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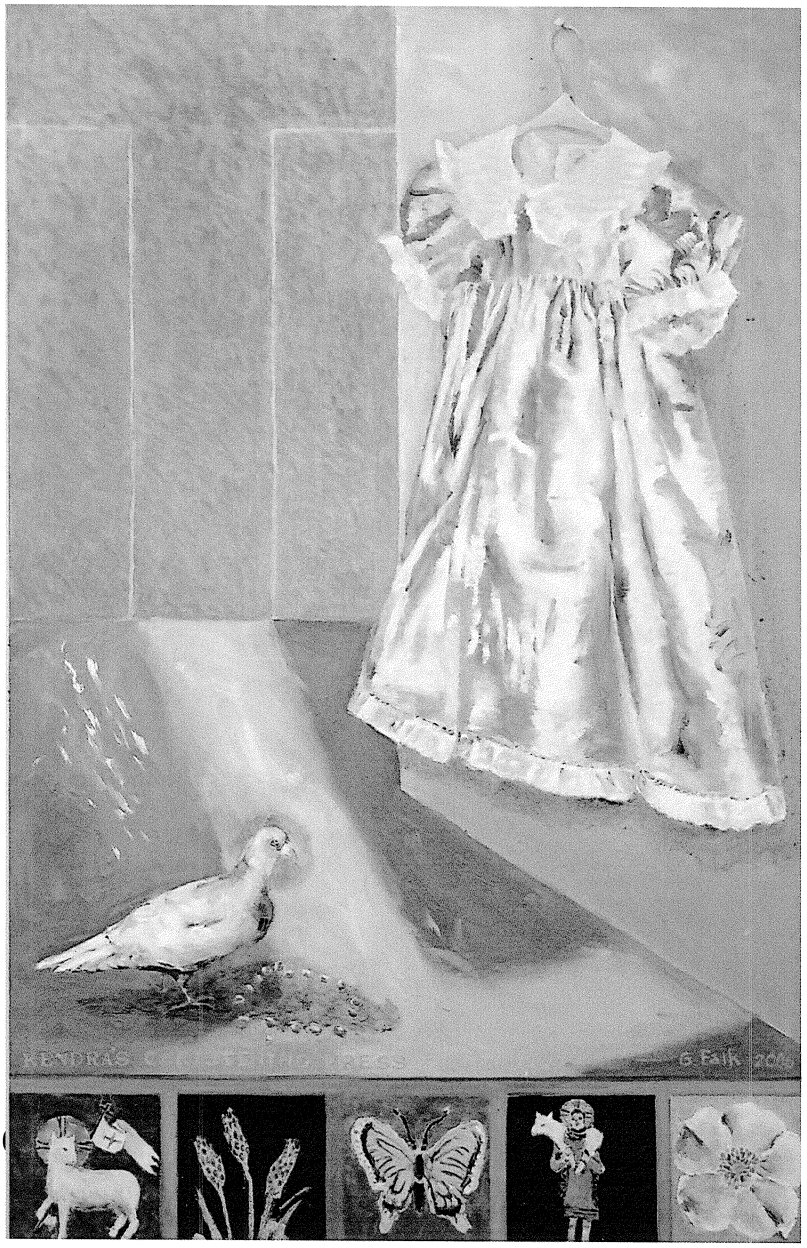
Roots and Branches

Periodical of the Mennonite Historical Society of BC

"What we have heard and known
we will tell the next generation."
Psalm 78



Gathie Falk, *Kendra's Christening Dress*, Painting, 2006.

Editorial

by Maryann Tjart Jantzen

What an amazing difference fifty years makes! This issue of *Roots and Branches* commemorates the fifty-year anniversary of the publication of *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, Rudy Wiebe's first novel. Once widely viewed within Russian-Mennonite circles as subversive and threatening to Mennonite continuity, costing Wiebe his job as editor of the *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, the novel is now taught in literature classes at Mennonite institutions and lauded as prophetic in its challenge of legalistic adherence to tradition.

This shift in perspective infers that surely we've learned from the lessons of the past to pay attention to the often prophetic perspectives of the creative individuals in our communities. Surely we Mennonites no longer fit the profile Jesus speaks of when he declared that a prophet is without honour in his own hometown. But in what ways have we really changed? What are our current attitudes to the literary and visual artists in our midst, especially those who have the ability to help us see differently, to enlarge our "language of observation," as Lois Klassen's article asserts about visual artist Gathie Falk?

Unfortunately, while separatist suspicion of the unusual and disturbing is no longer the prime Mennonite mode of operation, what seems to have sometimes replaced it is not attentiveness to the sometimes quirky, but significant expressions of literary and visual artists but rather apathy and an unthinking acceptance of mediocrity, where any work labelled as Christian and featured in a Christian bookstore is lauded, even if it is trite or superficial.

We Mennonites have done well at embracing a diversity of musical genres, bringing into our churches and homes musical expressions of lament and joy, praise and sorrow, that give us a fuller understanding of both the larger human experience and our particular Mennonite identity. Let us also pay careful attention to the literary and visual artists in our midst, an increasing number of whom have impressive bodies of work that have been recognized on the national stage as exceptional and enduring. Artists like Rudy Wiebe and Gathie Falk, both Order of Canada recipients, have much to teach us about viewing the world through attentive eyes, of digging below apathy and unawareness to see anew the full array of life in all its beauty and horror, truth and deception. Let's pay attention to the Mennonite artists in our midst and allow them to stretch our horizons.

Letters to the Editor

Dear editorial staff,

Congratulations are in order for your courage in broadening the nature of your articles. We are all familiar with the horror stories of unchallenged communism. But it is important for everyone to know some stories of injustice that led up to the anger and abuse and slaughter that our Menno families suffered in the USSR. The majoritv of my family relatives had insane and terrible endings; but my siblings and I were lucky (Our father had experienced plebian rage early enough so that he would not let his children grow up in the Soviet Union. He managed a 1925 family exit to Saskatchewan). There are, however, many untold stories that people should be aware of, if we are to understand our own history a little more fully.

An example follows: My own grandfather, David G. Dirksen, Elder of the M.B. Church, had his home invaded by raiders (bandits? terrorists? reds? democratic socialists?) while he and his daughter (my mother) stood and watched the ransacking. At one point the youngest raider asked grandfather David, "How many servants do you employ?" '"Eight," David replied, "More during the harvest time."

Bloodsucker!" the raider declared. He struck David's chest. "I should shoot you now!" David stood silent and as impassive as Father Brebeuf in his last hour. As the raiders left, David looked after them thoughtfully. "If they only knew how I agree with them." "What!?" my mother cried in shock. "I don't agree with their methods and their guns, but I've never thought it was right for us to ride on rubber-tired buggies with springs while the poor people walk blistered and barefooted" (small wonder that his Canadian grandsons were considered 'leftist').

Edgar G Reimer
North Vancouver

Letters to the editor are welcome, subject to editing for length and appropriateness.

Rudy Wiebe and the *MB Herald*

by Robert Martens

When the first issue of the *Mennonite Brethren Herald* appeared on January 19, 1962, no one expected the bitter controversy that would ensue. At the time, an English language denominational magazine seemed simply to be an appropriate response to the gradual loss of the German language among conference members. Canadian Mennonite Brethren (MB) leaders were deeply concerned that young people were rapidly assimilating into mainstream Canadian society and abandoning the German language of their ethnic tradition. While some leaders resisted the trend, forming the Committee for the Preservation of German Language in 1950, the more discerning among them realized that English would be the only alternative to communicate the message of the church to succeeding generations. Henry F. Klassen, who was manager of Christian Press in Winnipeg, along with prominent MB leaders such as A. H. Unruh, John Baerg, and Frank Peters, began publishing papers with English content, despite very limited financial aid from the Canadian MB Conference. The high degree of public interest in these projects was immediately evident; clearly, Mennonites were quickly anglicizing.

Plans for a General Conference MB paper went ahead. The option of cooperating with American MBs was soon rejected, due to the belief that only a Canadian owned and edited paper would safeguard national interests and points of view. Consequently, Christian Press was purchased by the Conference in order to keep expenses to a minimum, and the *Mennonite Observer* and *Konferenz-Jugendblatt* (Conference Youth Paper) were discontinued to make way for the *Mennonite Brethren Herald*. The first editor hired was an energetic and talented young teacher, Rudy Wiebe.

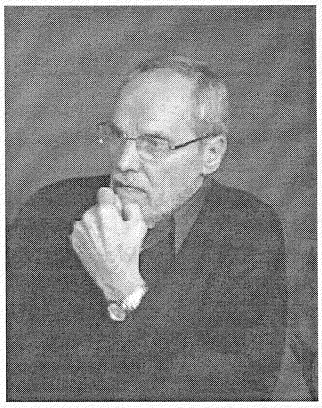
Wiebe was born in 1934 on his family's farm in northern Saskatchewan, near the tiny Mennonite community of Fairholme. During his childhood Wiebe developed a keen interest in literature, reading every book in his school's modest library. In 1947 his family moved to Coaldale, Alberta, and by 1956 Wiebe had earned a master's degree in creative writing at the University of Alberta. Later he studied at the University of Tübingen, where he enjoyed the company of Tena Isaak from British Columbia; the couple were married in 1958. Wiebe went on to achieve a bachelor's degree in Theology from MB Bible College (MBBC). He taught at MBBC as well as at Goshen College in Indiana, but spent most of his professional career at the University of Alberta, teaching creative writing there from 1967 until his retirement in 1992.

Wiebe eventually became one of Canada's preeminent writers, publishing novels exploring Mennonite his-

UPCOMING EVENTS

Annual Fund-raising Banquet 2012
Contact the MHSBC office for tickets

Rudy Wiebe
October 13, at 6pm.
The 50th Anniversary of the Publication of *Peace Shall Destroy Many*
at Emmanuel Mennonite Church, 3471 Clearbrook Road, Abbotsford, B.C.



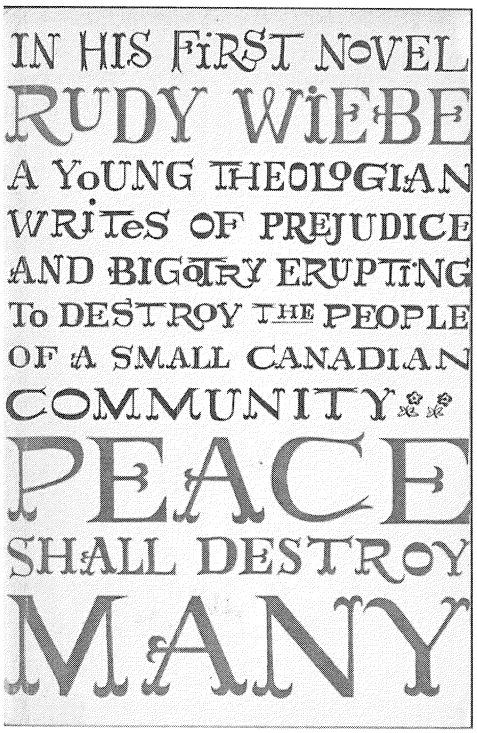
My parents, with their five children, arrived in Didsbury, Alberta, as penniless refugees from the Soviet Union in March 1930, and they could not dream that a child of theirs would ever become a writer, published and read in many parts of the world. (Rudy Wiebe)

Genealogy Workshop 2012
November 17, time and speakers TBA.

New GRANDMA database 7.0 CDs should be available at the archives by the end of September. Anyone wishing to pre-order a copy can contact or email the MHSBC office at archives@mhsbc.com. Price will be $30.00 plus shipping.

tory and First Nations history. In addition, Wiebe has published works of nonfiction such as *Stolen Life: The Journey of a Cree Woman,* written in collaboration with Yvonne Johnson, and the memoir *Of This Earth.* It was *Peace Shall Destroy Many,* however, his first novel, that rocked the Canadian Mennonite world.

In 1961, Rudy Wiebe was 26 years old and teaching high school English in Selkirk, Manitoba. By December he was able to resign from his teaching job to accept the invitation to be editor – and, at first, the sole staff member – of the *MB Herald.* J. H. Quiring provided a mission statement in the first issue: "It will strive to educate and edify; to inform and to inspire; to foster love and loyalty for Christ and for His Church; to broaden our vision and correct or confirm our views; to credit our virtues and criticize our vices." "Obviously," Wiebe now reflects, this mandate was "a very tall order" (*mbconf.ca*). The workload was almost overwhelming: "I don't remember a holiday," notes Wiebe (*mbconf.ca*). Despite these challenges, during his 73 issue run, Wiebe was in love with his new job and with the staff at Christian Press print shop. Soon, however, his creatively provocative editing and writing landed him in trouble with his readers, especially with the publications committee.



The committee communicated, in German, that the content of the *Herald* had become overly negative; that the mailbox had become a "dumping ground" for the disgruntled; and that "the editor had not consulted with enough *reiferen Brüdern* – more mature (literally 'ripe') brothers" (*mbconf.ca*). Wiebe changed his style to accommodate these concerns, and by July 1962, MB delegates observed that "A distinct change in tone ... where it had been rather piercing and critical near the beginning, a saner and more positive voice was now being heard" (mbconf.ca). And then, in October of 1962, *Peace Shall Destroy Many* was published. Not long after, Wiebe was compelled to leave his job at the *Herald.* The following year, Rudy and Tena Wiebe left for Goshen College.

At his first interview with the publications committee, Wiebe had revealed that he was working on a new novel, and offered the committee his manuscript to read. Everyone declined. *Peace Shall Destroy Many* began as Wiebe's MA thesis in creative writing. At first, he had intended to focus on Shakespeare and war – "like a good Mennonite, you know," he jokes (oldmbherald.com) – but his professor disagreed, advising him that he should write about what he knew, adding that "You may be the only person who can write about Mennonites" (*oldmbherald.com*).

The response to *Peace Shall Destroy Many* was generally positive among the Canadian reading public, but frequently hostile among Mennonite readers, though some were supportive. A church leader wrote that the novel was like "washing dirty laundry in the front yard of a neighbour" (*oldmbherald.com*). Wiebe was deeply hurt. In his final issue of the *Herald,* he wrote, "There are in our brotherhood those who do not believe that frankness and openness is the way things should, or even can, be fruitfully discussed" (*GAMEO*). Over the next years, Wiebe's books were blacklisted by some Mennonite communities, and he was harshly snubbed by the community of Coaldale. "Oh, words have power, power beyond what I imagined in three years of wrestling with them," he says. His first novel became for him "both an exaltation and a trauma; it certainly changed the direction of the rest of my life" (*CM*).

Rudy Wiebe remains critical of aspects of his Mennonite ethnic heritage, reflecting that "Mennonites tended to always view their neighbours – whether in the Ukraine, Paraguay or the western Canadian Prairies – as the 'other'" (*CM*). On the other hand, Wiebe seems to have become the "grand old man" of Canadian Mennonite literature. His memoir *Of This Earth: A Mennonite Boyhood in the Boreal Forest* describes a relatively happy childhood in a tiny and insular Mennonite community. And in retrospect he is now more forgiving of the early detractors of his first novel. Many leaders, he says, "couldn't read English very well – they couldn't understand the nuances. In fiction, there is more going on than the surface words" (*mbherald.com*). Wiebe adds that, as he did in *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, writers must embrace the negative, as well as the positive, in their

subject matter: "A lot of life isn't pretty. We struggle through it, and we struggle on ... Sometimes you have a damaged life, but God gives grace. You try to help others, even if you can't help yourself" (*mbherald.com*).

Wiebe, a long-time member of an MB church in Edmonton, still adheres strongly to traditional Mennonite teachings on peace, stating, "'Our country is at war.' I hate that language because then you think that all the normal rules of living are out the window. It allows us to kill people. Christians of all people should understand this – it's [not a matter of] save yourself, but care for the community" (*oldmbherald.com*). He also believes that his Mennonite heritage is imprinted in his heart. When he was semiconscious after cancer surgery, his wife heard him humming an old hymn his parents had taught him. "Something like that," he says, "is almost instinctive, profoundly embedded in our souls" (*mbherald.com*). And as a Christian writer, Wiebe perceives himself as a unique voice in Canada. Most writers, he remarks, have rejected their faith: "I've never grown beyond it. The older I get, it makes me respond in the deepest way to the problems I experience in life. I do respond deeply through a New Testament way of looking at the world and I can't get rid of it – I don't want to. I'd be silly to deny Jesus' teaching. It's the most important way to understand what the world is about" (*oldmbherald.com*).

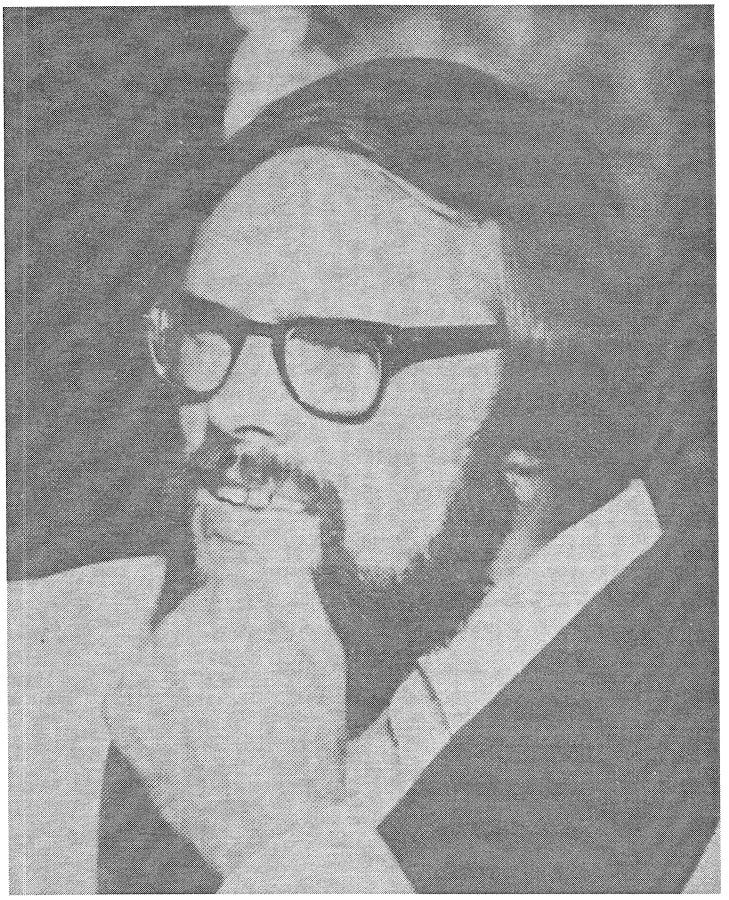
Benner, Dick. "Listen to our prophets." *Canadian Mennonite* 2. Vol. 6 No. 2 (23 Jan. 2010): *GAMEO* (Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online).

Longhurst, John. "Rudy Wiebe reflects on life, faith, and writing." *mbherald.com* MCC News Release, July 19, 2002.

"Award winning author Rudy Wiebe talks about peace." *oldmbherald.com.*

McKay, J. "English-Canadian Writers: Rudy Wiebe. " http://canadian-writers.athabascau.ca Wiebe, Rudy.

"Re:View: The First 18 months." *mbconf.ca*



From *Where is the Voice Coming From?,* 1974 collection of stories. Photographer: Orlando Martens.

Rudy Wiebe is best known for his novels set in the Canadian prairies [often featuring Mennonites] and his representations of First Nations people. He was awarded the Governor General's Award for Fiction twice, for *The Temptations of Big Bear* (1973) and *A Discovery of Strangers* (1994) and won the Charles Taylor Prize for *Of This Earth: a Mennonite Boyhood in the Boreal Forest* (2006).

Two major influences on Wiebe's writing are his religious beliefs and his experience of growing up as a Westerner. Wiebe believes that a person's place of birth is often more important than blood ancestry, claiming that where one is born is what influences one's life while blood ancestry is one's heritage and does not wholly make up who someone is or will be.

In addition to fiction Wiebe has written works of non-fiction and has released a collection of short stories. He has also written television scripts and done editorial work. His writing style is sometimes described as difficult and experimental and his work often aims to promote religious unity. He has been criticized for his use of syntax and rhythm, and his work is often described as challenging but always a rewarding reading experience. He is also known for being one of the only white Canadian writers to give a literary voice to the First Nations people of Canada. Rudy Henry Wiebe is one of Canada's most influential writers and his works are marked as major contributions to Canadian literature. (J. McKay)

(excerpted from http://canadian-writers.athabascau.ca/)

A Look Back: Re-visiting *Peace Shall Destroy Many*

by Elmer G. Wiens

And in the latter time, a king shall stand up. And his power shall be mighty and he shall prosper. And he shall magnify himself in his heart, and by peace shall destroy many: But he shall be broken without hand.
(Daniel 8, qted at the beginning of *PSDM*)

First published in 1962, *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, Rudy Wiebe's influential first novel, describes life in the small, isolated Mennonite community of Wapiti, in Northern Saskatchewan, during WWII. Wiebe's book introduces readers to the experiences of immigrant Mennonites who are striving to maintain their spiritual and moral values, despite challenges from both external secular society and internal religious pressures. Though fictional, the responses of Wiebe's characters to their physical and spiritual dilemmas are illustrative of the dynamics in many Mennonite communities during the early and mid-twentieth century.

The older generation of Wapiti Mennonites, who intensely remember the physical deprivation and persecution in Russia following World War One and the Communist Revolution, maintain their commitment to their traditions of love, non-violence and non-worldliness.

Through the interpretation of the church leaders, these biblical beliefs are translated into practices that seek to perpetuate an agricultural, separatist way of life. While the decisions of the church appear consensual and even democratic, for the most part they are dictated by the passionate and dogmatic Deacon Block. However, some younger members feel increasingly uncomfortable with not only the church's conclusions but also the process by which decisions are made. When they begin to question their elders' codes of belief and to act in unacceptable, "non-Mennonite" ways, Wapiti's seemingly idyllic everyday life is disrupted.

Since arriving in Canada in 1925, Wapiti's founder, leader, school trustee, and church deacon Peter Block has stuck to two goals with passionate, even fanatical intensity. His first is to have "a colony of true Mennonites" modelled on the enclaves of Mennonites that existed in Imperial Russia. His second goal is to establish a moral and spiritual utopia where Wapiti's residents can live separate, secluded lives while preparing themselves "for the world that is coming" when Jesus Christ returns to claim his flock of true believers.

Like his namesake, the biblical Thomas the Apostle, protagonist Thomas Wiens begins to experience doubt, asking questions about the Mennonites' agenda as he becomes aware of his civic and Christian responsibilities beyond the margins of the Mennonite community during a time of horrific war in Europe. His relationship with the community's young university-trained school teacher, Joseph Dueck, facilitates his new thought processes. For example, how will he respond when he receives his draft notice? Will he be able to follow the example of his friend Pete Block Jr. and without doubt declare himself a conscientious objector in front of a critical courtroom? Thom knows he cannot serve in a fighting capacity in the military and remain true to the Mennonite principle of non-violence, and yet he senses that during this crucial time non-action is not sufficient for a Christian.

> Does peace merely mean a physically and spiritually safe, well-ordered community, where each person knows his or her role, and conflicts are avoided rather than resolved?

Thom also questions why all church services, including a young people's meeting at which Métis youth who do not understand German are present be conducted in German. Further, while the church supports missionaries in India, why does Deacon Block thwart any attempt to convert their Métis and First Nations neighbours? Thom increasingly senses Block's unwillingness to have anyone without a Mennonite heritage join their church. Further, can Thom keep his temper and not respond with violence to the taunts of his neighbour Herb Unger, a "fallen-away" Mennonite from a marginalized, disreputable Mennonite family?

Near the end of the novel, Thom enters into a spiritual "valley of the shadow" when he discovers the dark secrets lurking under Deacon Block's pious exterior, including acts of violence and harsh treatment of his daughter. Disillusioned with the hypocrisy of Deacon Block, Thom must choose whether he will continue to embrace the Mennonite traditional interpretation of "right moral and spiritual action" or whether he will reject the tenets of his faith. What he fails to remember until the very end of the novel is the third way Joseph Dueck has modelled for him, the path of re-contextualizing valuable Mennonite truths for a new cultural context.

The interaction between these two strong characters – the sincere but questioning, young Thom Wiens and the experienced, battle scarred Deacon Peter Block – provides the novel's central conflict and shapes its plot. Other characters deepen and reinforce Wiebe's thematic focus on the need to discern between tradition and truth, legalism

and grace.

Functioning as a character foil to the tradition-bound Deacon Block is Joseph Dueck, the young, idealistic Mennonite school teacher Block himself brought to Wapiti. Dueck and Block clash on a number of issues related to appropriate Christian conduct. Joseph, Block's intellectual equal, states that it is hypocritical of Mennonites to supply Canadian troops with farm produce, yet refuse to help protect Canada and the Mennonite way of life against foreign aggression. Even serving in the medical corps with the military, the route Joseph eventually decides to take as an expression of his beliefs in active peacemaking, is anathema to Deacon Block.

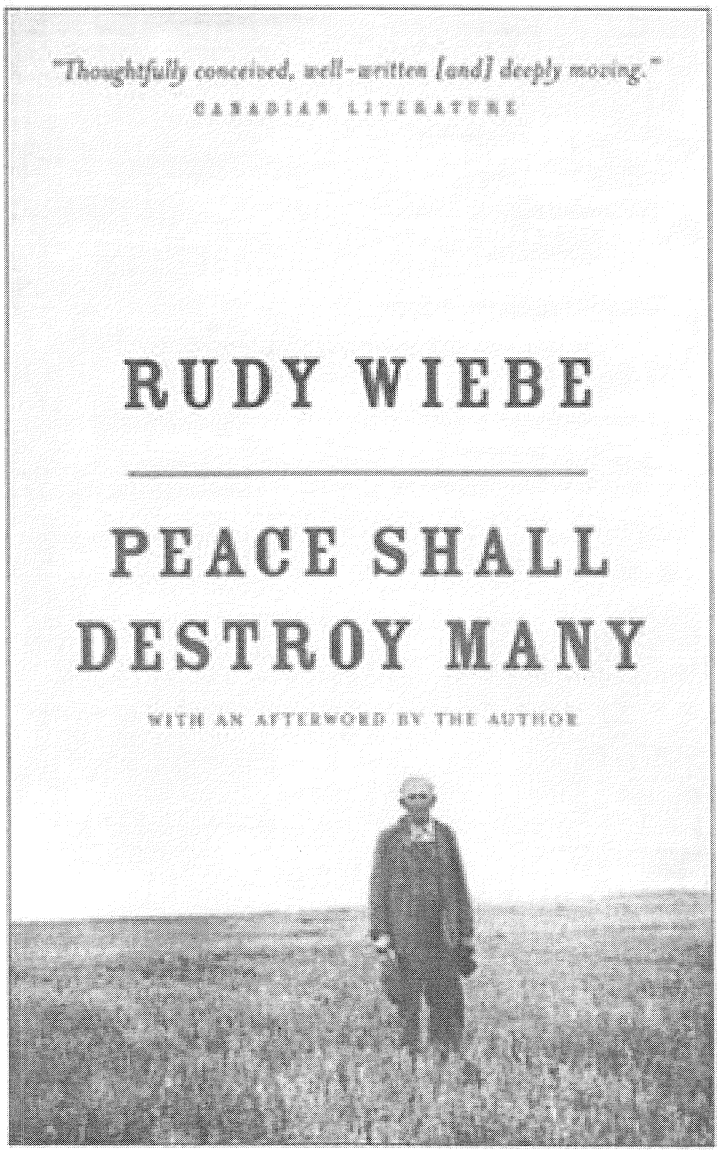
Block also reacts aggressively against Joseph for holding a young people's meeting in English, since he believes that exclusive use of the German language provides a buffer against the evil influences of the non-Mennonite world. Block considers Joseph a destabilizing challenge to his authority, and ensures that Joseph leaves Wapiti. But Joseph's influence continues to bear fruit as Thom Wiens ponders Joseph's challenge to re-think and re-apply long held traditions in the light of current cultural and historical realities.

The story's tragedy falls onto Deacon Block's hard-working, spinster daughter, Elizabeth, who, motivated by loneliness and desperation, has had an affair with her father's Métis farmhand. Block had earlier refused to approve her relationship with Herman Pettkau, who had been born out of wedlock to a Mennonite woman and a Russian farmhand and adopted by the Paetkaus before they emigrated to Canada. Ironically, like Herman's biological mother, Elizabeth dies in childbirth.

Meanwhile, the church excommunicates Herman Paetkau because he has married the Métis Madeleine Moosomin in a civil ceremony. Thom and his sister Margaret question such harsh treatment, especially since Madeleine is a new Christian. But their dissent is quickly supressed by their father. Growing increasingly frustrated with what he sees as short-sighted dogma and legalism, Thom is almost thankful that the students in his Métis Sunday School class (originally begun by Joseph Dueck) are unable to understand enough of his lessons to become Christians, since he realizes they will never be good enough to join the Wapiti Mennonite church while Block is deacon.

The novel's climax comes at the community Christmas program, where a cross-section of the larger community is gathered: the Mennonites, old and young, believing and questioning; the Métis school children and their parents; the young worldly *Englische* school teacher Razia Tantamnount; the "fallen away" air force pilot Hank Unger, etc. When violence erupts among the young men of the community, including Pete Block Jr, Block's cherished son, over the affections of Razia, the authoritarian hold of Block over the community is broken as his fellow Mennonites are stunned to hear "the sobs of a great, strong man, suddenly bereft, and broken." Thom too is forced to see both himself and his community in a new light as he comes to understand that true peace is not a superficial absence of conflict but an inner state often only achieved "in a conquest of love that unites the combatants."

Throughout the novel, Wiebe interrogates the concepts of peace and peacemaking. Does peace merely mean a physically and spiritually safe, well-ordered community, where each person knows his or her role, and conflicts are avoided rather than resolved? Where questions are best not asked, in order to avoid conflict? Or is peace a struggle that involves not only negotiation and dialogue but perhaps also compromise, if the community is to experience an "inward peace that is in no way affected by outward war but quietly overcomes it on life's real battle-field: the soul of Man."



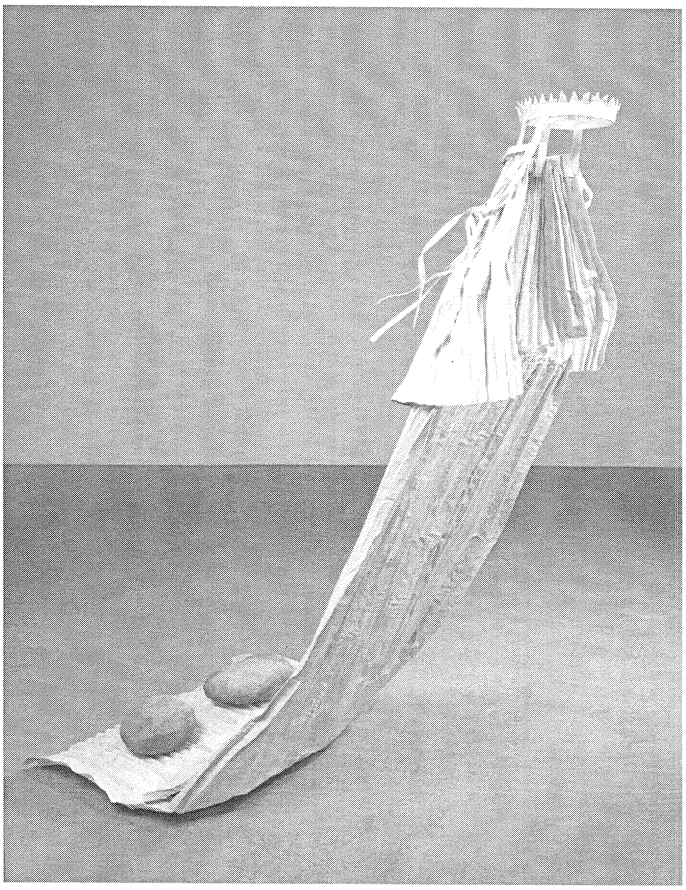
Enlarging the Language of Observation: a profile of visual artist Gathie Falk

by Lois Klassen

[Gathie] Falk's images whether painted, sculpted or performed, are made as sacred as prayers, chants and mantras through repetition and reiteration. They are images that carry with them a weight of personal symbolism that draws upon her extraordinary life, upon her bank of experiences, emotions, beliefs and intuitions. But they are not simply personal: they convey social and cultural meanings, too, meanings that reverberate in our lives and times.

Robin Laurence, "To Be a Pilgrim"

I first met Vancouver visual artist Gathie (Agatha) Falk in the early 1970s as a fellow member of Killarney Park M.B. church. My attention was drawn to her hands which gestured, twitched, and moved incessantly. Her fidgeting hands seemed to possess all of the restless energy an otherwise calm demeanour concealed, a restless energy still evident in her hands now that Falk is in her mid-80's. This energy, or impetus to create, combined with a strong work ethic and prodigious talent have earned Falk recognition and honours, including the Gershon Iskowitz Prize (1990), the Order of Canada (1997), the Order of British Columbia (2002) and a Governor General's Award in Visual Arts (2003). Her work has been exhibited internationally in public and private galleries and graces the collections of corporations, private collectors and public institutions such as The Vancouver Art Gallery, the Glenbow Museum (Alberta), Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, the Canada Council Art Bank, and the National Gallery of Canada, to name a few.



Gathie Falk, *The Problem with Wedding Veils*, 6' Paper Mache Sculpture, *Presence and Absence* Installation (Equinox Gallery, Vancouver, 2011).

Falk's stature as a senior Canadian artist is especially impressive given the hardship of her early years -- both financial and familial -- which prevented her from beginning her career in visual art until she was nearly 40 years old. The loss of a parent at a young age, poverty exacerbated by a crushing travel debt, and the necessity to cut her education short to help support the family are troubles Falk shared with other children of Mennonite immigrants who grew up in the Canadian prairies on the eve of the Great Depression. Like others in similar circumstances, she found herself unhappily trapped in menial labour. During this time she took night-school classes, persevering until she was eventually able to leave the tedium and hard physical labour of factory work for a professional career as a primary school teacher. This choice of career — while secure and offering a good pension — was not ultimately satisfying to her. It did, however, provide her with the opportunity to take summer and evening courses in the arts, a special area of interest for her from an early age. Although Falk enjoyed drawing in her childhood, her interest in the arts was expressed mainly through music; she studied violin, piano and voice, and today still endeavours to practice piano for an hour every day and to sing — usually hymns — alone, or with a friend, daily.

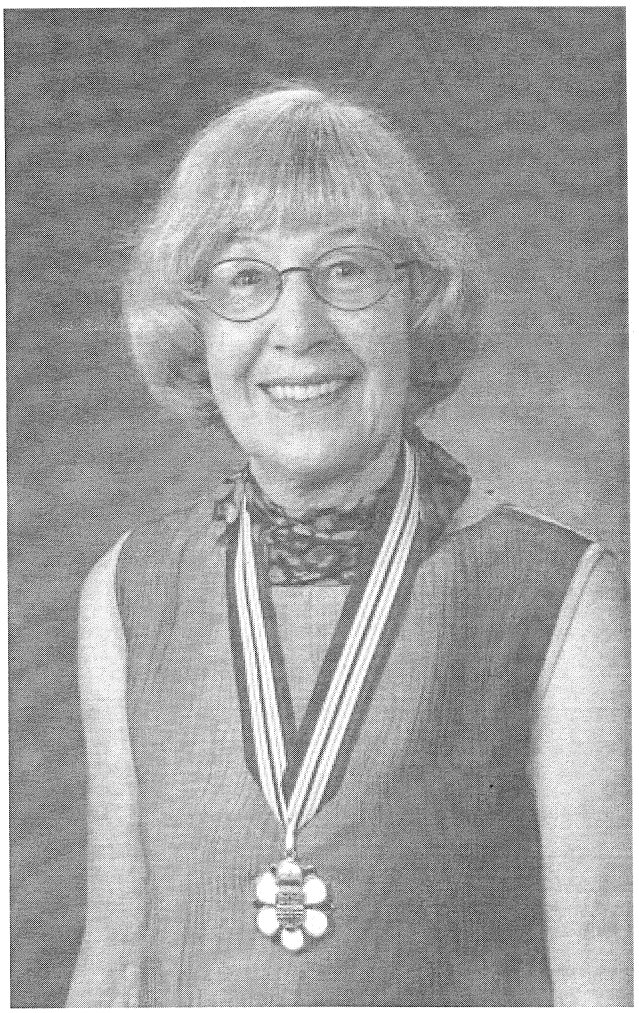
In 1965, she resigned from her 12-year-old teaching career to fulfill her dream of a career in the arts. Having reached a plateau in her music education, she applied herself to visual art instead. Against the advice of colleagues, and even though she was still financially responsible for an aging parent, Falk cashed in her teacher's pension, a move that was risky at best and must have seemed foolhardy to many. There is little doubt that her thriftiness and willingness to live extremely simply (at one point living in her unfinished basement in order to rent out the main floor of her house) allowed her to persevere in her artistic endeavours. She very quickly earned her first solo exhibition of paintings at the Canvas Shack in Vancouver and by 1971 she had won a prestigious commission to make two large ceramic mural installations (*Veneration of the White*

Collar Worker #1 and #2) for the Department of External Affairs building in Ottawa.

Although she began as a painter, Falk became known primarily for her ceramic sculptures such as the large and beautiful *Fruit Piles* series completed in 1970, and for her hauntingly surrealist performance pieces such as *Red Angel* performed at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 1972. Later in her career she returned to painting as her primary medium, but she has never completely abandoned sculpture, switching from the physically demanding constraints of ceramic sculpture to papier-mâché in works such as the *Traces* series, comprised of life-sized dresses, some reclining, some upright with small shelves built into their hems (1998), and bronze in works such as the *Arsenal* series (2010), which comprises large bronze snowballs painted white and arranged in pyramids reminiscent of her earlier sculptures of piles of fruit.

The subject of Falk's work has included large expressive canvases of night skies (1980), parts of the ocean (*Pieces of Water*, 1982), and individual flower blossoms so large that they become monumental (*Heads*, 1995), but her paintings and sculptures more often depict common household objects such as wooden kitchen chairs, tables, articles of clothing, light bulbs, or even multiple heads of cabbage. In her work, these humble items are often juxtaposed with seemingly incongruous objects: dead fish on a piece of furniture or draped over a clock; lit candles on a shelf protruding from the hem of a dress; or small bones suspended above a forest of little trees. These odd juxtapositions may not make literal or symbolic sense, in spite of the efforts of critics and commentaries to "read into" them symbolic or literary meaning, but they do make aesthetic sense. Simply put, Falk paints and sculpts what grabs her attention. In her own words, "I like to make things that have never been made before" (interview).

Falk is not bothered by the attempts of others to attribute to her work metaphor and hidden meaning. "If people want to make up stories about my work I don't mind." She points out that while people may find meaning in her work she never sets out to communicate a specific message or metaphoric allusion. She does not believe that paintings and sculptures, open as they are to misinterpretation, are the best media by which to communicate a specific message. Sometimes, after a work is complete she may realize that a metaphor could be extrapolated from the work, as in one of the sculptures in her installation *Presence and Absence* (Equinox Gallery, Vancouver, 2011) wherein heavy rocks weigh down the bottom of a 6' tall wedding veil. The rocks were needed to keep the steeply-angled, papier-mâché structure from tipping forward. Afterward, Falk noticed the aptness of the symbolism of the rocks'



weightiness combined with the solemnity of the wedding rite implied by the veil and crown.

Her reluctance to use her work to try to communicate a specific message is no doubt at the root of her reluctance to be labelled a "Christian Artist". As she points out, she does not paint overtly religious objects, saints, or themes. Her Christian faith, however, is an integral part of who Gathie Falk is; she adheres to a daily routine as strict as any monastic order of hours that includes time for work, devotion and prayer, socialization and recreation in predetermined proportions. Falk's faith in God, together with the experiences of her whole life, has imbued her work with its unique presence and character. In spite of the hardships she has known, and maybe even because of them, her sculptures and paintings evoke a sense of hope and promise. Even when the work comprises sombre images and solemn themes (vacated clothing, mysterious figures of humans or animals, disembodied arms or legs, tombstone-like configurations of repeated objects), the overall impression is celebratory, never glib or merely pretty but certainly concerned with beauty whether that beauty resides in man-made, everyday objects or in nature. As such, Falk's work stands out in a world art scene that is often characterized by

nihilism and cynicism. In the words of Robin Laurence, art critic and curator, "We seek out artists like Falk to give sense and shape to our jumbled sensations and experiences, our fears and joys and apprehensions. And to help us believe in ordinary miracles and everyday salvations... in the everlasting life of the spirit" ("*Pilgrim*").

Laurence is not alone among critics and commentators in remarking on the integration of Falk's life and her work. The late critic Doris Shadboldt commented on "...the wholeness of [Falk's] creation — the degree to which her life and art interpenetrate" (qted in Laurence 142). A visit to her home confirms this; echoes of past paintings resound in her lush flower garden and in the sidewalk leading to her front door; sculptures are recalled by the ordinary implements of daily life such as dishes and chairs. Although her work has been characterized as "veneration of the ordinary" (a phrase coined by Falk herself), and in spite of her expressed desire "to make the ordinary important," the recurring themes in her work are anything but prosaic. In the 2010 television documentary *A Window Looking In* she poses the question, "What is everyday stuff? A picture of a hill? Is that ordinary? Or is it extraordinary?" (Hogan and Hungerford) In the same interview, she says that she hopes her work will encourage people to really look at things, not to look at things differently but rather to really look, to pay attention to what is in front of them. In this way she sees her work as "enlarging the language of observation."

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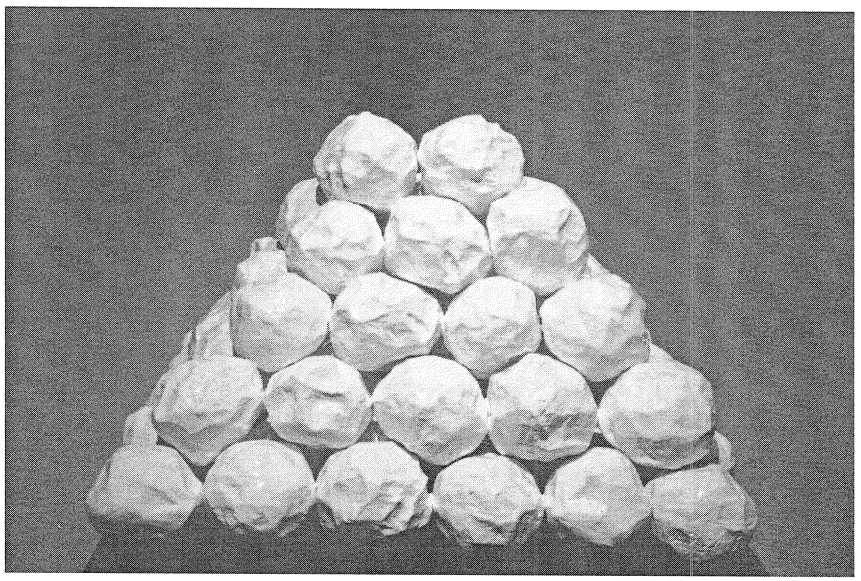
Lois Klassen is a writer and retired teacher-librarian who lives in Yarrow, BC.

Gathie Falk. *Agnes*, bronze (grey patina), bronze 5/7, 37" x 28" x 33".



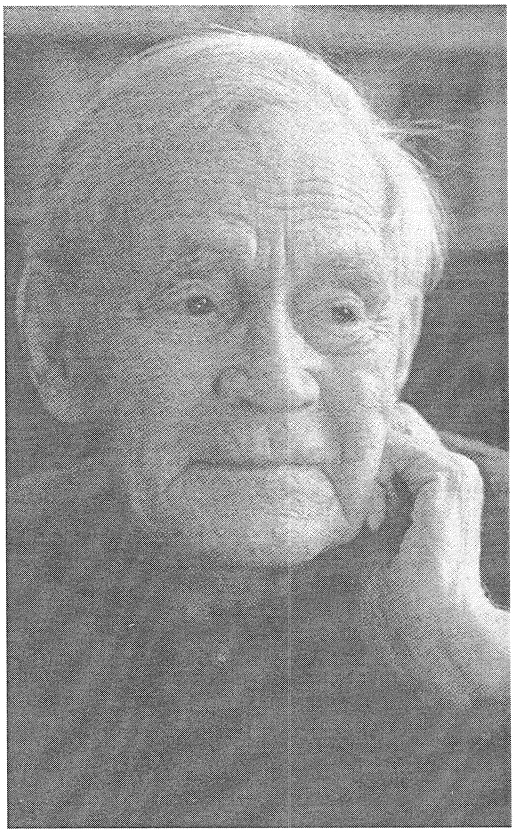
72 snowballs, Bronze sculpture from the Arsenal series, 2010.

Doubting Castle: Paul Hiebert's Spiritual Autobiography

by Robert Martens

Now there was, not far away from the place where they lay, a castle called Doubting Castle, the owner whereof was Giant Despair; and it was in his grounds they were now sleeping: wherefore he, getting up in the morning early, and walking up and down in his fields, caught Christian and Hopeful asleep in his grounds. They told him they were pilgrims, and that they had lost their way.
(John Bunyan, *Pilgrim's Progress*, quoted by Paul Hiebert)

Paul Hiebert, born to Mennonite parents in Manitoba, is best known as a humourist. His *Sarah Binks*, today regarded as a classic of Canadian literature, is a gentle and affectionate fake biography of a truly terrible fictional poet, Sarah Binks, the Sweet Songstress of Saskatchewan. His book won the Stephen Leacock Award for humour in 1948, and has never been out of print since. Less well known is Hiebert's deeply serious philosophical and religious side. *Doubting Castle*, his spiritual autobiography, is a series of essays marked by uncertainty but also by confidence in a Truth that will set humankind free. At times it seems nearly unimaginable that it was also written by the apparently carefree author of *Sarah Binks*.



Paul Hiebert, photographed by George Sawatzky.

Paul Hiebert, the sixth of ten children, was born in 1892 in Pilot Mound to Johann and Maria Penner Hiebert, both from Bergthal Colony in South Russia. A few years later the family moved to Altona; here his father opened a store, where Paul helped out while pursuing his high school education. Paul Hiebert earned his BA in philosophy from the University of Manitoba, and his MA in Gothic and Teutonic philology from the University of Toronto. After working as a high school principal to fund his education, Hiebert received a Ph.D. in chemistry at McGill University in 1924. Science was never his first love, but this clearly brilliant and versatile individual made a career as professor of chemistry at the University of Manitoba. In 1926 he married Dorothea Cunningham. They never had children. He stated that *Sarah Binks*, which made him famous, "arose as a vehicle for publishing the poems which my brother and I had written when we were kids ... I attributed them to some country bumpkin" (quoted in library2usask.ca).

In addition to the Stephen Leacock Award, Hiebert was honoured with the Governor General's Medal for Science, as well as the Order of Canada. After retirement, the Hieberts moved to Carman, Manitoba, where they lived until Paul died in 1987. Hiebert to some degree stepped away from his Mennonite heritage when in later life he served as a minister in the United Church. The Paul Hiebert papers are archived in a collection at the University of Manitoba, and the Hiebert home in Carman is a designated Manitoba Heritage Site.

Doubting Castle, writes Hiebert, is an account of his quest for the greater Truth that makes meaningful the lesser, daily truths of our lives. On the one hand, says Hiebert, "No one can say with absolute certainty, 'I am right and you are wrong.' We know very well how the arrogant assertion of being right has led to quarrels and cruelty" (Hiebert 5). Yet the book "is certainly not one of these tolerant and open-minded expositions which allows of any belief..." (8). Hiebert in fact writes that the "curse of the intellectual is doubt," and that "having no convictions they tend to believe in almost everything" (9). Throughout his lifetime he would regard academics with skepticism, and indeed *Sarah Binks* satirizes literary critics.

Paul Hiebert grew up in an atmosphere of what he calls "frontier religion." The Methodist faith in which he was initially raised taught that God was a "Fearsome Being and I was often much distressed" (15). He admired the fervent piety of his mother, but his father was a disputatious dogmatist, and both of them, according to Hiebert, were totally absorbed into Methodism except for their Anabaptist convictions on pacifism: "Whatever Truth was instilled into us as children was certainly not the truth that made us free" (21). For Hiebert, the God of love was absent from his childhood, and he would spend a lifetime trying to fill that absence. He writes,"[W]e did not know the meaning of sin because we did not know the meaning of Christian love" (25).

Hiebert's childhood was a happy one, except for the ominous concept of God which caused him such anxiety. This attitude changed when the Hiebert family moved back into the Mennonite community. Contrary to the contemporary supposition – and perhaps stereotype – that Mennonites of that time suffered from a lamentable legalism, in Altona Paul discovered a faith that was, for him, tranquil and secure: "They had a faith beyond the clutter of beliefs, and in many cases they had a serenity of mind which could come only with the assurance that they were under God's care" (33). The town had an amazing charm, writes Hiebert, and the hymns affected him profoundly. Perhaps, he speculates, the simplicity of the Mennonites' Low German was somewhat responsible for the wonderful simplicity of their beliefs. Hiebert was never a formal member of the Mennonite Church, and lived outside Mennonite circles for most of his life, but he retained nostalgia for his ethnic roots, and mourned what he perceived as the Mennonites' spiritual decline due to the influence of American fundamentalism. These "imported Evangelicals," he writes, "were busy earning God's love instead of accepting it" (38).

Hiebert regards his college days as fascinating but barren: "There was nothing there concerning which one could say with conviction, 'This will I accept and according to this I will live.' At least I was beginning to learn in a negative way that a philosophy which lacks the vital element of purpose is sterile" (44). Meanwhile, he was a student rebel immersed in the belief of social reformers that "if only everything would be good then everything would be good" (43). Perhaps, muses Hiebert, only the contemplation of death can ultimately turn humankind away from such self-involvement.

Throughout his life, Hiebert was afflicted with doubt. There can be no proof of God's existence, he writes, because "it is God himself who supplies the terms in which proof is framed..." (64). And science, he says, regards the universe as initially dead. For Hiebert, resolution came as a personal revelation that the immaterial laws and forces of the universe constitute the "activity of God." These forces, along with Time, he suggests, are the intervention of a personal God.

In his old age, Hiebert writes, he has returned to the religious faith of his youth except for the God of fear, stating that "Love was the fundamental element which had been left out of my fundamentalism" (109). He views salvation as a direction, an acceptance of divine love which unravels in time: "Compulsion could not be introduced into the problem of our salvation in any way whatsoever. Fear and punishment were the very things from which we were to be saved" (104). Hiebert's primary tenet was that anything which detracts from God's goodness and love is false. And yet doubt in Truth is an essential part of his life, writes Hiebert: "...I am not at all sure that I want to be completely quit of doubts and difficulties. I do not like the thought of using God for my own comfort something like a tranquilizer pill" (112). Out of the abyss of uncertainty springs the joy of enlightenment, and these moments, he says, will sustain us: "[T]here is still the comfort of knowing that underneath are the everlasting arms, and that nothing, but nothing, can ever really happen to us" (113).

Doubting Castle opens with the following meditation:

Last night I walked with God. He said,
Well, Stranger it's been quite a while,
Just where on earth have you been wandering now –
Lost, I suppose; that restless search of yours
To find yourself must take you far afield –
But then I need not ask, I know full well
Just how distressing now earth's valleys seem,
Fearsome and dark and lonely – haunted too
By guilt and ghosts – though loneliness is the worst –
But tell me, Friend, what brings you back to me?

Lord, I said, the fault is mine I know,
But also yours, you planted that damned tree
Of good and evil square across my path –
Tell me, Lord, did you expect of me
That I could pass it each and every day,
And never ask, what's this forbidden fruit,
This evil I am not supposed to know,
Whose knowledge of the good is even vague?

Friend, said God, it was not forbidden fruit,
I merely warned you of its consequence,
For knowledge is experience, not words;
I gave you freedom so that you could love,
And in your loving you could be like me,
To be like God, not gods, was yours to choose,
For freedom given cannot be constrained –
The choice was yours – and if not free,
There was neither good nor evil in the tree.

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Mennonites in the War of 1812 and the Trajectory of Peace Legislation in Canada

by guest writer Jonathan Seiling

What national significance does the War of 1812 have for Canadians? Further, what significance does the role of peace churches in that war have for Canadian national character? While the first of these questions is a rather "hot" topic this year, the second is rarely posed. These questions tend to reopen issues of regional versus national identity, and one is left wondering: will a focus on Ontario's history test other regions' patience? Who gets to define national character as a warring or peace-oriented nation? Residents of British Columbia have a rather important and unique way to respond to this question.

Mennonite Immigration to Upper Canada and the War of 1812

Mennonites had already established settlements in various parts of the Niagara region in the 1790s. In the following two decades, migration increased steadily, with a large block settlement around Waterloo and another in the North York region beginning in the early 1800s. While some of these migrants were motivated by economic interests, others had more political motives due to pressures on them to support the revolutionary government in the newly-formed United States. Some Mennonites had suffered during and after the war because of their refusal to support the revolution. The British colonial government of Upper Canada was willing to grant "loyalist" status and free land to some of these settlers. Congregational leadership lagged behind migration patterns; as a result, conformity to an assumed norm among Mennonites was difficult to enforce.

By 1793 the Militia Act accorded Quakers, Mennonites, and Brethren in Christ exemption from militia duty upon payment of an added tax. While Quakers in Upper Canada were strictly opposed to paying this tax, Mennonites generally paid it, as they were accustomed to doing so in previous wars. In 1808, as the war approached, exemption laws and other civilian requirements were further clarified. Whether or not they had paid the tax, war objectors were obligated to provide various civilian or non-combatant services, primarily hauling supplies, selling food, and even feeding and housing soldiers; these activities drew some Mennonites very close to the heat of battle. In the Waterloo region, several Mennonites were required to haul supplies and suffered great financial losses when retreating from American soldiers. Throughout Niagara, Mennonites suffered loss and damage to property for the duration of the war; many of them migrated elsewhere as soon as the war ended, likely for fear that the war would erupt again in the following years.

While Mennonites also gained exemption from swearing an oath, which meant they could not testify in court or hold certain political positions, they were far from apolitical. Several Mennonites held positions of municipal authority. Most significantly, Mennonites and Brethren in Christ advocated on their own behalf for improvements in legislation that would allow them to withhold support from war and from preparations for war. Such advocacy was the start of a trajectory of peace-oriented legislation in Canada. It is a legacy that has had some glory days in which grand dreams were made manifest in the spending decisions of the government. Other times have seen apathy and complicity with militarism, in which such dreams have turned to nightmares of rampant overspending and stockpiling of weapons arsenals.

Already prior to the war, Mennonites and Brethren in Christ became conscious of the need to lobby for a legislative exemption for minors who had not yet been baptized. Without proof of membership, young unbaptized men could not receive exemption from militia service, but lobbying efforts resulted in an amendment to the Militia Act in 1810, extending exemptions to unbaptized Mennonite men aged 16-21. This exemption was especially significant because this age group was the most sought-after by the militia recruiters, who would typically use these men for combat training, while older conscripts would be required to provide non-combatant services.

The Historical Trajectory of Peace-tax Legislation in Canada

The Legislative Assembly of Upper Canada demonstrated a progressive, even utopian orientation at its outset. In addition to laws favouring conscientious objectors, the 1793 act prohibited the importation of slaves. Yet this progressive spirit did not prevail over the following decades, and a harsher, more autocratic style of government began to predominate following the War of 1812. Nevertheless, Mennonites and the other peace churches advocated for a legal means to divert the military tax toward more constructive, rather than destructive, purposes.

In 1841 the result was "An Act to Amend the Militia Law of that part of this Province formerly constituting

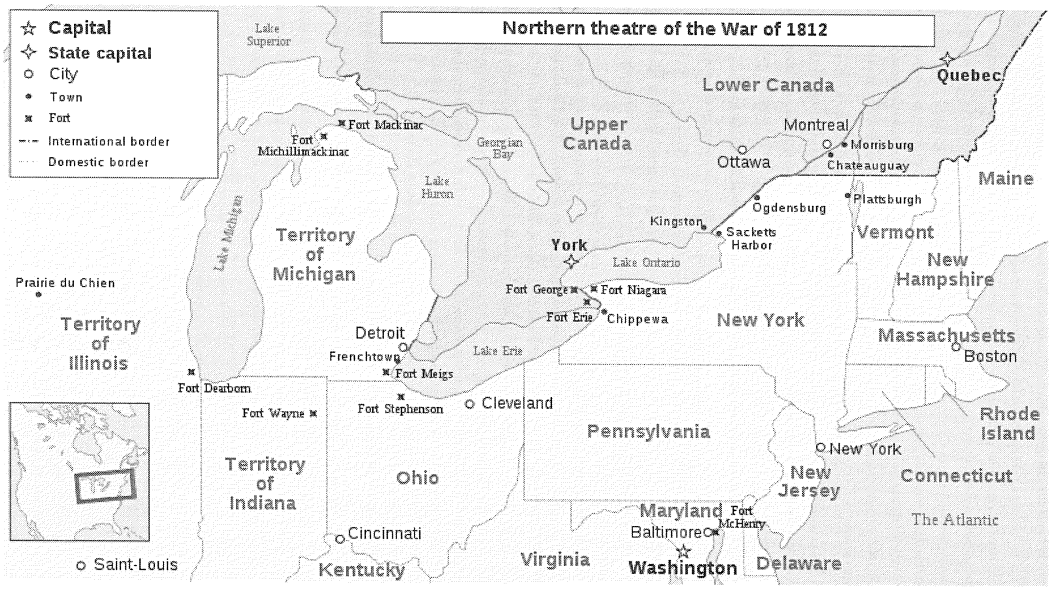
the Province of Upper Canada." Rather than these taxes supporting military preparations or actions, the funds were designated for local infrastructure spending. The act stated the funds were "to be expended within the township in aid of any road tax. … the said Town clerk is required to pay out to the Road or Path Master of the division wherein such fine shall have been levied, to be expended on the public roads, highways and bridges within such division." The positive benefits for local industry were obvious. Before confederation the advocacy efforts of peace churches were effective in applying the principle of conscientious objection to the payment of military taxes. (In Russia Mennonites had enjoyed exemption from military taxation already in 1820. This privilege was granted primarily due to the advocacy efforts of English Quakers who had been invited to Russia, but had then insisted on exemption from financing Russia's military).

The War of 1812 provided an occasion for a nation in formation to consider various options on how to define itself as a progressive and increasingly sovereign nation. It is often assumed that this was an era of Mennonite quietism, of spinning a separatist cocoon, but such a stance was not possible, especially in Niagara. As a people of peace, Mennonites were given an occasion to consider various options ranging from the strict non-compliance of the Quakers to the complicity of most Upper Canadians. The actual convictions and experiences of Mennonites in that war ranged between these extremes, the general pattern found in other contexts where Mennonites faced war and conscription.

Current Conscientious Objection Legislation in Canada

The importance of the present moment for Mennonites in Canada, during the bicentennial commemoration of the War of 1812, should not be overlooked. Given that it was virtually the only defensive war fought on Canadian soil, and the first in which conscientious objection was extended and tested in Canada, it deserves special scrutiny. Mennonites in Canada can study this history to learn an alternative version of the experiences of Upper Canadians, compared to the one that is currently being used to bolster support for increased military spending. Gaining a critical capacity to assess patriotic notions in relation to that war will guard against the propagandist efforts of those who suggest that the War of 1812 defines Canada as a militarily strong nation and therefore justifies a more aggressive foreign policy. Such jingoism ignores the rampant protests and "disaffection" among many Upper Canadians who adamantly refused to support the war effort. It also marginalizes the strong, mainstream tradition in Canada that supports peacemaking efforts as a defining national feature. (Jamie Swift and Ian McKay have offered an incisive analysis of this recent "rebranding" of Canada in their book, *Warrior Nation: Rebranding Canada in an Age of Anxiety. Between the Lines*, 2012: www.btlbooks.com) Better acquaintance with the trajectory of advocacy for improved legislation may inspire current advocates of peace to become more active in communicating the effectiveness and urgency of nonviolent approaches to resolving conflict on individual, communal and international levels.

In British Colombia there has been a long and strong tradition of advocacy for improved peace-oriented legislation which has weakened noticeably in recent years. Victoria was the headquarters for the advocacy group *Conscience Canada* after its inception, until it moved to Toronto a few years ago, due to decreased support in BC. It was in BC that the first case for redirection of the military portion of income taxes was argued in court. Dr. Jerilynn Prior, a professor of medicine at UBC, challenged the applicability of the 1982 Charter of Rights and Freedoms to the assessment of taxes that offend the religion and/or conscience of an individual. Her bank accounts were seized and she appealed to the tax court; eventually, she appealed to the Supreme Court and the UN Human Rights Committee. Although courts in Italy have ruled in favour of the redirection of military taxes toward peaceful purposes, to date Canada refuses to respect military redirection as a charter right. The role of British



Source: Wiki Commons

Columbians in the landmark case of Jerilynn Prior was enormous, and their support and efforts have not been forgotten in the rest of Canada. Yet momentum for supporting peace-oriented tax legislation has not been growing.

The hopes of many Mennonites remain alive for the establishment of a Department of Peace and for legal means for conscientious objectors to redirect the military portion of income tax toward peaceful purposes. Legislative advocacy remains alive in the form of two private members bills. Such efforts today, in an era when our wallets are conscripted in lieu of our bodies, are consistent with the hopes of the early Mennonites and those citizens of BC who in the past raised their voices against the wasteful spending of Ottawa and the purchasing of the latest war toys. Remembering the War of 1812 and Dr. Prior may help us clarify national identity in a way that is consistent with the Mennonite faith tradition.

Today many people remain silent in the face of the continual stockpiling of nuclear arsenals and the failure of nuclear-armed nations to enforce or abide by the Non-Proliferation Treaty. In an era when few people fail to engage the advocacy process, Mennonites in Canada have an opportunity to speak up, as they have in the past, in order to reshape the taxation practices for our generation. Current relevant private members bills include the "Act to establish a department of peace" (C-373); and the "Act respecting conscientious objection to the use of taxes for military purposes" (C-363). *For more information see www. conscriencecanada.ca*

Jonathan Seiling has a PhD in history, specializing in peace church traditions. He is Chair of the 1812 Bicentennial Peace Committee (Quakers, Brethren in Christ, Mennonites), and Director of Onefortyfive, an arts centre in downtown St. Catherines, ON. Since he earns little at his part-time job at Onefortyfive, and his 1812-related activities are not highly income-generating, he is also a grant writer and editor, primarily for university research funding proposals. He is also a father of a 3-year-old, which is a full-time job but a joyous one.

Conscientiously Commemorating the War of 1812

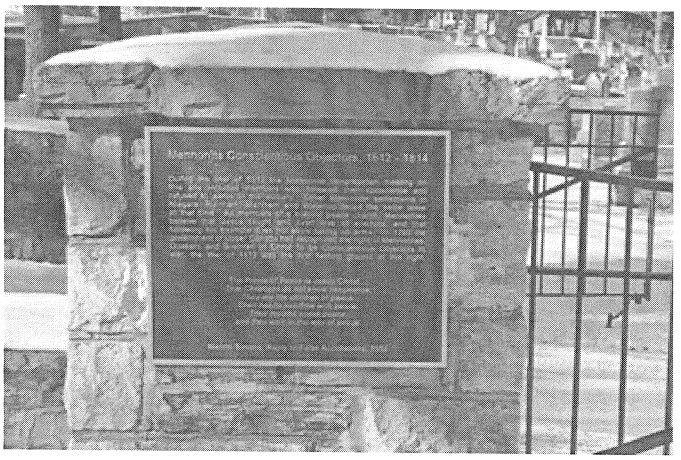
Memorial at First Mennonite Church, Vineland, Ontario. Inscription reads as follows:

To commemorate the experience of these early Canadian pioneers of peace and conscientious objection, historical markers are being installed at different locations in the Niagara region.

During the War of 1812 the Mennonite congregation meeting on this site included members who followed their conscience and refused to serve in the military. Other Mennonite settlements in Niagara, Rainham, Markham and Waterloo faced the same issue at that time. As members of a historic peace church, Mennonites believe that Jesus taught and lived love of enemies, and that following his example does not allow taking up arms. In 1793 the government of Upper Canada had recognized the right of Mennonites, Quakers and Brethren in Christ to be Conscientious Objectors to war; the War of 1812 was the first testing ground of this right.

The Prince of Peace is Jesus Christ...
True Christians do not know vengeance.
They are the children of peace.
Their hearts overflow with peace.
Their mouths speak peace,
and they walk in the way of peace.

- Menno Simons, Reply to False Accusations, 1552



From MCC Ontario website, by permission.

Genealogy Column: The Ties That Bind

The EWZ50 Digitization Project

by Don Fehr and Wilf Penner

In the Summer 2002 issue of *Roots and Branches*, Richard Thiessen wrote an extensive and detailed article in which he explained the origins and history of the *Einwanderungzentrumstelle* (abbreviated as EWZ – Immigration Centre) records.*

In that article Richard mentions that the microfilmed EWZ50 files contain the records of some 30,000 Russian Mennonite refugees who sought citizenship in the German Reich during the latter half of the Second World War.

Approximately three years ago a project was envisioned to digitize the 848 EWZ50 films. When completed, the project will encompass some 2.5 million microfilm frames. MHSBC only had about four hundred of these films, so it was decided to approach other archives (organizations as well as individuals) to partner with us in buying the equipment and in sharing the films. In the end, a number of Mennonite and non-Mennonite organizations, along with individuals, have joined us in this massive endeavour.** The ultimate goal of the project is to have these digitized films available at as many Mennonite and non-Mennonite organizations in Canada and the US as possible.

In 2009 the project came together. The computer and automated microfilm scanner were purchased, and individuals have come forward to volunteer their time. In the last two and a half years this team of volunteers has been working hard, keeping the machine working seven days a week.

When the MHSBC directors made the decision to proceed with this project, they didn't realize how labour intensive and time consuming it would turn out to be. The project sounded quite simple: purchase an automatic scanner for about $20000, invite partnered agencies to mail their EWZ50 microfilms to MHSBC, and set the machine to work. With the scanner's ability to digitize a 3000 frame microfilm in about 3 hours, it should take about four weeks to complete 200 microfilms! Unfortunately, because of the way the documents were originally filmed, the project is taking far longer than originally estimated. After almost three years, we have completed approximately 269 films totaling 805,000 frames. These are impressive numbers, but unfortunately the project is progressing at a much slower speed than first anticipated.

The information contained within these records is quite overwhelming. Watching individuals visit MHSBC and browse the films to find family they have never known about is very touching. Once this project is complete, they will no longer need to load films and slowly move through them frame by frame. Instead, all they will need to do is start up one of our computers, browse to the film they are interested in, and then quickly move through the frames to locate the desired valuable information.

*Interested readers can find Richard's article by looking up the MHSBC webpage, clicking on *Roots and Branches*, scrolling down the list of issues to Summer 2002, and opening it with a click of the mouse.

**If you are interested in obtaining a complete set of these digitized films, contact the project coordinator, Don Fehr, at MHSBC for more information.

MSA Museum Society, Abbotsford, BC

MSA Pioneer Families Wanted!

Was your family a "pioneer family" of Addotsford (formerly Matsqui / Sumas / Abbotsford), B.C.?

Did they settle in the area between 1890 and 1950?

If so, the MSA Museum Society would like to hear from you!

The MSA Museum Society and the MSA Pioneer Association are partnering to publish a coffee-table book with the stories of Abbotsford pioneer families, as told by the pioneers or their descendents. The goal is to include as many accounts as possible.

The book will be published in May, 2013.

If you or your family settled in the region between 1890 and 1950 and would like to contribute a story, please let us know before August 1, 2012.

For more information:

Tel. 604.853.0313

Email: msapioneers@gmail.com

Arnold Dyck (1889-1970) and his Masterpiece *Lost in the Steppe*

by Robert Martens

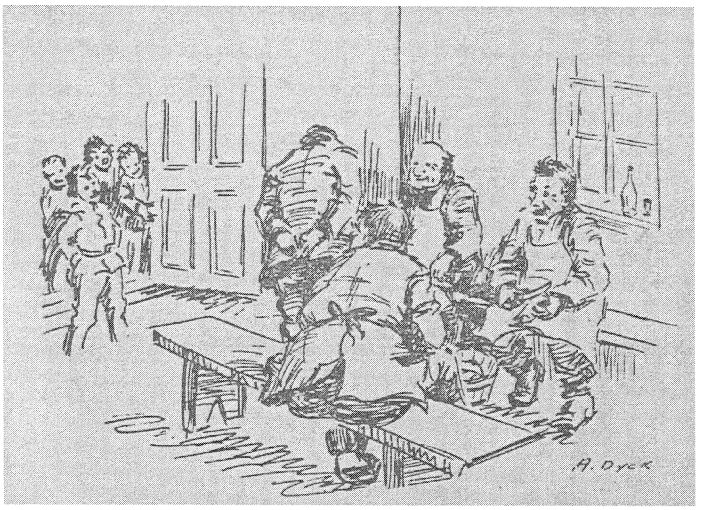
Twentieth century Canadian writing is typically characterized by its modernist sense of alienation. A frequently occurring theme is the individual who desperately needs to leave his or her community of birth, only to discover that the wider world is a profoundly lonely place. Arnold Dyck's masterpiece novel, *Lost in the Steppe* (*Verloren in der Steppe*), tells the story of a young boy somewhat estranged from his community, and in that sense is similar to other Canadian writing of his time. The book is significantly different, however, in its depiction of the protagonist's relatively happy childhood. Dyck seems to stand, like so many other Mennonite writers, with one foot inside and the other outside his community. Although the author's unease and feelings of displacement form a nearly constant backdrop, Dyck's autobiographical novel also resonates with a pleasant, almost pastoral nostalgia: His ambivalence is obvious: despite his affinities with his community of origin, the writer is torn and is deeply critical of the failures of the Russian Mennonite colonies.

Hans Goes to School, A. Dyck

Arnold Dyck was born in Hochfeld, Ukraine, in 1889. After graduating from business school in Ekaterinoslav, he studied art in Germany over the objections of his father. In 1923 he emigrated to Canada, fleeing the terrors of revolutionary Russia, settling in Steinbach, Manitoba. Here he purchased the *Steinbach Post* and for many years pursued a career as publisher, editor, and writer, although at heart he longed to be an artist. In 1935 he started *Mennonitische Volkswarte*, a cultural Mennonite magazine, but the times were extremely difficult, and this project only lasted until 1938. Dyck subsequently sold his newspaper and endeavoured to live by his writing. In the 1940s he published a number of comic Low German novels (the *Koop and Bua* series) and plays, as well as the High German *Verloren in der Steppe*. Dyck lived with his daughter in Germany during his later years and died in 1970.

Lost in the Steppe, although fictional in technique, actually tells the story of Dyck's own boyhood. The central character, Hans Toews, is happy in his remote Russian Mennonite village of Hochfeld, but at the same time dreams of a career as an artist. The novel follows Hans into his adolescence, when he leaves Hochfeld for the *Zentralschule* (high school) in Chortitza. While Hans Toews feels deeply committed to his Mennonite faith and culture, he is also somewhat marginalized by other villagers, many of whom consider his aspirations to be self-seeking and "worldly." The Mennonite colonies, in Arnold Dyck's view, are models of hard work, mutual help, and organization; on the other hand, as Hans Toews grows up, the insularity and prejudices of his community become painfully evident. Arnold Dyck went on to become a champion of Mennonite culture, but it was also clear to him that the Golden Age of the Russian Mennonite colonies, even with all its successes, was tainted. In a late chapter of the novel, Hans is shocked when his former Russian schoolteacher accuses the "German" settlers of arrogance and abuse:

.. Look, Toews, you weren't only a good student, you were also the only one among the boys who never hurt me.... And that, Toews, believe me, was one of the few bright spots in my life while teaching these two hard years in Hochfeld. –You have seen, at least you could have seen, how badly I was treated by all, from the children in school to the grownups in the village. I read it in everybody's looks: When will you finally be gone, you Russian? –I have taught for fifteen years, in different schools, all Russian. I found the children in Russian country schools, in which I taught for nine years, much poorer than you; they went for only two or three years, hardly enough time to learn to write their names. But they weren't less gifted than you. There were also naughty ones among them, but their naughtiness was of a different kind: it wasn't directed against the Russian. You understand that? And I always received the respect which a teacher or an educated person has a right to expect. But in Hochfeld ... Why were Heinrich Jakovlevich [a Mennonite teacher] and I treated so differently? Wasn't the sole reason that he was a German while I was a Russian! – Because I am Russian I was rejected and treated as an inferior. – That's how you German colonists are. You look down on the Russians with disdain. – And yet, all the time you are the foreigners here, you are our guests, because this country belongs to us, the Russians, after all! – Yet look around, observe the German villages and then look at the Russian ones, a few steps away from your door. What a contrast! It seems our landlords had to perish in order to make room for you Germans. Their land went into your hands. And the muzhik? [peasant] He was left holding the bag, remained poor as he had always been. Your sons and



Pig Butchering, A. Dyck

daughters don't go into service – not even to other Germans, not to speak of Russians. They remain snugly at home on the full homesteads, and when they marry, they themselves suddenly also possess such homesteads; sixty-five desyatins [about 1.1 hectare] of land. How you do it, God only knows. It is as though your acres produce pure gold. But the sons and daughters of our farmers must go into servitude to you, in the fashion in which they worked for their landlords as serfs in former years. How could it be otherwise when their fathers cultivate no more than three to five desyatins, because that's all the land they have? – I also don't know why, on top of this, their land always yields only half as good crops as yours. It seems that God himself is for you Germans and against us Russians. (p. 315-16)

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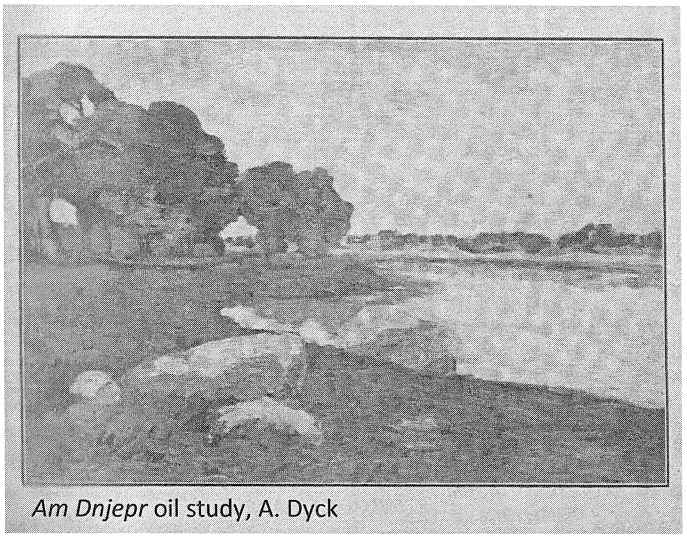


Am Dnjepr oil study, A. Dyck

The Dark Side of the Good Old Days: Biography of Johann Peters

by Louise Bergen Price

In 1944, the same year that Arnold Dyck was at work writing *Verloren in der Steppe* (*Lost in the Steppe*), William (Big Bill) Enns published *Das Verstoßene Kind* (*The Abandoned Child*). The authors were almost the same age, Dyck born in 1889 and Enns, in 1893; both were born in South Russia; and each tells a story of childhood in a Russian Mennonite village. Both books were published in Steinbach.

But here most similarities end. By 1944, Dyck, who emigrated to Canada in 1923, was an accomplished writer at the height of his career. *Verloren* is a lyrical retelling of a childhood, reminiscent of W.O. Mitchell's *Who has Seen the Wind?* Al Reimer calls Dyck's book a "minor masterpiece" with "almost mystical illumination of the concrete everyday world and the delicate inner dialogue between the naive boy Hans and the sophisticated adult narrator."

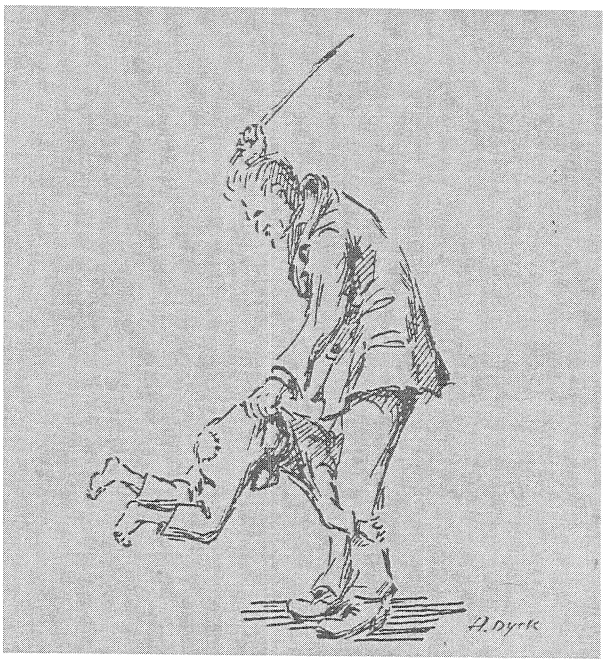
William Enns, on the other hand, was a dragline operator who spent most of his life in Altona. *Das Verstoßene Kind* seems to be his only literary work, although even that is not mentioned in his obituary. In the foreword, Enns states that the book was written as the story was told to him by Johann Peters: "Therefore I ask the reader not to concentrate on the author's manifold errors, for I have, as much as possible, taken the story directly from the mouth of the 'child'"(foreword).

Like the people it portrays, the style of *Das Verstoßene Kind* is rough and unpolished, often meandering from one topic to another. Many threads are not followed through to conclusion, and a lot of attention is given to events that have little or no bearing on the story. And yet, in spite of its shortcomings, *Das Verstoßene Kind* holds a fascination for many. It is popular among German-speaking Mennonites in Bolivia, being one of the few books endorsed by colony elders there. Currently, it is being reprinted by the *Friedensbote* press for resettlers to Germany from Russia; *Friedensbote* also offers a Russian translation. In 1995, it was published in an abridged 25 page English version as *The Unwanted Child: Biography of Johann Peters, 1862-1946* (no further information available).

Das Verstoßene Kind begins in 1863 in Heuboden, Bergthal Colony, South Russia, with the passage, "'Oh, what is that?... a child' a not very old woman cried in fear and terror as she was about to pass by the neighbours' pig

pen. What she saw made her blood run cold: there, in mud and filth, lay a newborn child..." (5) A young woman, Maria Doerksen, rescues the child. A neighbour woman agrees to wet-nurse the baby and names him Johann. When the child's mother, a Russian servant girl in a Mennonite household, learns that the infant is still alive, she tries to find other ways to kill it. She's encouraged in this by Petrovitch and Maruschka, the Russian couple with whom she's staying. The book never touches on what would seem to be an important subject – is Johann of Russian parentage? Is that why he is later bullied as the "pigpen child"? Or is he perhaps of mixed parentage?

As Johann gets older, his life will be haunted by people who try to harm him. In addition to his birth mother, there's his teacher, Mr. Knelsen, who flogs him until blood runs into his shoes. When Johann plays with his best friend, Abram Penner, Abram's stepmother beats her son mercilessly and threatens to do the same to Johann. Other characters harm him by name calling, gossiping and bullying. In the only comical scene in the book, Tante Peters is so upset with Tante Dick's gossip, that she grabs the broom and begins to sweep the kitchen's dirt floor. "But woman, sprinkle some water or we'll suffocate" (25), Tante Dick says as the house fills with dust. But Tante Peters just sweeps more energetically.



School Days, A. Dyck

Johann's foster parents, the Derksens, treat him kindly, but when Maria Derksen dies and the family decides to emigrate to Canada, they leave the nine-year-old boy behind, saying, "It's too bad, but we just can't afford to take you. You'll have to stay. Someone will find you and take you in" (Enns 89). Neighbours who see the deserted boy have no sympathy and make unkind comments. Johann is finally rescued by the *Oberschulze* (district mayor), Jakob Peters, who promises Johann that his family will not abandon him. He also assures the boy that his dogs will keep away the "bad woman" who still appears several times a year.

Peters keeps his word, and in 1876, Johann emigrates to Canada with his new family. At his baptism, he takes the name "Peters". The end of the book sees him happily married on his own homestead in Plum Coulee, Manitoba.

For Mennonite readers used to either stories of the "Golden Days" or tales of wrong done to Mennonites by others such as Machno or Stalin, this story covers new ground. Here is a community of Mennonites living in a traditional village setting, governing themselves with little interference from the outside, and yet life is far from idyllic.

The Good Old Days, as author William Enns depicts, also had their shadow side (75). At the time of the story, the Bergthal Colony, settled by landless Mennonites from Chortitza, was little more than 20 years old. The beginning years were difficult. Many settlers had no farming experience, and those who did had to learn different agricultural practices to suit unfamiliar soil and climate conditions.

"Schooling was in its infancy," Enns writes. "Teachers like Knelsen left a bad mark on children" (75). Beatings were common, even expected. There was no real curriculum. Children were taught using the Bible as primary text. When it was suggested that children be given primers with illustrated texts, the elders protested vigorously (see the excerpt from Gerhard Wiebe that follows this article). The right to educate their children in the time-honoured manner would be one reason for the Mennonites' drive to emigrate just when the colony was beginning to prosper.

The isolation of Bergthal colony also meant that the spiritual revival movement did not take root here. Existence was often hand-to-mouth, and little energy remained for inner development and growth (75). In fact, religious life is seldom mentioned in the novel, and church services appear mostly in connection with weddings, baptisms and funerals. The church seems to be just another institution like the council and school. In this setting, people seem as rough as their environment. The village council meets regularly, but is incapable or unwilling to interfere in cases of child abuse or neglect, limiting its scope to "practical" matters.

Although *Das Verstoßene Kind* paints a very dark picture of life in the early days of a Mennonite settlement, it is important to remember that this book is based on the childhood recollections of an already old Johann Peters. Yet it is an important book told from the perspective of an outsider to the Mennonite world, a rejected orphan of unknown background. Through his eyes we see a number of Heuboden's residents indulging in drunken behaviour, gam-

bling, child and wife abuse, and generally showing a lack of Christian love or charity. The few that show concern for Johann are the exception rather than the rule.

Why is *Das Verstoßene Kind* so popular among German-speaking Mennonites when Dyck's "minor masterpiece" is relatively unknown? Perhaps it is simply that people have always been fascinated by rags to riches stories. The story of Johann Peters exemplifies this: against all odds he survives to have a long and happy life.

Postscript:
In 1889 Johann Peters married Katharina Falk. They homesteaded north of Plum Coulee and later bought a section of land in Lowe Farm. They had 10 children. Katharina passed away in 1915 and a year later, Johann married Nettie Wall. Together they had 9 children. Today the descendants of Johann Peters number over 600 (Plett 107).

The German edition of *Das Verstoßene Kind* can be ordered from *Friedensbote Verlag,* http://www.verlag-friedensbote.de/produkt-36-das-verstossene-kind#

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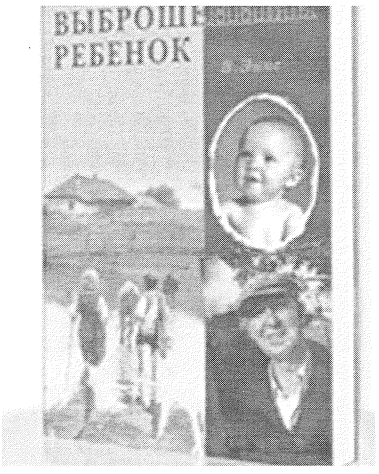


Verstossenes Kind in Russian

Children's Primer Controversy

The following is an excerpt from Gerhard Wiebe's Ursachen und Geschichte der Auswanderung der Mennoniten aus Russland nach Amerika (Origins and History of the Emigration of Mennonites from Russia to America), published in Winnipeg, 1900. Wiebe (1827-1900) migrated from Bergthal to Canada in 1875. He was deeply conservative, and served as elder until 1882, when he inexplicably resigned, and never delivered another sermon.

Translated by Louise Bergen Price

It happened soon after that when Baron von Korff visited our colony [Bergthal], he also visited the schools. Village officials were present at the visit. The Baron had brought small picture books which he showed the children, who, in their innocence, had great pleasure in them. Pictured in the books were cows, sheep, pigs, goats and similar animals. Then he asked the children what kind of animals they were, and what they were called. Many children replied that they did not know.

"Oh, it is such a pity that the children know so little," he said, but he did not ask about their knowledge of the teachings of the Lord. He did say we could teach our faith, but those were only words – he had different thoughts – for he soon asked the children if he should bring more picture books on his return. "Yes," they answered with one voice.

Then he said to the teacher and the village officials, "It is better to give the children the Holy Scriptures only when they are ready to understand them."

Immediately, the mayor came to me and reported the matter, praising the man and his understanding. Then I realized that the poison had already begun its work on their hearts. At the time, District Mayor Peters [Johann's stepfather] was visiting me, and when they finished speaking, he said to me, "You're being very quiet – I demand a response."

During this whole conversation, I'd been watching a spider weaving a web. I said to them, "Come and see this spider – that shall be your answer. See, she has spun thread everywhere, and now she makes her nest, and the threads are so fine that when a fly comes, it does not see the web and is caught, and the spider runs over and kills it. This man [Baron von Korff] is like this spider: he spins a web, and then he will catch us. Now is the time to tear the web before he builds his nest. [....]"

This is how, dear reader, webs were spun in the 1860s so that when the Enemy attacked us on the issue of nonresistance, we would be found napping and easily led into disunity.

BOOK REVIEW

Walter Klaassen and William Klassen. *Marpeck: A Life of Dissent and Conformity*. Scottdale, PA and Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2008.

Reviewed by Robert Martens

Sixteenth century Europe was in such a state of crisis that it often seemed the world itself was about to end. The Holy Roman Empire, a loose confederation of quarrelling powers, was deeply in debt, largely due to ongoing war. The immensely profitable Fugger family banking chain was only too glad to prolong that debt and heighten its influence over European society by lending to the Empire. Meanwhile, the miners' guilds were threatening to strike, women were acquiring power through emerging group Bible readings, and technology, in the form of the printing press and millions of tracts and books, was radically transforming modes of thought. Finally, the peasant revolt of 1525 and the subsequent violent Anabaptist seizure of Münster was sending shock waves of anxiety throughout the continent. The emperor Charles V and his brother Ferdinand of Austria took advantage of the prevailing uncertainty to stamp out the opposition.

This situation should sound familiar to observers of twenty-first century society. Walter Klaassen and William Klassen, in their comprehensive biography of Pilgram Marpeck, do a masterful job of relating early Anabaptist ideas to contemporary issues and their ethical and spiritual challenges. What, they ask, does Marpeck have to say to us that is still relevant after all these years? According to the authors, he remains a living and vital voice.

In fact, not a great deal is known about Marpeck – his writings have only recently been rediscovered – and Klaassen and Klassen make up for that lack with a wealth of historical detail and some passionate storytelling. Marpeck was likely born about 1495 in the south German town of Rattenberg. He was unusual for an Anabaptist leader in that he managed to die in bed while so many of the others suffered torture and early death. Marpeck's engineering skills in waterworks and in the transportation of wood, the fuel of the day that was rapidly being depleted, made him indispensable to the towns in which he worked, and thus he lived in relative tranquillity. He was born into a prosperous family, and served as councillor and mayor before his Anabaptist leanings got him into trouble. Marpeck was also appointed mining superintendent in Rattenberg, consequently learning to hear all sides of political issues and developing invaluable mediatory skills. When he was ordered to indulge the names of reformist and Anabaptist dissidents among the miners, Marpeck, caught between his service to "two kingdoms," that of God and that of secular authority, initially acquiesced. Somehow and sometime, however, he had been so attracted to Anabaptist ideals that he secretly converted, resigned his position and left town for Strasbourg. He was subsequently exposed as an Anabaptist and his property confiscated.

In the relatively tolerant atmosphere of the free town of Strasbourg, Marpeck engaged in public debate with both the authorities and Anabaptist "Spiritualists," who argued, in the context of fierce persecution, that a secret inner spiritual life was adequate: Marpeck always insisted upon the visible, the sharing, the acting church community. In particular, he advocated a theology of "two covenants": "The coming of Jesus had abrogated the Old Testament law. The old had passed away and everything had become new" (175). The Lutheran reformers maintained a "one covenant" theory, in which the Old Testament, with its union of church and state, was of equal value to the New. Although Marpeck consistently maintained, perhaps due to his experience in government, that civil authority be respected, he urged ardently that the church community should have absolutely nothing to do with power: Jesus' resurrection "was the beginning of a king and a kingdom in which all violence, all vengeance, and all forceful coercion are forbidden" (176). The sword, he said, is equivalent to a preoccupation with property. And so the issue of adult baptism, as a sign of voluntary renunciation of a brutal world, became paramount to Marpeck." As soon as infant baptism were to be abolished," he wrote, "the disruption of the realm of the Antichrist would immediately follow" (207).

Eventually, Marpeck was expelled from Strasbourg for his dissident views, but the parting seems to have been on reasonably amicable terms. Throughout his lifetime, Marpeck was a negotiator, a conciliator, and in Appenzell, Switzerland, where he lived for the next few years, he attempted to resolve the legalistic, rule-bound strife that was already occurring among Anabaptists. His writing was "a ringing manifesto of Christian freedom from legalism and from what he calls *Eigentum* [literally, "property"], that is, everything that is outside of Christ. The meaning of this

term included actual posessions, but also social status, profession, reputation, and the fearful clinging to them" (222). Marpeck also in fact believed in a strong community, and this implied warnings to those who were perceived as wandering too far from the faith. All in moderation, however, and provision was "to be made for growth and development" (223), as Klaassen and Klassen express it.

Marpeck moved on to Augsburg in 1542 and lived there until his death in 1556, working once again as an engineer (with impressive successes and some spectacular blunders), organizing the few Anabaptist believers there, and writing voluminously. He must have been unspeakably busy. Women were some of his greatest supporters, and the authors of this book devote a fascinating "interlude" to some powerful female personalities. It was a time of war or threatened war and of great peril to dissidents. Marpeck never again engaged in public debate after he left Strasbourg – he knew when to keep his mouth shut – but must have spent huge amounts of time writing and publishing. Religious and state wars, he proclaimed, will ultimately simply lengthen the chain of violence. The authors write that "[t]irelessly throughout his writing, he called on his followers to identify courageousness with their Lord in his humble renunciation over every use of power to dominate and control" (326). In language that seems to resonate with the issues of today, "financiers," wrote Marpeck," have sold the Lord through envy and hate. 'Whole lands, armies, and peoples ... are betrayed, sold, and bought by their loans, finance, and usury'" (298).

Klaassen and Klassen rarely quote Marpeck directly. His writing was frequently repetitious and polemical, directed to a lay and sometimes illiterate Anabaptist community. But Marpeck was, besides being a shrewd organizer and keen thinker, a mystic at heart, and in that vein could express himself poetically. Of the Song of Solomon, and of the bride described there so erotically, interpreted by Marpeck as representing divine love, he wrote, "I ... have had only a glimpse of her form. This glimpse has created great longing in our hearts to see her again, fully and as she really is" (282).

Pilgram Marpeck was a man of quiet tolerance and unity, one of those special individuals who seem to grow kinder with age. The authors suggest that "[u]nlike Martin Luther or Menno Simons, Marpeck appears to have become less rigid and more accepting of those with whom he differed toward the end of his life" (334). He defined quarrelsome and legalistic opponents not as enemies, but as God's blind servants, and implored them to become instead God's beloved children. He advocated accommodation with the authorities, but on the other hand cannot, say the authors of this volume, be accused of an inner pietism of evasion or avoidance: "Marpeck lived on the edge, carefully navigating his fervent commitment to witnessing to an Anabaptist vision of the gospel alongside his more public persona as a highly skilled professional living in relative political and financial security" (308).

"The system of the one covenant," write Klaassen and Klassen, "was very alluring in 1540 because it relieved people from having to make a personal decision" (204). Adult baptism was a conscious and dangerous stepping out from the confines of mainstream conformity. Although Marpeck favoured a quiet lifestyle over an overt challenge to authority, he made an enormously risky personal decision. His legacy, even while Anabaptism disappeared from southern Germany and Austria, was long felt among the Swiss Brethren. And so, argue Walter Klaassen and William Klassen, it should be for us even today, as Christians continue to struggle with disunity, intolerance, and the call to war.

BOOK REVIEW

Lisa Weaver, Julie Kauffman, and Judith Rempel Smucker. *On the Zwieback Trail: A Russian Mennonite Alphabet of Stories, Recipes and Historic Events*. Winnipeg: CMU Press, 2011.

Reviewed by Robert Martens

The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; I have a goodly heritage.
Psalms 16:6

The book begins with A for Anabaptist, and then steps quickly through the alphabet all the way to Z for Zwieback: "What a delicious ending to our Russian Mennonite alphabet!" At first glance, *On the Zwieback Trail* might seem frivolous or superficial, skipping lightly over complex and controversial historical issues. And some might wonder if another book celebrating the Anabaptist/Mennonite heritage is appropriate in a time when that heritage is expanding far beyond its original ethnic boundaries. But *On the Zwieback Trail* turns out to be a delight. With its superb graphics and well-chosen snippets of information, the book is an excellent introduction to the Russian Mennonite heritage, especially for younger people or for newcomers to that tradition. The authors have succeeded in making history a pleasure.

As might be expected, this *Russian Mennonite Al-*

phabet dwells on the ethnic past: L for Low German, for example; or M for Mulberry trees grown for the silkworm industry; or Q for Question to the czar on Mennonite privileges in the Russian Empire. O is for the massive oak tree, now nearly dead, which was for decades a landmark and meeting place in Chortitza for Mennonite colonists. "Reverence and peace could be found beneath this tree," writes N. J. Kroeker, "which cast a spell like the biggest cathedral in Europe." And in S for Singing, refugee Justina Neufeld is quoted as saying that, despite her near starvation, "Singing ... was as necessary as food to us."

On the other hand, *On the Zwieback Trail* seems to go out of its way to emphasize Anabaptist/Mennonite values that might define the future of a non-ethnic group. Peacemaking is mentioned throughout. N for Nonviolence traces the Mennonite history of pacifist principles from alternative forestry service in Russia to public protests against the war in Vietnam. M for Menno Simons highlights his teachings on nonviolence: "The prince of peace is Christ Jesus. ... True Christians do not know vengeance. They are the children of peace, and they walk in the way of peace."

On the Zwieback Trail also stresses writing and literacy as a way of sharing the past and planning the future. U for Universities and Colleges documents the institutions of higher education established by Russian Mennonites in North America. I for Ink tells the stories of the Mennonite periodicals, the *Mennonitische Rundschau* and *Der Bote*, and refers to a longstanding love of reading and publishing among Russian Mennonites. When P. M. Friesen, for example, was asked in 1885 to write a history of Mennonites in Russia, it was expected that he would finish the project quickly, in as short a time as two weeks. Instead, his massive volume of history would be published in 1911 after 25 years of research and writing.

This *Russian Mennonite Alphabet* is packed with fascinating details, even for readers conversant with that history. W for Turkey Red Wheat chronicles the variety of wheat that Russian Mennonite migrants brought with them to Kansas and cultivated with enormous success. T for Tractors reports that after Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) was formed in the 1920s to help alleviate hunger among post-Revolution Russian Mennonites, "they realized they needed to provide more than the food itself – they needed to provide a means for people to grow their own food." Forty Fordson tractors were subsequently shipped to Ukraine. And K for Kroeger tells the story of a longstanding family business of fine clockmaking: "Kroeger clocks were made by members of the Kroeger family, beginning in Prussia in the 1700s. In the 1800s and early 1900s, they were made in the Chortitza colony in the village of Rosenthal. A Kroeger wall clock might have cost a family a month's worth of wages." Kroeger clocks are being repaired in Winnipeg by a family descendant to this day.

The tone of *On the Zwieback Trail* is usually light hearted and spirited, even gently comic. The Mennonite predilection for socializing over food – after all, many Mennonites had survived famine – is engagingly documented in F for Faspa, the traditional late afternoon snack. "A guest will never leave a Russian Mennonite home without Faspa," write the authors, and then go on to quote, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied." In Z for Zwieback, an enthusiast is quoted: "Toasted Zwieback is especially enjoyable when soaked and softened in one's coffee cup." And in B for Borscht, it is said that "Borscht seems to taste even better the second day, warmed up."

In fact, this volume accentuates the Russian Mennonite fondness for food, and includes a number of interesting recipes. P for Peppernuts, Pluma Mos, and Pancakes contains recipes for all three. The following is for peppernuts (*Pfefferntisse*):

1 cup sugar
½ t. nutmeg
1 cup brown sugar
½ t. cardamom
1 cup shortening or margarine
½ t. anise
3 eggs
1 t. baking powder
1 t. salt
4-5 cups flour
1 t. cinnamon

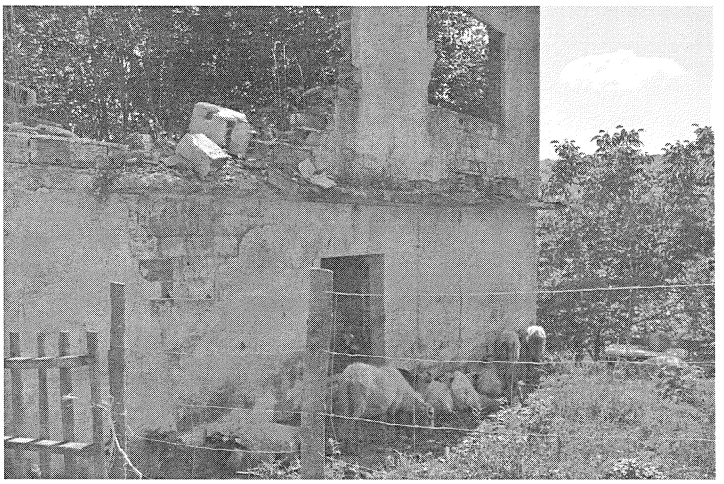
Mix ingredients one after another in order. Roll dough out in skinny ropes and cut in ½ inch pieces. You can lay 4 or 5 ropes out on the table and cut through them all at one time. Bake in 350° oven for 10 minutes.

On the Zwieback Trail also highlights the enforced wanderings of the Russian Mennonites, and here the tone turns tragic. E for Emigration, the longest entry in the book, chronicles the various waves of Mennonite emigration from Russia and the USSR: the 1870s migration to North America; the refugee flights of the 1920s and of World War II; and the *Aussiedler* (emigrants) relocation to Germany from the 1970s on. Emigration often occurred under conditions of intense suffering, but the Mennonites endured and carried on. At their best, they could be models of integrity. In G for God go with you, an elderly father

...continued on page 24.

Written into Each Other's Stories

by Jen Wieler



June 16, 2011

We wake up to the sound of birds – a sweet symphony of twittering, whistles, and melodious chatter punctuated by the occasional dog barking or cricket whirring. We've just spent our first night in Zecovi, a tiny village tucked away in the upper folds of gently sloping hills in northwestern Bosnia. The house we're staying in is one of the last along the dirt road. It backs onto an old orchard and is bordered by bright green fields which are dotted with herds of sheep, a few cows, and rag-tag goat packs. There's a constant thrumming of thousands of bees in the nearby clover fields. The sounds of this tranquil hilltop landscape are the perfect tonic for our recent city life in Belgrade, Serbia, where we've been serving with MCC for seven months. The absence of wheezing bus brakes, city trams clattering along their rails, and the throbbing bass of all-night dance clubs is a pleasure for our ears in this quiet village.

Twenty years ago in the summer of 1991, the village of Zecovi and many others like it throughout Bosnia were anything but a peaceful oasis. I shudder to think of the hellish sights and sounds the villagers here experienced while their Serbian neighbours helped the Bosnian Serb army "ethnically cleanse" the village of all its Muslim inhabitants. The men were rounded up, bused to unknown locations, or killed on the spot. Homes were torched and their foundations detonated. The house we're staying in for our mini-holiday has been rebuilt since that time and belongs to our friend Senad, who was a young teen in Zecovi back in the summer of 1991. Senad managed to flee to nearby Croatia with surviving members of his family, and a few years after that, he immigrated to Canada – to Chilliwack, British Columbia, to be exact, where he ended up in my husband's high school English class – a serious, too-old-for-his-years young man haunted by the memory of a village littered with the bodies of his friends, uncles, cousins, and his father.

And now *our* family of five is here visiting Zecovi so many years later – in 2011 – enjoying the promise of a bright summer's day and the warm hospitality of Senad's many extended family members who returned to live in the village after those dark times. We've already had several visitors since we arrived yesterday. A cousin of Senad's who lives next door, Juja, has come by to gesture us over to his house for a visit whenever we're ready, and Hilmo, another relative, has driven over in his dusty VW Golf for the

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...continued from page 23.

who is staying behind in Russia writes the following letter in 1900 to his emigrating children:

> Beloved children! Take to heart the things that come from the heart; for it is my utmost desire to stand at the right hand of God with all of you.
> Avoid debt as you would avoid the devil.
> Be especially concerned in all your statements to be accurate.
> Promise little, but keep the smallest promise.
> By diligence, honesty and painstaking integrity, make yourself worthy of your employer.
> Hold onto a higher ideal than anyone places before you.
> Use your energy on your own business.
> Do not speculate or gamble.
> Never speak evil about anyone.
> Forget not the God of your father and your mother.
> Do not despise small churches or modest ministers.
> Do not strive for advantages, but rather seek to be humble. Read the Proverbs and the writings of the New Testament frequently.
> The Holy God go with you and protect you."

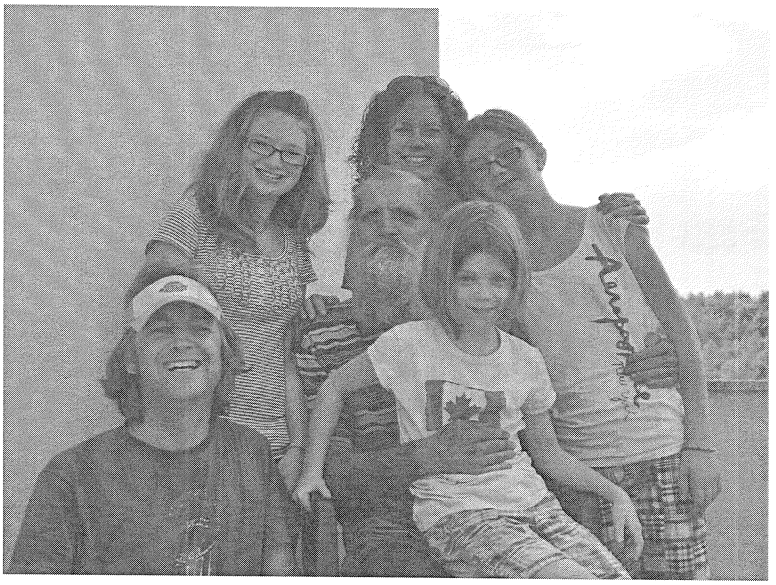
Words spoken in the spirit of tradition and heritage: do they sound old fashioned today?

On the Zwieback Trail can be purchased at the Mennonite Historical Society Archives.

first of several daily check-ups on our wellbeing and also to invite us on a tour of the village. Apparently Senad has been busy back home in Chilliwack – emailing and phoning his relatives to ensure that we're well looked after while staying in the family home that he's rebuilt over the years on return trips to Bosnia during the summer months.

But Senad's relatives certainly don't need any prompting to be neighbourly – none in the least. It's obvious that hospitality is a deep-seeded instinct here. I remember Senad explaining to us that before the brutal Balkan wars carved up what was then the country of Yugoslavia, he and his family were friends with Serbs who lived in the area. Being a Serbian Orthodox Christian or a Muslim did not keep people from sharing a meal in each other's kitchens or sipping home-brewed Rakia (a potent plum brandy) together on their porches. And even as the onset of war in 1991 was tearing at the fabric of multi-ethnic villages like Zecovi, the kitchen table still had the power to diffuse violence and remind people of the peaceful ties that used to bind them, as in the case of Senad's father, who – weeks before being shot – offered a meal one night to some Serbian military commanders who drunkenly stormed through the front door of his house. The fact that Senad is alive today is due to the mercy of a Serb militia member who'd been a friend of the family in former peaceful times; it is this man who was responsible for pulling Senad out from the rest of the men who'd been rounded up, telling him to go run and hide in the cornfields to escape being shot.

I'm thinking of this story as our family walks down the dirt road to the house of Senad's cousin, Juja, who lives next door. It doesn't matter to Juja that we are Christians who've been volunteering in Belgrade, Serbia, working alongside Serbian Christians. He beams as he finds us places to sit around a low table placed on the dirt floor of his garage. This is the only space big enough to accommodate all of us for a visit; most of Juja's house is still boarded up and uninhabitable; he and his wife and their two daughters currently live in their tiny basement. We're served freshly picked berries, sweets, mineral water, pop, and, of course, the ubiquitous Turkish coffee. It's hot and the flies buzz around us, but Juja and his wife Almira never waver in their earnest efforts to communicate with us in the little English they know, we trying the same with our extremely limited Bosnian. Despite our often comic attempts at expressing ourselves, our visit with Juja and Almira reminds me of the sacred space that's created when people open their home and themselves to others, inviting strangers in and allowing these strangers to see the reality of their lives (the rough garage standing in for what was once a comfortable living room in better times), and treating the strangers as honoured guests who are worth all the time that it takes to try and understand them through painstaking conversation.



Wieler family with Hilmo.

The next day spent in Zecovi we encounter more such sacred space, this time when we invite Hilmo to stay for coffee before he takes us on a tour of the village. Hilmo is in his early 50s, but his toothless grin, matted grey hair, and prophet-in-the-wilderness beard give him the appearance of a man older in years. Hilmo lives in his still-damaged family home at the other end of the village, donating all of his time, money, and energy to his unofficial role as village statesman and advocate. It's because of Hilmo's fundraising efforts that Zecovi now has its own school.

As we share a morning cup of Turkish coffee and Hilmo smokes up a storm, we chat together in broken German, learning about Hilmo's desperate flight from the village during the war and about his life as a refugee in Germany for three years. We tell Hilmo about a peace initiative in the nearby city of Sanski Most where MCC has partnered with a local Muslim organization to promote peace education and events that bring together both Bosnian and Serbian young people in the region, and we also share about our MCC assignment back in Belgrade where our entire family has been volunteering at Noah's Ark Kindergarten, a Christian preschool and kindergarten that promotes peace and trauma education.

While Hilmo's still sitting at the table, our middle daughter, Zoe, asks if he'd mind if she sketches him, and when she finishes and presents Hilmo with the portrait, he's very touched. He presses it to his heart,

...continued on page 27

Roots by David Waltner-Toews

not about Rudy Wiebe, but for him

Rudy Wiebe, wiping the sweat from his brow,
calls a spade a spade.
He has a spade in his hands.
He is digging a hole near Winnipeg
in the middle of a potato field.
He has blisters on his hands.
He has roots on the brain.
He is looking for his roots.
One foot down he unearths
a nest of potatoes.
Two feet later he has an aching soul
and a sore foot.

His spade has struck a bone.
It is a dry bone.
It gets up and walks around.
Rudy is not sure if it is an ankle bone
or a hip bone.
It may be the bone of a buffalo
dropped by an Indian's arrow or of an Indian
killed by Mennonite good fortune.
Perhaps a Mennonite died here
of overwork and too many potatoes.
Most likely it is the bone of a cow
that choked on a potato.
Rudy Wiebe cannot tell for sure
what kind of bone it is.
He watches the bone walk out to the road
and head toward town.
The people of Winnipeg ignore the bone.
To them, it is just another drunk Indian.

After the bone
Rudy Wiebe takes a lunch break.
He sits beside the hole and eats
rollkucken with watermelon.
After lunch he continues his search.
There is a lot of dirt in the hole.
There is a lot of dirt in Winnipeg.
The bone gets tired of Winnipeg
and comes back out to the field.
It sits on the nest of potatoes
and watches the top of Rudy's head
going up and down in the hole
between sprays of dirt.

By nightfall Rudy Wiebe
is up to his ears in dirt
but he still hasn't found any roots.
He tilts back his hard hat
shoulders the spade
and trudges home,
bone in hand.
How was your day? asks his mother.
No luck, he says
hanging up his hat.
Maybe you are right.
Maybe my roots are in Russia.

My my, says his mother.
You have enough dirt behind your ears
to grow potatoes.
Rudy pulls a nest of potatoes
out from behind his ear.
Rudy and his widowed mother are very poor.
For supper they have potato soup
with a bone in it.
When I was a girl in Russia,
says Rudy's mother,
we ate this all the time.

First published in *The Impossible Uprooting*, McClelland & Stewart, 1995. By permission of the author.

David Waltner-Toews, born in Winnipeg in 1948, is a poet, essayist, fiction writer, veterinarian, ecosystem health specialist, father, husband and professor. Based at the University of Guelph, he teaches about, and does research on, the social and ecological contents for diseases people get from animals (zoonoses). (http://poets.ca/members)

Roots and Branches

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looks at Zoe with his piercing blue eyes, and tells her that when she returns to Zecovi someday he will ask her to sketch another one for him. This is the first of several occasions that Hilmo refers to a future return visit on our part. He seems certain that we'll be coming back.

The rest of the day spent with Hilmo includes some spontaneous cherry picking, a tour of the village mosque, and a drive to a nearby restaurant where Hilmo insists on buying us cappuccinos and multiple bottles of pop (much to the delight of our girls). I'm touched by the way he has welcomed and hosted us during our visit to Zecovi. Throughout the rest of our stay in the village, Hilmo will continue to drop in daily to chat and to see if we need anything.

That hot afternoon, as we sit in the restaurant visiting with Hilmo over our drinks, I reflect on the fact that we wouldn't be there if it weren't for my husband, Gary, befriending Senad, the young Bosnian refugee who showed up in his classroom almost 20 years ago.

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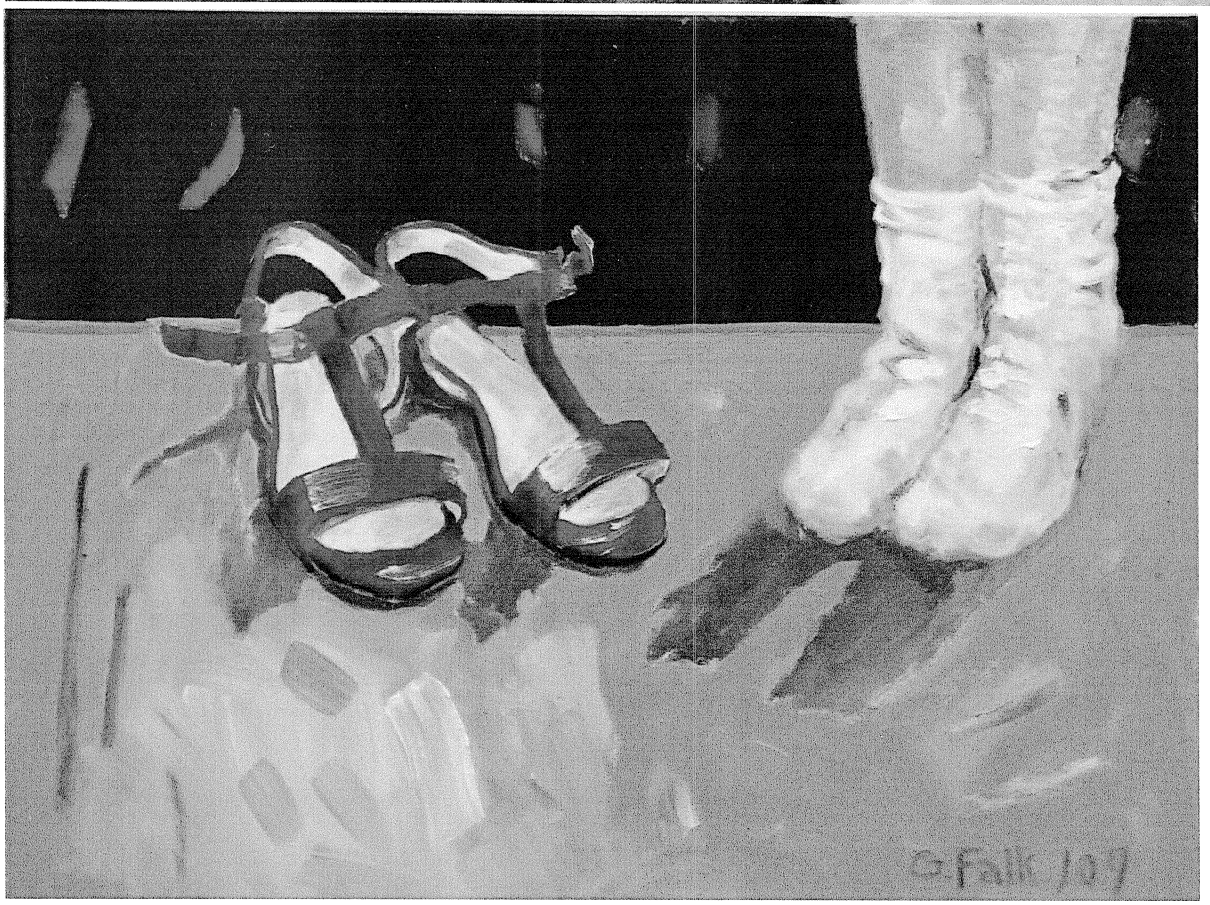
We've gotten together with Senad, his wife Alma, and their two young sons Amar and Eldon several times since our return to Canada this past summer. The first time they came for supper, we showed them pictures from our trip to Zecovi in June and listened to more of Senad's stories from that terrible summer of 1991. He does not recount these stories with hatred or bitterness. I marvel at the way the atrocities committed against Senad's village have not destroyed all of its people nor their capacity to once again extend their hand in friendship to those of a different faith. This, to me, is beautiful evidence of God's renewing, restorative work among the nations, of his love and compassion for every one of his creation.

I am so thankful that our family has become a part of Senad's family's story, a story that's being written by the Prince of Peace, and I'm thankful that they have become a part of *our* story, as well. I look forward to the pages and chapters still to come.

Jen Wieler is a high school teacher in Chilliwack, B.C. She and her husband, Gary, and their three daughters completed a short-term MCC assignment in Belgrade, Serbia, for eight months in 2010/2011. They attend Highland M.B. church in Abbotsford.

Juja and Almira outside their house.



Above:
Gathie Falk, *Crybaby*, small paintings series.

Left:
Gathie Falk, *Red Shoes and Socks*, small paintings series.