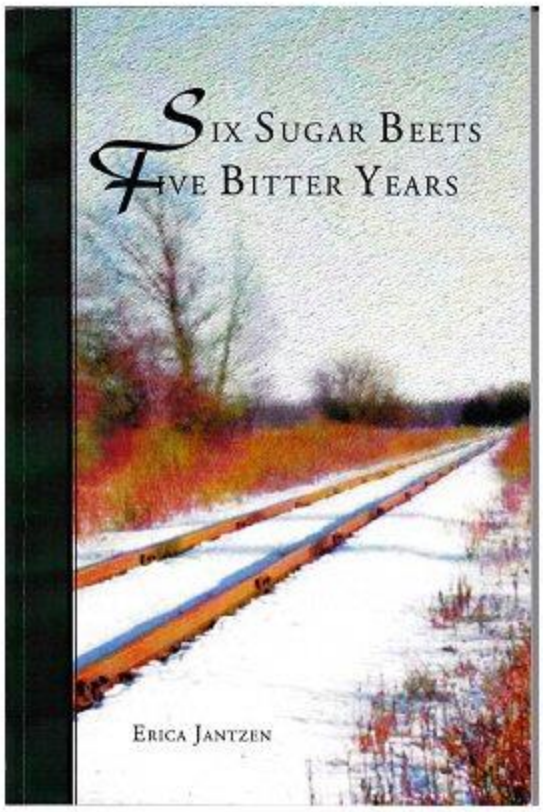
Erica Jantzen. *Six Sugar Beets, Five Bitter Years*. Kitchener, Pandora Press: 2003. 186 pp.

Book review by Robert Martens



While Erica Jantzen was working with MCC in Germany between 1990 and 1993, she developed a relationship with Anna Kroeker, the sister of her stepmother. The stories Anna told her were astonishing. "What an amazing account of survival and faith! It had to be written down. ... So I set about reconstructing a few years of her life" (7). Anna Kroeker's story, though, was so strange that Jantzen felt she must tell it in the form of a novel. "To help the reader understand the bizarre events of the Stalinist years, I took the liberty to add some details. I used direct speech. Would Tante Anna Kroeker have said it in exactly those words? Probably not. Therefore I decided to give the heroine of my story the name Mia (Maria) Peters, but it remains the story of Anna Kroeker (1902-1999), a testimony of God keeping his own" (7). "Tante Anna" eventually was able to move to Germany with her family but not before experiencing the nightmare of the Stalinist labour camps which literally drove many insane. Jantzen's novel, *Six Sugar Beets, Five Bitter Years*, tells that haunting story.

The novel opens and closes in Kyrgyzstan, named the Kirgizian Soviet Socialist Republic during the years of the Soviet empire. An independent country since 1991, Kyrgyzstan is nestled in Central Asia between Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and China; its people are mostly Muslim. German-speaking people have also lived – and continue to live – in Kyrgyzstan, however, and among them are Mennonites. Author Erica Jantzen's parents were born in its capital city, Bishkek, and Jantzen herself taught English there in 1999.

The Mennonite story in Kyrgyzstan is not well-known. German-speaking Mennonites and Baptists first arrived there in the late nineteenth century and established several farming villages, including one called Bergtal – a customary Mennonite name. With the establishment of the Soviet state, Bergtal was renamed Rotfront (Red Front) in 1927 and all religious observances were banned by the Communist authorities. Years of discrimination and hardship followed for Mennonites living in the area. More Mennonite settlements appeared in

Mennonites in Kyrgystan

Kyrgyzstan during and after the Second World War, when Stalin had German-speaking citizens living in the western Soviet Union forcibly exiled eastward, away from the war front. Another wave of "German Russians," attracted by the warm climate, settled in Kyrgyzstan after being released from the Gulag – the Soviet labour camps – in 1955 and over the next few years.

By 1987, four "Old Church" Mennonite congregations were active in villages near Bishkek, and a Mennonite Brethren church was located in a suburb of the capital. These congregations were ably led by Mennonite elders from other areas of the nation, including Tokmak. One such elder (*Ältester*), Hans Penner, translated the Mennonite confession of faith from German into Russian. High German, however, was still being used in church services, and Low German in Mennonite homes. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, church members regained the freedom to practise their faith openly. Rotfront once again became Bergtal and Mennonites live there to this day, conducting themselves according to strict conservative principles and rejecting alcohol, television and dancing. European Germans seem fascinated by the remnant still living in Central Asia; a movie, *Milch und Honig aus Rotfront* (Milk and Honey from Rotfront), was made in 1995. Most Mennonites, however, have left Central Asia and have moved to Germany and beyond.

At the beginning of Erica Jantzen's novel, the protagonist, a single mother named Mia Peters, is working in the sugar beet fields of a Soviet commune. She makes the terrible error of picking up six sugar beets lost in the mud, intending to help out a sick friend feed her family. Mia is betrayed by the village informant and is summoned before a kangaroo court on charges of state theft. Those who sit in judgement are portrayed in the novel as utterly vicious and incompetent, almost as cartoon figures, but the reality is that the portrayal is likely accurate. Mia, who has a "big mouth" and independent spirit, can't help but defend herself with a righteous rage, and the consequences are tragic: she is sentenced to six years in prison camp, one year per sugar beet. She is in a state of despair in a dark holding cell when she experiences the first of several divine visions: "Suddenly, although her eyes are shut tight, she is aware of a blaze of light around her, as bright as if a thousand searchlights have been turned on. The light blinds her, yet feels warm and comforting. She falls into a heap on the dirty rags in her cell. Slowly the warmth embraces and fills her. She hears a voice, gentle and reassuring, 'Mia, I love your children more than you do'" (37). Later she wonders if the vision was "wishful thinking": no, she decides, "He loves my children more than I do. I have his promise" (43).

Then her years of trial begin. Along with other political prisoners, Mia is transported first by truck and then train cattle car to the forced-labour forestry camps of Siberia. Some die along the way and many more in the Siberian wilderness. "Sometimes she wondered which was harder to bear – the hardship or the monotony of their existence" (67). A fellow prisoner, Yekaterina, driven mad by suffering, commits suicide. At her graveside, Mia experiences another vision: "She had expected to feel an enormous sadness standing at Yekaterina's gravesite. Instead, she was overwhelmed by the beauty of the light and the whiteness around her" (73).

When Stalin dies in 1953, conditions in the Gulag ease in some measure, but Mia falls desperately ill after working in brutal conditions in a coal mine. Eventually, due to her frail health, Mia is given work as a domestic and soon falls in love with the children of her "adopted family." After she has endured five years of state labour, amnesty is granted to prisoners over a certain age, and Mia is among them. The struggle is not quite over, however: her release is initially denied by a sadistic administrator and Mia, walking the train tracks, overwhelmingly feels that she wants her life to end. Another vision of divine intervention saves her from suicide.

With the strength of that vision filling her soul, she confronts the administrator once again; nervously glancing over her shoulder at seemingly empty space, he grants her release.

Many lost their hope and their faith in the prison camps of the Soviet empire. Mia Peters/Anna Kroeker refused to accede to the bottomless cruelty of the regime. Near the end of the novel, Mia breaks down in tears when, on her journey home, she learns she has boarded the wrong train. A friend asks if she feels God has abandoned her. "I forgot to think about God," Mia replies. "I worried" (175).

Additional sources

Klippenstein, Lawrence. "Kyrgyzstan." *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. 1990. www.gameo.org
"Rot-front." n/a. *Wikipedia*. 2014. www.en.wikipedia.org