comments on the inordinate desire among her people to emigrate to Germany after the war. Indeed, young Mennonites commonly profess their eagerness to join the Wehrmacht, if only the opportunity might arise.

Unfortunately, the author seems to wander from his original purposes in the latter part of the story. As many others do, Elisabeth eventually leaves Fernheim to find her future in Asunción. Bizarrely, in the big city she finds employment with prominent German nationalists. Her new employers are so impressed with her trustworthy demeanour that they arrange for her to work for one of Hitler's agents in Buenos Aires, where against her better judgement, she is to inform her handlers when ships leave the harbour, only to be torpedoed by U-boats lying in wait off shore.

As the war ends Elisabeth is informed that her mother has died. Dutifully, she returns to Fernheim to look after her now aged father. However, the taste of independence has come with a heavy price. To rid her troubled conscience of its guilt, she publically confesses her sins in the Fernheim Mennonite church, and re-enters village life. However, she cannot escape the yearning for liberation, the result of her years away from the controls she once again reluctantly embraces.

For readers who can manage German, this novel is highly commended.