Lives Coming Full Circle in a New Book

Maureen S. Klassen, *It Happened in Moscow. A Memoir of Discovery* (Winnipeg, MB, Goessel, KS: Kindred Productions, 2013). Paperback, 211 pages, including numerous black and white photographs. Book review by Harry Loewen

After Herbert and Maureen Klassen published the biography of their father, Cornelius C. Klassen (1894-1954), *Ambassador To His People. C. F. Klassen and the Russian Mennonite Refugees* (1990), it appeared that most of what CF had been and done was generally known to Mennonites everywhere. The Mennonite world knew that CF, as he was generally called, was the man who through his tireless work enabled thousands of Mennonite refugees to leave the Soviet Union in the 1920s and particularly after the Second World War to find safety and new homes in North and South America. When CF suddenly died in 1954 in Germany at the age of 59, his life and contributions were remembered and celebrated among Mennonites throughout Germany, Canada, the United States, and South America. Mennonite leaders, many of whom had been CF's co-workers, such as Pastor Otto Schowalter and Benjamin H. Unruh in Germany, Harold S. Bender in Goshen, Indiana, J.J. Thiessen, David Toews, B. B. Janz, and Frank Epp in Canada, among many others, spoke to large audiences of the invaluable services CF had rendered to his co-religionists in need throughout the world (*Ambassador* 254-58). Among his fellow workers, including Peter F. Froese in Moscow and Peter and Elfrieda Dyck in Europe and South America, CF had been an inspiration for their own relief work.

A tall and imposing figure wherever he appeared, some Mennonites saw CF as vain and demanding, especially among those immigrants who were constantly reminded by him to pay off their *Reiseschuld* (travel debt) to the Canadian Pacific Railway as soon as possible. But there were also many others, perhaps the majority, who regarded him as a humble and self-sacrificing servant of his people, one who almost approached sainthood. Describing his work as "Ich suche meine Brüder" ("I'm in search of my brothers"), and assuring the refugees that God is able and can help, "Gott kann" ("God can") became mottos for CF's life, courage and faith.

Yet the generally open, transparent and public life and work of CF was not all there was to this man, as Maureen Klassen's new memoir, *It Happened in Moscow of memoir of discovery,* shows. Over his private life in Moscow there had been unsavory rumors among many Mennonites, but few details were known. It was known, for example, that CF's marriage in Moscow to a divorced Lutheran woman from Riga, Latvia, did not sit well with some Mennonites, but the details of CF's relationship and marriage to Mary Martha Brieger, and especially the identity and character of Mary's first husband in Moscow, were not known. CF and Mary never talked about this part of their early lives, neither to their children nor to their relatives. In school in Canada, Mary's teenaged son Harold was teased by his fellow students that he was not a real son of CF. Then as late as 1939, on Harold's sixteenth birthday, CF and Mary told Harold that CF was not his biological father.

In the *Ambassador to His People*, Jakob J. Reimer, Mary's first husband, does not come off well; he is not even given a name. We are just told that when Mary "was in St. Petersburg during the chaotic days of the Revolution… she met and fell in love with a Mennonite music student, who had come up to the big city from the Crimea…. [When] she visited his family and the Mennonite community in the Crimea she was so impressed with the sincerity and piety of these

people that she [a Lutheran] resolved to become one of them. They were married soon afterward, but she found out to her great regret that under his charm and behind his musical talent was a weakness of character that, after they had moved to Moscow, manifested itself in an instability that made him an unreliable provider and, finally, an unfaithful husband. It was not long after their first child was born that it became evident that he was seeing other women, one of whom, a Russian girl, was also carrying his child. It was at this point that he disappeared out of her life" (74).

It should be remembered that while Mennonites, Lutherans and other religious groups in the early Soviet period still believed in the sanctity of marriage, the Communists saw commitment and fidelity in marriage as an outdated bourgeois practice that needed to be replaced by complete freedom in all human relationships. It is not known how Jakob Reimer was affected in that heady revolutionary period in St. Petersburg and Moscow with regard to love and marriage. Mary, on the other hand, still saw marriage as a permanent commitment, and she and CF knew that her divorce and remarriage were not acceptable to the religious communities to which they belonged. CF, in fact, withdrew from the Mennonite Brethren church before they got married, but later in Canada, when Mary was baptized in the MB church, CF also was readmitted into the MB fellowship.

The discovery about Jakob Reimer and his relationship to the Klassens began in 1993 when Herb and Maureen Klassen, working on a Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) assignment in Moscow, received an unexpected telephone call. The call was from a woman, Erika Reimer Gurieva, a daughter of Jakob Reimer from his second marriage to Vera Protopopova. From her father Erika knew that she had a brother, named Harold, who lived in Canada with the C. F. Klassen family. Herb and Maureen Klassen then arranged for Erika to visit them in their Moscow apartment. It was through Erika that the Klassens learned some details about what happened in Moscow when CF, Mary and Jakob Reimer lived there in the 1920s. Erika brought a photo album with her to show pictures, including one of her father being together with Mary, one of holding little Harold in his arms, and some photos of gatherings of the Reimer family. As she told the Klassens what she knew about her father and Mary, the hitherto empty spaces about the early lives of CF and Mary began to fill in. For Herb and Maureen, Erica's story was indeed a discovery. In time Erica was able to meet her brother Harold, first in Moscow and then on her later visit in Canada.

Perhaps the most interesting part of Jakob Reimer's life and relationship to the Klassens came from what was revealed during his KGB interrogation in 1937. Erika in her dogged persistence was able to get access to the KGB files in Moscow, even acquiring a transcript of the questions and answers in the interrogation. The questions of the police and Jakob Reimer's answers reveal, among other things, what the real relationship between Reimer and CF had been in Moscow, a relationship that was anything but strained because of Mary, who now found herself caught between the two men. In fact, the relationship between the two men and Mary was quite cordial (*It Happened* 153-59). And Reimer certainly appears a much better man then what was said about him in *Ambassador,* and Klassen regrets for the way Reimer was characterized in the earlier book.

The year 1937, as is well known, was the height of trials, exiles and executions of assumed enemies of the Soviet state. Many people who were considered to be subversives and spies, including *kulaks* (land or property owners), citizens who corresponded with foreign relatives, professionals accused of sabotaging state property, and just ordinary citizens perceived to be disloyal to the Communist party – all such persons were deemed dangerous to the Soviet state.

Many of them were arrested, often in the dead of the night, imprisoned, and on trumpet up charges tried and usually found guilty. While these "enemies" of the Soviet state were found among all nationalities, Soviet Germans, including Mennonites, were especially targeted because they were generally well to do, religious, and anti-Communist (Peter Letkemann, "Mennonite Victims of the 'Great Terror,' 1936-1938," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 16 (1998).

The Menno Centrum in Moscow, as it was called, administered relief and negotiated with Soviet officials in the hope that the government would allow Mennonites to retain their traditional privileges, including their religious practices and ownership of land. Some Mennonites believed at first that the political situation would in time change for the better. Especially during the New Economic Policy (NEP) between 1921 and 1928, their hope seemed justified. Both Peter Froese and CF, the two leaders of the Centrum, were among the optimists in this regard, and many others, including Jakob Reimer, also wanted to give the new regime a chance for betterment. But by 1928, CF and other Mennonite leaders, including B. B. Janz in Ukraine, realized that things would get only worse and that emigration was the only solution. Thus the C.F. Klassen family, reluctantly, immigrated in that year to Canada, while many of those who stayed behind, including Peter Froese and Jakob Reimer, faced arrest, trial and often death.

Chapter 10, "A KGB Revelation in Moscow," deals with what Erika had discovered about her father's arrest, interrogation, his connection with CF, and his condemnation to death (150-159). In the year 2000, Erika sent the Klassens in Canada a twelve-page text of transcript she had acquired. The text included questions and answers in the interrogation and the reasons for Jakob Reimer's death sentence. The transcript also reveals much about Jakob Reimer's character, some of his religious views, and especially his relationship to CF.

Asked why he had not served in the Red Army, Reimer said he did not want to fight as a soldier, possibly an allusion, as Klassen suggests, to his Mennonite position on nonresistance, or non-violence. Some questions dealt with Reimer's connection to CF and other possible contacts in the West. Reimer did not deny knowing and corresponding with CF, but insisted that such contacts were not subversive but merely expressions of friendship, and because, after all, his son, now fourteen years of age, was living with the Klassens in Canada. Being a musician, Reimer was asked about his playing "fascist anthems on the piano," which he flatly denied, saying, "I never played fascist anthems. I only played English and German hymns" (155). In addition, two "witnesses", who had worked with Reimer in Tashkent, were brought in to portray him as a negligent engineer and saboteur of state-owned machinery, which also was a crime against the state. These two men in later years admitted that they had lied during Reimer's trial, and that Reimer, instead, had been an upright man and an efficient worker.

Klassen observes, "It is clear from this line of questioning… that they were trying to construct a case of espionage and treason against Reimer, a case that would give them cause to condemn him to the firing squad" (154). On December 23, 1937, Reimer was found guilty as charged, and on December 29 of that year he was shot to death in Moscow (157).

The fate of Jakob Reimer was similar to that of thousands of other Mennonite and non-Mennonite victims of Stalin's paranoia and cruelty during the mid-1930s, as the book shows. Even the format of Reimer's interrogation is similar to many other such cases. For Mennonites living in the Soviet Union at the time, the description of Reimer's fate is nothing new. As early as 1949 and 1954, A. A. Toews, in his two volumes of *Mennonitische Märtyrer,* told many stories of what and how the many Mennonite victims suffered. Since the Soviet archives were opened and made accessible after the collapse of the regime to the children of the condemned

men and women, the truth of these stories have been confirmed. The unjustly condemned persons have now been declared innocent and "rehabilitated." Perhaps there is not much comfort in that now!

Klassen's memoir is not suggesting that Jakob Reimer was altogether innocent and that he did not make mistakes, especially with regard to his relationship to Mary. Klassen's story hints at possible motives or reasons why he left Mary for another woman. Reimer emerges as one who was caught in the cross currents of the politics, ideology, and moral values of the Revolution, although it is not known to what extent he was influenced by them. With his career transfer to Tashkent, Uzbekistan, which separated him effectively from his first wife and child, his break with Mary was complete. But, according to Erica, her father always was and remained a "good man" (40). He continued to love his son Harold, who, he knew, lived with the Klassens in Canada, and there was no doubt, according to Erika, that he loved his new family as well. It is also interesting to read that he valued and maintained his friendship with CF, and he apparently remained true to some of his Mennonite beliefs and values, such as nonresistance.

In reading Erica's interesting story about her father, it is easy to forget that the book is as much about Mary, if not more, as it is about Jakob Reimer (Chapter 2). Klassen reflects on the difficulties Mary's divorce and remarriage must have had on Mary. While the book does not spell out these difficulties, there are hints that this chapter in Mary's background was a reason for her and CF not wanting to talk about it. As much as this part may have weighed heavily on Mary, it did not hinder her from being the woman in CF's life without whom his important public service was unthinkable. Maureen Klassen, who also came to the Mennonite community from a non-Mennonite background, can understand Mary very well. And she discovers in her, as she learns to know her gradually, that she was not only a loving wife, a good mother to her children, and a woman in her own right, but also an efficient manager of the Klassen household. For example, she was in complete charge of all material and economic matters, including taking care of all real-estate details during the Klassens' several moves in Canada. CF's long absences during his many travels abroad made Mary's being in charge necessary, and she did it without ever complaining. In fact, her tact, tenacity, sense of duty, and her love for CF and the children, never seemed to leave this heroic woman. Many readers will see her as the real hero in this story.

In addition to telling the interesting stories of the characters in this memoir, Klassen weaves into their lives many aspects of the history and culture of Russia, reflecting on their politics and ideologies. It is evident that Klassen loves Russia's art, literature, music and culture. Moreover, as a Christian, she also shows an evangelical concern for the Russian people, believing that the collapse of the Soviet Union may give religion in that country a new chance. In the book's Epilogue, Klassen and her husband attend a performance of Handel's "Messiah" in the Kremlin. Klassen sees the performance of the great Christian oratorio in the Kremlin as a sign of a new beginning in Russia. She writes, "I recall that as we made our way back to our apartment from that momentous evening… I had a deep sense that things were going to be different in this beloved land of Russia from now on" (207).

In conclusion, it might be mentioned that the memoir may be chatty and somewhat repetitive at times, but that is Klassen's writing style, and it works well for her in this book. A historian will no doubt have questions about some of the memoir's reported facts, questions about whether it had really happened as described. Where the facts are scanty or not known, especially with regard to the feelings and motives of Jakob and Mary, Klassen uses phrases such as "would have," "may have," "must have felt," "would have had," and the like (69-74). But then also in strictly historical works such phrases are not uncommon.

Overall, Maureen Klassen has written an interesting, important and unique memoir. It brings the story of CF and Mary, both important and beloved Mennonite leaders, to its proper conclusion in that it adds the story of Jakob Reimer and how it fits into their lives and this narrative. This is a fine human-interest story, well researched and written. The book may well become a bestseller in Mennonite circles.

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