



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



Painting by Jacob D. Sudermann. See page 26 for book review.

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Editorial

Mennonites and Humour: a two-edged scalpel

By Maryann Tjart Jantzen

As a ten-year-old, I remember sitting around the kitchen table at my family's farmhouse and laughing until my belly ached as extended family shared funny stories of my *Oma*, who had just died at the age of 92. In this situation, humour was a way of celebrating her passing and also of coping with the grief of loss. From my memories growing up in the Mennonite community of Greendale, it was often the literal, frequently earthy Plautdietsch that was the linguistic vehicle for humour, rather than serious "church" High German.

Humour has many facets, and Mennonite humour is no different. It can delight; it can create camaraderie; it can provide solace in the midst of trauma and hardship; and in the form of *spott*, it can be an equalitarian way of levelling hierarchy and assigning identity, as in the Plautdietsch combining of occupation and last name, for example, *Stur Janze* (store Janzen), or of adding a slang prefix, as in *Ompke* or *Mumpke Panna* to describe those perceived as too full of themselves. And Plautdietsch abounds with pragmatic witticisms designed to undercut pretension, such as *Aules haft en Enj, Bloss ne Worscht nijch. Dee haft twee Enja* (Everything has an end, except a sausage. It has two ends). Or *Dee weet nijch fal; Dee es blooss hinj'rem Owe oppjewosse* (He doesn't know much; He grew up behind the oven). (<http://deepmiddle.blogspot.com>).

But humour – including Mennonite humour – can also have a darker side: it can be a way of perpetually deflecting conflict or of mocking those who are different – and sometimes of creating stigma. And Mennonites have surely also been the brunt of cruel racial/ethnic jokes about the strange German-speaking "country bumpkins" who were perceived to be invading *Englische* communities.

This issue focuses on some of the ways humour has and continues to function in a Mennonite context. Who could have imagined even twenty years ago that Mennonite comedians would draw sell-out audiences, both Mennonite and non-Mennonite? And that they themselves would be satirized in a website like *The Daily Bonnet* (See articles on performers Matt Falk and Corny

Rempel). In this issue, we also revisit an excerpt from one of Arnold Dyck's comic 1940s Koop and Bua stories, in translation from the original Plautdietsch. Through these and other feature articles we are attempting to provide a snapshot of what tickles our funny bones.

At its best, I believe, humour keeps us from taking ourselves too seriously, helping us to laugh at ourselves and our foibles and to be more accepting of each other's failings.

Letters to the editor

Regarding my Ord family article in the previous issue: I'm hoping my momentary mix-up of names wherein wires crossed regarding the Ord family's one-time maid (i.e., Margaret Derksen, not sister Susie) perhaps by way of the error might inspire someone to sometime write a piece about either or both of these most deserving community-minded (now both deceased) women of Yarrow. Or perhaps a piece on the *Nähvereine* (ladies' sewing circles) that abounded, and still do, perhaps, in Mennonite communities, as that is mainly how I personally picture the sisters who both happened to be part of the same group as my mother, though these sisters were certainly busy with much else. They were members of the Mary Magdalene circle. Off the top of my head, if I'm not mistaken, I also recall the Dorcas Ruth circle, the Naomi circle, and I think the Willing Helpers, and that was just in my little hometown. I assume there was a far-flung network of such service and industry in neighbouring villages and towns and cities across the province(s).

Note, in a non-related error in the same article, I indicated that H. & I. Peters, the long-time latter-day owners of the Ord property, purchased the place circa 2000,




Long stories, and longer peels—family laughter among the Neufeld, Born, and Reimer families in Volendam, Paraguay, c. 1956. Photo: courtesy of Julia M. Toews

when it was in fact a decade earlier (1989). Thanks.
Larry Nightingale, Vancouver

I am responding to a statement in *R&B*, reported by Robert Martens. Right column, first sentence. "Mary Derksen ... was on board the very last train of Mennonite refugees to escape the Soviet Union." The article does not provide information about the date of departure. But we do know that some of our relatives left Russia via Moscow as late as 1929, and perhaps even 1930. Then there are also others who were on the Great Trek in the 1943-5 period, not necessarily moving out by train (some walked, some had a horse and buggy), but perhaps some did ride the train, or at least for some of the route. This may all be clear to other readers, and perhaps I have misread this sentence. Thank you.

Margaret Friesen



A Centre for Transnational Mennonite Studies Conference

MENNONITES AND ANTHROPOLOGY:

Ethnography, Religion,
and Global Entanglements

October 25 – 26, 2019

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 25

8:30 am – 3:15 pm
Panel 1: Mennonite Anthropology
Panel 2: Race & Ethnicity
Panel 3: Economic Transformation
3:45 – 5:00 pm
Keynote Address:
Mennonites, Anthropology
and History: A Complicated
Intellectual Relationship
7:00 – 9:00 pm
Panel 4: Rituals

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 26

8:30 am – 5:30 pm
Panel 5: Dissension
Panel 6: Missions
Panel 7: Discipline
Panel 8: Archaeologies
Panel 9: Bodies

KEYNOTE SPEAKER
(VIA SKYPE)
JAMES URRY
Victoria University of Wellington

FREE Admission
Register at Conference
University of Winnipeg
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mennonitestudies.uwinnipeg.ca/events

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Image by Miriam Rudolph

Upcoming Events

Yarn & Garn

Bring your craft project & a friend or two. Informal; drop in. MHM Coffee Shop. Thursdays from 1:30pm to 3:00pm at the Museum.

Fall Films begin mid-September at the Museum with Host, Dr. Harold C. Ratzlaff.

Registration required. Call: 604-758-5667. Movie starts 1:30pm. For film details, see the website mennonitemuseum.org

Sept 17 & 19—New Beginnings: Mennonite Refugees to South America

Sept 24 & 26—Pioneers in the Chaco

Oct 1 & 3—Remain in Me

Oct 8 & 10—Through the Red Gate

Oct 15 & 17—Through the Desert Goes Our Journey

Oct 22 & 24—Menno's Reins

Oct 29 & 31—Clearbrook MB 75th Anniversary

Nov 5 & 7—Mennonites in Mexico, 75th Anniversary

Fall Gallery Exhibit at the Mennonite Heritage Museum

Gareth Brandt's Anabaptist Stories

Book Launch

Author Victor Wiens presents his book: "Refugees and Ambassadors". Free event.

Saturday, September 21, 2019 at 2pm

MHSBC Fall Fundraiser: Matt Falk

Tickets on sale now, and selling fast! Wear your Menno Shirt (available for purchase at the Museum) *Would you like to SPONSOR this event?* Call the MHSBC at 604-853-6177. www.mhsbc.com

October 5th, at 7pm

October Book Fest Book Sale

Lots of German books will be for sale in the Museum foyer for the month of October.

MHSBC Genealogy Workshops

Registration begins in October.

November 8 & 9, 2019

Annual Christmas Market: *Christmas at the Museum*

Cozy Christmas Concert Series runs during "Christmas at the Museum". Let Jennifer know if you or your group would like to perform! info@mennonitemuseum.org

November 18-23, 2019

Last Open Day for 2019 December 13, 2019

First Open Day for 2020 January 13, 2020

Matt Falk: Mennonite Funnyman

Two years ago, Mennonite funnyman Matt Falk packed the house when he performed in Abbotsford for an MHSBC fundraiser. Falk returns this fall at a bigger venue, Abbotsford Arts Centre, doing his *schtick* once again for the Historical Society. Don't miss it!

7 pm, Saturday, 5 October 2019.

Tickets are available at the Historical Society Office or online at mhsbc.ca.

Falk's talent hasn't been overlooked by the popular satirical column, *The Daily Bonnet*. The following isn't strictly true.

Matt Falk's 'That Mennonite Joke' Rakes in Three Billion Dollars at the Box Office

By permission from the *Daily Bonnet: Your Trusted Site for Mennonite Satire* (<https://dailybonnet.com/>)

Niverville, MB

Comedian Matt Falk's new film *That Mennonite Joke* has just surpassed James Cameron's *Avatar* to become the highest grossing film of all time at the global box office.

After a triumphant star-studded premiere at Steinbach's Keystone Cinema in February, the film has travelled the world smashing box office records in every country it has played, culminating in a total of 3.1 billion dollars.

There were lineups around the block when the film was screened in London this past month with Emma Watson and Benedict Cumberbatch in attendance. Oscar-winning actor Eddie Redmayne also raved about the film.

"Matt Falk's performance, in particular, was incredible," said Redmayne. "I worked with an accent coach for months in *The Theory of Everything*, but Falk, well, the man's a natural."

Obsessive British fans came dressed as Mennonites, complete with suspenders and flower dresses, and were seen sipping Pepsi from Matt Falk-emblazoned collectible cups.

"The film was also quite successful in China," noted director Orlando Braun. "They love Mennonites there. They just get us."

When adjusted for inflation, the 1939 civil war epic *Gone with the Wind* still remains champ, but industry insiders are optimistic

MHSBC FALL FUNDRAISER 2019

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MATT FALK

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@7pm
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Matt Falk
Comedian
"...was called 'Effortlessly
Funny' by the CBC. He's per-
formed at Just For Laughs,
The Halifax Comedy Festival
and the Winnipeg Comedy
Festival. His debut album,
Apple Pie & Scars is currently
being played on Sirius
XM and was named one of
the Top 10 Comedy Albums
the year of its release. Both
of his comedy albums
reached #1 on the iTunes
comedy charts."
<http://mattfalkcomedy.com/>

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that the Falk film will break that record, too. A two-page spread in *The Hollywood Reporter* called the film, "box office gold."

Inspired by the film, critic Leonard Maltin is said to have acquired vacation property in southeastern Manitoba.

"The movie got me hooked on *faspa*," said Maltin from his Niverville estate. "Great cinema can do that to you."



Andrew J. Bergman, editor of The Daily Bonnet. Photo: Daily Bonnet website

Elvis Impersonator Corny Rempel: Comedian Extraordinaire

Introduced by Maryann Tjart Jantzen

Last February, on vacation in Mazatlan, Mexico, my husband and I invited friends from Winnipeg to join us at an event featuring Elvis impersonator Corny Rempel, from Steinbach, Manitoba. They agreed, not knowing what to expect, but wondering audibly if anything funny could come out of Mennonite Southern Manitoba.

However, only a few minutes into Rempel's virtuoso performance, they were laughing heartily, something that continued for much of the evening's performance (one of two sold-out events). Rempel alternated his rendering of Elvis tunes, performed in elaborate costume and with great gusto, with witty commentary on a variety of subjects. While his brand of humour is accessible to a broad audience, we Mennos in the audience took great pleasure in being part of the "in-crowd" when he occasionally used his ethnic/religious background as comic material. For example, in another performance a few years ago, I especially enjoyed his Spanish vs German *schtick*, in which he *spotted* about the contrast between romantic-sounding Spanish and utilitarian, pragmatic

The lack of
Mennonites in the
Rock Hall was
"embarrassing"...

German, comparing the sensuous musical sounds of "I love you" in Spanish with the guttural German "I liebe dicccchhhhh." Or the Spanish version of his name, the romantic *Cornelio*, with the Low German *Kjnals*, resonating with exaggerated consonants and harsh sounds.

My husband and I have had the privilege of attending three Corny Rempel events during our vacation time in Mazatlan, Mexico over the last decade. Although we are not Elvis impersonator fans per se, we have never been disappointed, laughing our way through his performances. Laughter indeed is a good medicine.

Corny Rempel is an award-winning Elvis tribute artist and comedian who has performed across North America for fifteen years. He has also played to packed houses five times in Mazatlan, Mexico. Corny is a morning radio host/DJ in Steinbach, Manitoba. He also does voicing for



Photo: www.youtube.com

cartoons, websites, movies, and video games.

Corny is featured in a documentary called That Mennonite Joke which has been picked up by Bravo. Recently Corny has also been performing as Johnny Cash and has even sung with Cash's sister Joanne Cash Yates. Corny plays Elvis like no one else. His facial expression and gestures are uncanny and his voice is a dead ringer. The thing that makes his show unique is Corny's humorous twist. He loves entertaining and it shows in his non-stop, highly energized hilarious performance. (https://www.cornyentertainment.com/about_corny.htm)

Corny Rempel Inducted into Rock and Roll Hall of Fame

By permission from the *Daily Bonnet: Your Trusted Site for Mennonite Satire* (<https://dailybonnet.com/>)

Cleveland, OH

Local Elvis tribute artist and radio personality Corny Rempel is set to become the first Mennonite elected into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

"As far as the Rock Hall is concerned, this was a long time coming. For a man of his talents to not be in the Hall, well, that's just unthinkable. He's been snubbed for far too long," said Rock Hall president Greg Harris from his Cleveland office.

Harris cited numerous contributions from early Mennonite rock pioneers such as Aganetha Penner, known mostly for her drug-fueled autoharp solo at Woodstock and Henry Dueck's *The Dark Side of Yantzied*, a seminal

Menno-rock album which some listeners still insist can be synced up to play with *The Wizard of Oz*. The lack of Mennonites in the Rock Hall was “embarrassing,” said Harris. “We’re happy to finally be remedying that.”

After numerous second and third place finishes at international Elvis competitions, Rock Hall voters, which include critics from around the world, selected Corny Rempel for his “otherworldly ability to evoke the spirit and essence of the King of Rock, while successfully repressing a thick Low German accent.”

“I’m at a loss for words,” said the usually loquacious Rempel, sporting a tight white sequined jumpsuit. “To

think that my name will be up there with Buddy Holly, The Beatles, and Elvis himself. It’s quite the honour for a young lad from Steinbach.”



Corny Rempel performing his signature Elvis tribute.

Photo: www.steinbachonline.com

Previous Rock Hall inductees offered well wishes. “I always thought the real Elvis was over-rated compared to me,” said 80-year-old Jerry Lee Lewis, “but when I hear Corny Rempel belt out ‘Suspicious Minds,’ I get goose bumps. Literally. Look, touch my skin right now.”

The ceremony, which will attract dignitaries and celebrities such as the Dalai Lama, Snoop Dog, and Wolf Blitzer is set for July at Randolph Garage, a few miles down a dirt road west of Steinbach.

“Koohschiet!!”

By Wilfred E. Penner

Some time near to my ninth birthday, this incident occurred. We lived in an aging house on the windswept yard of Clear Springs School, in a rural community named Great Deer, Saskatchewan, about 25 miles northeast of the nearest town, Borden. From about late October to mid-May most people in the community left their cars on blocks in garages. Finally, after a long prairie winter, plus the weeks of thaw and drying before the dirt roads were dry enough to be navigated by car drivers, the days of waiting were finally over. The old 1928 Chevy was off the blocks and standing outside of the garage, so that Mother could wash and clean it. By the time school was dismissed, she had finished the job.

It was Friday and, after supper, our family was looking forward to driving to the Borden Mennonite Brethren Church, about four miles distant, to attend a missionary report and slide show; so Mom not only had cleaned up the Chevy, but also had the kids’ dress clothes ready for the evening. While we three older siblings could, more or less, dress ourselves, Mom had sewn a pretty new dress of white cotton print, decorated with



Little Orpha.

Photo:
courtesy of
Wilfred E.
Penner

red cherries, for four-year-old Orpha, which she was to wear that evening. Before suppertime, there was one chore that Daddy had to perform: he had to milk Rosie, our red and white Shorthorn cow. By this time, she was out to graze during the day along the road allowance, tethered to an 8-gauge wire between two pegs.

However, she had to be led to the well, which was located on the road allowance down the hill from the schoolyard, to have a good drink, and then led to the cowshed on the schoolyard, a narrow shed under a lean-to attached to the coal shed, to be milked and fed her grain ration.

So it happened that Daddy was in the cowshed, milking Rosie, and the rest of us were ready to sit down for supper. Orpha, already in her new dress, decided that she would go to the cowshed to tell Daddy to hurry, and then accompany him to the house. When she got there, she opened the door, which swung outward when opened, just when a rogue wind gust struck the door, knocking Orpha off her feet and into the manure gutter behind the cow. Suddenly, we at the house heard a distressed cry from the little dirty girl, as she ran toward the house, crying, “*Koohschiet, koohschiet!!*”

Supper had to wait, while Orpha got another bath and a less pretty dress to wear to the slide show at church, and there probably was a more hurried supper, and dishes left to be cleaned up when we got back from the “show.”

Fritz Reuter: A Mennonite Favourite

By Robert Martens

A near-complete edition of the works of Fritz Reuter has found a home in MHSBC's rare book collection. It was donated by John B. Toews, who appended a note: "Fritz Reuter was a 19th century North German writer who wrote in both Low German and High German. He was known to Mennonites in Ukraine. This is a rare 1898 edition of his collected works (Vol. 1 is missing)."

Reuter was more than "known to Mennonites" – he was extremely popular. Ted Regehr observes in his history *Mennonites in Canada* that in the early twentieth century, Canadian Mennonites were writing Low German plays and dialogues, mostly comedic. "Some of this material was similar to, or even plagiarized from, the writings of Fritz Reuter." Plautdietsch (as Mennonite Low German is now known) dramas by Arnold Dyck and Jacob Janzen, "together with pieces by Reuter, generated laughter in communities where Low German was understood and spoken" (292).

Stormy beginnings

It's strange, perhaps, considering Reuter's turbulent early life, that his writing would be so popular among Mennonites. He was born in 1810 in Stavenhagen, a small town in Mecklenburg, northern Germany. In 1831 he



Fritz Reuter
Photo:
Wikipedia

began to study law at the University of Rostock. When he moved on to the University of Jena, Reuter joined a student political society, *Burschenschaft Germania*, for which he was arrested in 1833. This was nearly the end of Fritz Reuter. He was condemned to death for treason, but got a bit lucky when the sentence was commuted to thirty years in prison by the king of Prussia, Friedrich Wilhelm III. Then Reuter got even luckier: in 1840 he was freed in an amnesty proclaimed by the new king, Friedrich Wilhelm IV.

At the age of 30, Reuter continued his legal education but was forced to drop out after his father, discovering that Fritz was not focused on his studies, discontinued the subsidization of his son's education. Fritz was simply, one assumes, having a good time. Reuter Sr. died in 1845, and things got both worse and better: Fritz learned that

he had been disinherited, but the unfortunate situation compelled him to settle down and do something with his life. He worked as a tutor, married Luise Kuntze, the daughter of a minister, and began to write.

Reuter's fame as a writer grew over the next decades. He wrote in both High and Low German (Plattdeutsch), but despite the difficulty many Germans might have had in reading dialect, his sense of humour won the day. Reuter wrote poetry and prose; his best work, according to some, was a novel, *Ut mine Stromtid* (*During My Apprenticeship*). He was now a solid citizen worthy of a good Mennonite's respect. Reuter was granted an honorary doctorate from the University of Rostock before he died in 1874.

East Low German

Fritz Reuter did not write in Plautdietsch (that is, Mennonite Low German) but his works would nevertheless have been quite easily understood by Mennonites. The picture is complicated, of course, but in a nutshell – East Low German dialects, spoken in northeastern Germany as well as northern Poland, include Brandenburgisch (in Brandenburg); Mecklenburgisch-Vorpommersch (Mecklenburg-Vorpommern); East Pomeranian (Pomerania and parts of Brazil where Germans settled); Low Prussian (the vicinity of Danzig, but the dialect is nearly extinct); and finally Plautdietsch, which originates in the Danzig area and is spoken by Mennonites in North and South America.

The following poem is written in Mecklenburger Low German, interspersed with some High German. The character of the shy lawyer might have appealed to Mennonites. Being of the elite, he speaks, naturally, principally in High German. An English translation follows.

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“De Rekning ahn Wirt,” by Fritz Reuter (1810-1874)

„Gu’n Morgen, Herr Avkat, mi is do wat passiert.

Mi het dor up de Strat so’n unverschämtes Dirt

Von Köter in de Beinen beten

Und mi en Stück ut mine Buxen reten.

Dat is ’ne ganze nige Hos,’

Und ick wull Sei dat bloss mal fragen,

Ob ick den Kirl nich künn verklagen,

der so’n bettchen Hund lett los’

Hier ob de Straten rümmen gahn?”

„Gewiss, mein lieber Freund, das können Sie!

Der Eigentümer von dem Vieh,

Dass Ihnen solches angetan

Und Ihre Hose riss in Fetzen,

Muss Ihnen selbige ersetzen.”

„Süll’t woll drei Daler föddern können?”

„Gewiss, dass können Sie! Für diese schönen

Und neuen Hosen ist das nicht zu viel.”

„Na, Herr Avkat,” sagt Möller Thiel,

„Denn geben S’man drei Taler her.

Wil’t Ehr oll Köter wesen ded.”

„Mein Hund? – mein Pollo biss Sie in die Waden?

Nun gut! Ich glaub’s und stehe für den Schaden:

Hier sind drei Taler für die Hosen.

Was recht ist, muss auch recht bestehn

Und sollt’ die Welt in Stücken gehn.”

De Möller lacht so recht gottlosen

Un denkt: De hesst du richtig nommen!

Strikt sick dat lütte Geld tausamen

Un will gehorsamst sick empfehlen.

„Halt, lieber Freund!” seggt de Avkat,

„Ich kann es Ihnen nicht verhehlen,

dass in beregter Sach’ für Müh’ und guten Rat

Drei Taler sechzehn Groschen mir gebühren.

Nun weder rut mit de drei Taler,

und söstein Gröschen bi geleggt!

Denn kommt de Sak erst richtig t’recht.

Recht, Fründing, möt as Recht bestahn,

un süll de Welt in Stücken gahn!”

**“The Worthless Account,” by Fritz Reuter. Translated by
Peter Krey from the Low German of Mecklenburg**

“G’mornin, sir Advocate, your honor,

Something just happened to me –

out in the street; this mangy critter,

this shameless dog, came over

and bit me in the leg,

and ripped my pants to a shred.

Now this is a brand-new pair

And I would like to ask you there,

Could I lodge a complaint

Against the guy, because people cain’t

allow dogs that bite

to run around wherever they might.”

“Most certainly, I say, my dear friend, you may.

The owner of that canine

That perpetrated such a crime

To have ripped your trousers into shreds

can be required to replace your threads.”

“Would I be allowed to charge three dollars?”

“Certainly, you could. That price

should just suffice. Three dollars

is not too much for trousers

That are so nice.”

“Well, sir advocate, your honor,” said Moeller Thiel

“Then fork over three dollars, my dear sir.

It was your mangy dog, your mangy cur!”

“My dog, little Pollo bit you in the calf?

Very well, I’ll take responsibility on his behalf.

Here are your three dollars

to buy yourself some new trousers.

What’s right is right so right increases

Or else this world will go to pieces.”

Moeller laughed a derisive little laugh,

Pleased with himself for his skillful gaff.

Pocketed the money and no longer peeved,

was just about to take his leave....

“Stop, dear friend,” said the advocate.

“Duty bound am I to inform you

That for my expertise and advice, too

Three dollars and sixteen cents are due.

So out with your three dollars

And add sixteen cents thereto

And now this case is rightly through.

What’s right is right, my friend, so right increases

Or else this world will go to pieces.”

A Plautdietsch Cookbook

By Robert Martens

When I'm doing intake on donations to the Mennonite Historical Society of BC, a lot of rare and odd items land on my desk. A recently donated cookbook written entirely in Plautdietsch might qualify, I'd think, as a little rare and odd. Some readers may argue with that.

The title is *Met Helen en de Kjäkj* (With Helen in the Kitchen), and is written by Helen Funk, who at the time of publication (2007) was working for the Family Life Network. It might be best for Helen to introduce herself:

"Helen Funk is married to Jacob Funk. Jacob and Helen both come from Paraguay and have three grown children and four grandchildren. Helen Funk comes from a family of sixteen children, eight boys and eight girls. Helen is number ten in the family. Jacob and Helen Funk came to Canada in 1947, where Helen worked for fourteen years as head cook.

For the last three years Helen has worked, alongside her husband, with the Family Life Network in Winnipeg, Manitoba, producing the radio program for children, *Komm Kjikje!* (Come See), and on the women's program, *Met Helen en de Kjäkj*. Women have often asked if the recipes Helen broadcasts on radio might possibly also be seen in print.... Here is the first recipe book.... Lord willing, Helen Funk might soon begin a second" (Funk frontispiece; translated by RM).

Just a little history (after all, this is a historical publi-

cation): In 1947, Henry Brucks and Henry Poetker, both students at the Mennonite Brethren Bible College in Winnipeg (MBBC), felt called to originate a radio gospel ministry. The college administration was not enthusiastic – the two Henrys had \$1.98 between the two of them, and the radio project would cost thousands. But the duo persisted, and by 1950 the *Gospel Light Hour* became an agency that broadcast in several

languages and was supported by 150 volunteers.

The times changed, as they usually do, and since the *Gospel Light Hour* had always had a strong Mennonite Brethren base, in 1954 the Manitoba MB Conference adopted the radio program. In 1976 the ministry was renamed as Mennonite Brethren Communications. And this lasted until 2000 when it transitioned to an independent agency called Family Life Network. Enter Helen and Jacob Funk. Jacob was named director of the German-language radio ministry in 1995; Helen joined the Family Life Network in 2004. The couple retired in 2013, although Jacob still maintained some connections.

The Funks left the Network when technology was changing faster than ever. In 2014 the ministry was once again re-christened, this time as Square One World Media Inc. Square One broadcasts globally in multiple languages, and of course has embraced YouTube, Facebook, and internet streaming. The two Henrys could not possibly have imagined.

But back to Helen Funk's charming and amiable cookbook, which mixes recipes with chitchat and Plautdietsch humour. Here's an example. Can you decipher it? How good is your Plautdietsch? (I resorted to an online Plautdietsch/English dictionary.)

Sources

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A recently donated cookbook written entirely in Plautdietsch might qualify, I'd think, as a little rare and odd. Some readers may argue with that.



Jacob and Helen Funk. Photo: www.squareoneworldmedia.com/about/archive

Jebrodne Donuts

2 Kuffel Mäl	2 Teeläpel Backpulwa
¼ Teeläpel Solt	2 Eia
½ Kuffel Zocka	1 Kuffel Malkj
1 Teeläpel Vanilla	

En eene Dieech Komm ria dän Zocka, Eia, Malkj un Vanilla toop. En eene aundre Komm ria daut Mäl, Backpulwa un Solt derchenaunda.

Ria nu aule Sache goot derchenaunda, un moak eenen wieekjen Dieech.

Strei waut Mäl opp dän Desch un Roll dän Dieech soo denn ut, aus dien kjliena Finja dikj es. Dan drekj dän met eenen runden Aufdrekja auf, un nem eenen Neihoot un moak doamet een Loch en de Medd. Nu stal dee Paun met Fat opp däm Owe un moak daut Fat goot heet. Dan brod dee Donuts von beid Siede brun. Laj dee opp Papia daut aul dat Fat auflakje kaun.

Mie denkjt daut noch soo kloa, woo miene Groosmame soone Donuts muak. Un wan see ons dee toom äte jeef, saut Groospape biesied un säd: “Kinja paust oba opp, daut jie nich daut Loch opp äte woare.”

Aus Kjint wia mie daut nich gaunz dietlich, waut Groospape doamet meend. Un wie vesochte dan uk bloos rom dait Loch to äte, bott we enworde, daut doa aul nuscht äwa jebläwe wie. Un dan säd Groospape: “Nu hab jie doch daut Loch oppjeäte!”

Dee kjliene runde Bauls, von ut de Medd, deed ekj uk emma brode, un daut wia emma daut scheensta fäa onse Kjinja. (Funk 23)

From the Archives: The Autobiography of C. C. Peters

Introduced by Robert Martens

The articles which constitute the brief autobiography of C.C. Peters were first published in the *Mennonitische Rundschau*, May 9, 1973, to September 5, 1973, in sixteen instalments. They were translated by Anne Barga in 1980, transcribed by Elisabeth Klassen, and edited by Robert Martens. The translation is available at the MHSBC library.

Cornelius C. Peters was born March 17, 1889, in Sergeyevka, Fürstenland Colony, in South Russia. In 1909 he married Katharina Hildebrand, and with her had one daughter and four sons, including Frank Cornelius, who later became a prominent educator and served as moderator of the Canadian Mennonite Brethren Conference. In 1920

Katharina died and Cornelius married Anna Reimer; they remained a married couple until her death in 1971.

Cornelius Peters, who in Canada would be known as "C.C.", had a passion for schooling and education that lasted a lifetime. He began a career as a teacher in South Russia but that was cut short when he and his family fled the crumbling Russian empire and immigrated to Canada in 1925. In his new country, Peters taught first at Herbert Bible School in Saskatchewan while also ministering to the Herbert Mennonite Church congregation from 1925 to 1930. The Peters family then moved to Agassiz, BC, where they operated a dairy farm, an occupation that was not at all to Cornelius' taste. He must have been relieved when, in the mid-1930s, he was given the opportunity to teach at Eden Bible School in Yarrow, BC.

Between 1947 and 1959, C.C. and the rather sickly Anna Peters served in the educational systems of Mennonite colonies in Paraguay, Brazil and Uruguay. It was an experience that touched C.C. deeply and also inspired his profound admiration for the work of Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) representatives in those areas. He died in 1973 in Ontario.

C.C. Peters was a man of considerable girth and a voice that required no amplification. Having grown up in poverty, he maintained a life-long compassion for the poor and dispossessed. He was also a man of great wit,



Cornelius and Anna Peters. Source: GAMEO

intelligence, and humour. Both his concern for human suffering and his sense of self-deprecating humour are manifest in the excerpt from his autobiography which follows.

Section 4. The First World War

The entire country was caught in war hysteria. War! War! You heard that cry everywhere. Down with all Germans! Germans are enemies! You heard that both locally and provincially because the war fever against Germany had become so hot. And in these cries and posters we recognized the threat to our villages. The Russian reserves were mobilized, and shortly Mennonites were called up to do service in the Medical Corps. That is how I first got my call. I was sent with four hundred men, all Mennonite, to Yekaterinoslov and from there to Moscow. In great haste we were drilled, given our medic uniforms, and sent to the Caucasian front. I could relate some really interesting things from that trip that would not reflect well on some medics. But it was war, and now cleanliness and even politeness were rare. When brute strength makes all decisions, consideration for your fellow man – in fact any consideration at all – is often far from a priority.

With completely blackened lights the train rolled into Kars. Kars [taken by the Russians from the Turks in 1877] was the fortress we were holding. We were ordered to “silently disembark,” and were marched to the “F” wing of the fortification. The huge wire fences separating us from our enemies were only a hundred yards away. So this was the front! Our trainload of medics had been dispersed to the various front fortifications. I was stationed at Fortress Kars – and sent to the drug dispensary. When we entered the dispensary the commandant asked gruffly, “Which of you knows Latin?” I thought he meant the Latin alphabet [often known as the Roman or Western alphabet] as opposed to Gothic script [traditional German script]. Having wrongly understood the question, I stepped forward and said, “I am such a one, Excellency.” Without further ado he handed me the keys to the drugs and poisons cupboard. “You will be held responsible for the dispensation of poisons and drugs,” he said. Overwhelmed, I reached for the keys; only I was aware of my quaking hands. The keys seemed to me to be rattling but I couldn’t say now that I had misunderstood and wished to back out.

And did I ever have to learn and learn and then learn again! Some rather unusual incidents occurred during that time. A medical doctor rushed into the dispensary and said, “Please give me some ‘radium autylo-salycilicum.’” [Peters’ Latin chemical names seem rather fanciful.] Not wishing to poison anyone, I said, “Sir, we are completely out.” He went towards my cabinet and peered in and said, “Well, it’s standing right there.” I said astonished, “But that’s aspirin, sir.” He turned and looked at me with a withering glance that I won’t soon forget.

Or: I remember the day a nurse came into the dispensary and said, “Please get some ‘sape viridis’ for me.” I replied with the standard answer I used when I didn’t understand, “We’re fresh out of that, Sister!” She looked at me and said, “How did you run out so soon? We had six tons of it the other day.” With that she rushed past me into the anteroom and, standing beside a large barrel, said, “Here it is.” And I answered, “But that is just green soap!” She also gave me a funny look!

At another time a doctor asked for ‘t-ra nucis vonrica,’

and again I came back with, “To the best of my knowledge, we don’t have any.” He also looked in my locked cabinet, found it, and said, “Well, here it is.” I said, “But sir, that is strychnine.” Again a strange look was sent my way. It was in that manner that I learned until I finally could do most things without help or strange looks.

The battlefield was very close to us, and at night we

had to bring in the wounded. I believed that I would not be able to stand all the blood and heavy casualties without fainting. However, I found it wasn’t the blood and wounds that were hard to bear but rather the deep, probing eyes of the wounded. In those eyes, I saw a world of endless sorrow. And even today I can still see those eyes.

In truth it could be a chapter in itself, this crawling out for the wounded and transporting them to the trains but I will not speak further of that. One thing soon drew my notice: soldiers divide themselves into two groups. One group believed in God and tried to seek him even here. The other group became greater devils than I had ever seen before. These latter weren’t so much concerned about killing the enemy; rather, they derived delight from

torturing them. And these were helpless, wounded enemies. Again and again some words written by the poet Schiller came to mind. In his poem, *Das Lied von der Glocke* (The Song of the Bell), he writes this description of war:

“Nothing is considered holy,
Every bond of civil decorum is loosed,
The good makes room for evil,
And every vicious, profligate deed is cheered.”

I remember the chaplain of our unit coming in, clearly distraught, and blurting out to me, “War is a crime! War is a crime!”

Finally, in 1917, I was mustered out of the army because I was a teacher. I was shipped to Kuban Settlement [in the North Caucasus] because they said that is where I belonged. The village there asked me to become teacher of their school. I have always enjoyed teaching, and so it was with love for my work and genuine dedication that I worked there until 1919. And then revolution came to Russia.



Cornelius C. Peters as medic in the First World War. Photo: Rundschau

Koop and Bua Go Traveling

By Arnold Dyck

Translated by Al Reimer, University of Winnipeg

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Arnold (Abram Bernhard) Dyck (January 19, 1889-July 10, 1970) was a Russian Mennonite writer born in Hochfeld, Ukraine. Dyck immigrated to Canada in 1923, residing in Steinbach, Manitoba where he purchased and edited the *Steinbach Post*. He is best known for his humorous "Koop enn Bua" books, and his autobiographical novel *Verloren in der Steppe* (*Lost in the Steppe*). His books are among the first publications in the Mennonite dialect of Plautdietsch. His work is regarded as influential not only in establishing and recording Mennonite humour, but as establishing Plautdietsch as a written language. In later years, he moved to Germany, where he died in 1970 (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arnold_Dyck).

With *Koop enn Bua opp Reise* (*Koop and Bua on the Road*, 1942-43) [Dyck] began his popular series of Low German comic novels depicting the travel adventures of his two naive "bush" farmers from rural Manitoba. Two sequels -- *Koop enn Bua faore no Toronto* (*Koop and Bua Travel to Toronto*, 1948-49) and *Koop enn Bua enn Dietschlaund* (*Koop and Bua in Germany*, 1960, 1961) - further established Koop enn Bua as comic characters with universal appeal (GAMEO).

Part 1

About Bush Farmers in General and our Friends in Particular "A-f-f-u-uh ..." Bua sighed hard.

He was all out of breath. And he was sweating, so sour it had gone for him.

Slowly he pulled his *schneppelduak* out of his pocket and wiped his face.

At least two hours he had been sitting by his neighbor and friend Isaak Koop in the *grootestow* on the sleep bench and urged him on.

In love he had urged him and in anger, all the way from soft to loud.

Once he had even crashed his fist down on the table. But scared himself doing that and looked back jumpy at

the corner-room door; because-what she was, the *Koopsche*, she couldn't stand such table pounding. And Oomtje Bua was scared of her. He always said she was an angry wife.

And when Koop finally said yes, Bua, like I said, was all out of breath.

What riled him most was that Koop, who had started with this trip himself, now said he'd just been joking. Joking!-By gosh, why would Koop be joking, he never joked other times!

But finally they saw eye to eye: they agreed to make that trip to Saskatchewan. Four of them: they two, and Teews and Wiens, their neighbors, they would take along too.

Maybe I shouldn't be making such a fuss over this trip. My goodness, Saskatchewan isn't on the moon. And people have gone there before. And come back too. Who knows, maybe people travel there every day and come back again. But that's just it: people like Koop and Bua don't travel there every day.

Koop and Bua—in case you haven't met them before—are farmers somewhere in south-eastern Manitoba not far from the Red River, in the bush. Or struck-brush—as some call it. A pair of ordinary struckfarmers, of whom there are many there.

But they are not called struckfarmers because they sow struck instead of grain. No, they don't do that. They don't need to do that because struck and stones grow there all by themselves. Just let 'em grow and you've got 'em.

When these folks do sow something, wherever they can among brush and stones, then it's wheat and barley, oats and rye. They also plant potatoes and raise cucumbers and other vegetables.

The women and small kids dig seneca roots, hunt for wild strawberries, blueberries, cherries and whatever else grows among the struck and stones that can be eaten or even sold.

In winter the men cut firewood to sell, take care of the stock and catch bush rabbits by the ton.

Na, and in season they shoot deer, prairie chickens, grouse and wild ducks. Once in a while this or that one is supposed to have been shooting out of season too. I only know that from hearsay, though, and it probably isn't true anyway. Probably not, I'd say.

Wolves and bears they shoot the year round, or hack at them with a hatchet when there's nothing handy to shoot them with. And of course that isn't against the law because these animals tear their sheep to pieces in the

fences and drag their pigs out of the pens.

All this shows that these folks live quite close to nature. About the way old Rousseau wanted it. They don't do it because of the old man, though, they do it for their own sake because they've always done it that way and aren't used to doing it any other way.

As for their neighbors farther north, the wheat-farmers, the ones with the big tractors and combines, with their two-storey homes and eight-cylinder cars, they don't think much of struckfarming. Some of them don't care much for struckfarmers either. But they're wrong in that. You shouldn't always judge people by their money bags. It's not uncommon for a fatbellied moneybag guy to fall short of a hollowbellied guy with his flabby snap purse in at least one thing. And that is in natural, simple humanity.

That must have been exactly what old man Rousseau meant to be the important thing. And that's what I mean too. Even if what I mean doesn't count for much.

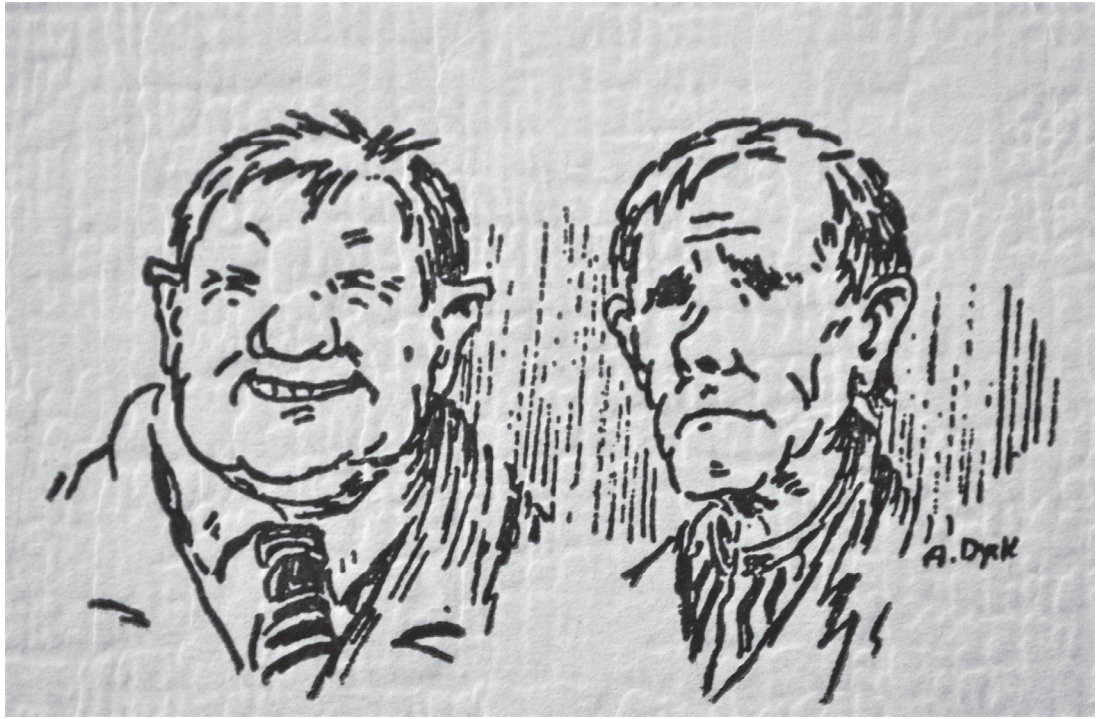
Yes, that's the way those folks in the bush are: fair to middling in doing and not-doing, straight and true in their thinking and speaking. They speak the way they drive in the bush: tight around the corners and cross-countryna prostets, as we say *opp plautdietsch*, or by a *schortkott*, as we also say *opp plautdietsch*.

It's because of their direct ways that these folks in the bush appeal to me.

So when I heard that some of my friends were going on a big trip, I said to myself: you've got to go with them, you'll have a good time with them.

And if any of you want to go along come on, we'll squeeze together in Oomtje Koop's car. The two on the sleep bench have already decided to make the trip in that.

The morning they were to start out finally came. Jasch Bua was the first to drive into Koop's yard. There stood the travel car all ready. And she looked ship-shape. The



Koop and Bua. Drawing by Arnold Dyck

boys had given her a good wash. And they'd done even more: they'd smeared the rust spots over with black paint, and wherever something had been tied down with binder twine they'd painted the twine black too.

"Yep, I tell you, there's nothing wrong with the old gal, she's fit to be seen," said Bua to himself after he'd eyeballed the vehicle from all sides. He was just checking the springs to see if they were stiff enough to carry his weight, when Teews suddenly arrived. And he had Wiens, the Russlenda, with him on the buggy.

"Hallo-good morning!" Bua shouted at them. "I tell you, we're ready to get going just about any minute now."

And so they were, with Koop himself now coming outside and joining the three others, who stood there admiring the car.

Now that I've got our travelers all together in one pile, I should take the time to introduce them to you one by one. After all, you want to know who you're dealing with. And the four oomtjes can all be seen clearly right now, even though it's still a bit early and the sun hasn't come up from behind the bush yet.

The easiest to see is Bua himself. Not only because he's the fidgety sort-scampering about and poking his hands in the air the way he always does. But on top of that there's just more of him to see. I mean on the outside.

You might say, of the four he has the greatest air displacement. To tell you the truth, he's barely medium tall, but everything about him is built pretty much on the wide side. You have to wonder how in his bare fifty years he could have eaten together such a nice pile of lard. It sits mostly where an ordinary person has his "waistline-that's how refined people call it if I'm not mistaken-the thinnest part between shoulders and seat. That means, Bua's legs, as far as you can judge from his twisted pant legs, are hard put to hold this "waistline" above ground and push it around, even though they are nice and round and solid, if a bit bowed. A bit considerably bowed. But they didn't get crooked because too much weight was loaded on them. No, it wasn't that. Apparently he bent them himself forcibly when he was still lying in the cradle. At least that's what the ladies have told me, the old *mummtjes* who know all about such things. Even then he already had a fair little belly-some of the *mummtjes* had even wondered if that might be another kind of "English" disease, like rickets. Anyway, he kept bending his little legs over his little belly trying to cram his feet into his mouth. And so his little legs finally grew crooked and stayed crooked too.

Whether it all happened in exactly this way-I don't know, you'll have to ask the *mummtjes* yourself.

Bua's head and face are like the rest of him, round and easy to see of course. He is ruddy of skin, has blond hair, and if he'd worn a beard, who knows, it might have been not quite fire-red but at least pretty reddish.

For the rest, Jasch Bua is a friendly man and quite likeable. What you have to get used to is that he's always in the right and that he can talk just about anyone to death.

As for Isaak Koop, the angry Koopsche's man, he's the exact opposite to Bua in every way. Well most ways at least. In age and stature they're pretty much the same. But that's where the resemblance ends. In appearance and nature they differ like day from night.

Whatever is pushed out in Bua, in Koop is pushed in. Where Bua is assertive, Koop is unassertive. And so on. You have to get down to their legs to find a resemblance again. Koop's legs are crooked too. But that's where the comparison breaks down again. Bua's legs curve outward, Koop's inward.

And that's why their overalls also stop resembling each other over the years. Bua's gets patches more on the

outside, Koop's more on the inside.

When they speak the two are very different too. When Bua speaks, he tears off a good strip, so that it was worthwhile starting. And he speaks so he can be heard easily. Na, as far as that goes, with his arm-flapping he can easily be seen speaking too. When he talks he sounds like a brand-new Russian box-wagon, the kind with a swon-a ringing sound-that is fresh and pleasant. Koop talks, and it's like an ancient Russian powos-farm wagon-creaking, and you've got to be alert to understand anything.

When you come right down to it, Bua has already talked Oomtje Koop to death, and you seldom hear the powos-creaking. He must have laughed him to death too -never in my life have I heard Koop laugh.

That's how they are, these two. I sometimes think that Koop and Bua should be tossed back into the baking trough, kneaded through again and freshened up completely. You should then take the dough-or whatever stuff you ended up with-and not just cut it in half approximately, but make each piece the same by weighing it off exactly. That would give you a pair of really fine oomtjes. But then I've never heard of that being done, maybe it's not even possible, so I suppose the two will have to use themselves up as they are. But it's too bad all the same.

How these two ever found each other and became friends-that belongs to those few things before which the world still stands in darkness.

Then there is also Jaun Teews. He'd be around sixty. A tall man. A bit portly. Slow and deliberate in manner. Slow and deliberate of speech. And he says very little. He's a quiet man who smokes pipe.

Jaun Teews' face and clothes always look a bit dressed up even on weekdays. Today he looks his Sunday best. It even smells like Sunday best around him: he's smoking his Sunday best tobacco today.

And the fourth, that's of course Wiens, Peeta Wiens. If Koop was introducing him to you, he'd probably add: but he's a Russlenda-meaning that he was one of those strange Mennonite refugees who came from Russia in the twenties and that there was nothing more to say and you could now ignore Wiens. That's Oomtje Koop for you: he just doesn't lilce Russlenda.

But even if he is a Russlenda I'm going to say a few words about Wiens.

He must be well into his forties. A bit on the tall side. Tall and slender. A fine-looking man really, and I can't

His listeners sat
around him and
enjoyed letting
his horrible
stories make
their flesh creep.

think of anything in his figure I'd want to improve. There's something rather striking about his face. Not that there's anything wrong with it, even if his nose is a bit long, his lips a bit thin and the whole face on the angular side. That's not what I mean. But there's something restless in his face, a nervous quality, as educated people would call it.

His eyes are strange too: at times they seem to see nothing, at other times too much. As though they can see directly through anything. It's a bit creepy and you get the feeling that inside Wiens is not quite the calm, steady guy he seems to be on the outside.

Wiens doesn't talk much either. But that doesn't really reflect his nature.

When he first came to this continent he is said to have talked a lot.

He came to America via Siberia and China. For months he apparently wandered through those Siberian forests with nobody around to talk to. Some say that's how he lost the habit of talking. But, like I say, to begin with in the States he talked a lot. And the people there listened to him eagerly. Over and over he had to tell about Russia and about Siberia. And about how it had been in the typhus epidemic and in the famine. His listeners sat around him and enjoyed letting his horrible stories make their flesh creep. Then suddenly he fell silent. People tried to get him to tell more so they could keep on enjoying the feelings of horror. But he remained silent.

When he left the States and came to Canada, here to the bush country, he was already the way he is now: of what happened in Russia he says almost nothing. Except to Oomtje Teews. But he's started joking with Bua, and laughs with him too. Who knows, maybe these bus11 folks and time itself will in the end get him back to normal.

Having packed their food boxes and whatever else they were taking in the car, our travelers now climbed in themselves. Koop and Bua in front, Teews and Wiens in the back. One of Koop's boys-they had come outside in the meantime-had to crank on, and after the engine had sneezed and banged a couple of times, the car sprang loose. She had the habit of starting with a jolt. Or maybe it was Koop himself who had the habit. At least one of his two boys, watching the car leave, said: "*Furratje* will never learn to start properly." The other just nodded. And as they trudged towards the barn the second one

shook his head and said: "I just hope things go well with the *oolasch* on their world tour." The "*oolasch*" themselves had no such concern.

And why should they! Who could possibly think of misfortune on such a beautiful morning.

And the morning was beautiful. By all appearances the weatherman had pulled an exceptionally bright morning out of his weather chest and draped it over the earth just for our friends.

But it only looked that way. This morning was no different from other days. The only difference was that other days our friends looked at the sun and all she shone on with different eyes.

It was the same here as it always is in life: the way you see things is the way they are. Yep, and when do you see the world as friendlier than on the morning you are starting out on a grand sight-seeing trip!

And that's how it was for our travelers: they thought they hadn't seen such a fine morning in a long time. Well, I really can't say as much for Koop. Even today he had put on his sour-pickle face. Maybe he didn't have any other, then again maybe he thought it was good enough for Saskatchewan, where the dust never stopped blowing. Anyway, he sat there behind the steering wheel with his everyday face and didn't look right or left. Mind you, they were still driving through the struck and over stones, a~ldyo u have to keep the reins tight on such an old Ford or it starts bucking.

So it may have been quite normal travel worries that made Koop's face look so black, and I repeat I don't want to say too much against Koop.

When it came to Bua, though, there was no doubt that he was the right man to travel. He showed that from top to bottom. Today the whole world was for him one big bagpipe. And he wanted to keep it that way. Which meant dragging out his food box with a lot of groaning and panting because his belly kept getting in the way.

But you shouldn't right away think that Bua cared only for food, and that he had no eye for the other beautiful things in life. No, you shouldn't. Who knows, he may really have been hungry. He had been too excited and concerned over whether the trip would really come off, whether Koop would back out in the end or something else might cross them up. So how could he help being hungry now that they were finally on the move!

I mean to say that he wanted to eat because he was truly hungry, even though I have to admit there are people who like to grab a bite when they are enjoying themselves. So they can enjoy themselves even more.

St. Peter am Kammersberg

By Betty Wall

The little red Opel hugged the narrow mountain road. Late spring snowflakes fell lazily from the sky.

"So, this is the mountain your mother didn't want you to hike with that boy?" I asked Mom. She laughed nervously, holding on to the door grip as a tourist bus squeezed past us. "*Ja! Der Großglockner!*"

"Who was he?"

"Just a boy from the village."

"From the old village in Russia or St. Peter in Austria?"

"St. Peter."

"Does he still live here?" We had just arrived in St. Peter the day before.

"I don't know. I don't even remember his name," she said.

It was snowing harder now. Huge flakes swirled around us. "Maybe we should turn back," Mom said. Halfway down, the road was clear and alpine flowers in bursts of blues, pinks, purples, and yellows appeared around every corner. Before long, the village came into view.

A cluster of homes, the local pub, a *pension* or two, nestled in a little enclave surrounded by mountainside farms.

"Your dad used to work for one of those farmers up the mountain," Mom said. "His name was Moa, or something like that."

"We could ask in the local pub if he's still around," Alf said.

We parked at our *pension* and walked across to the pub. It was midday and some of the locals, mostly men, were seated on barstools having a beer.

"*Grüss Gott!*" the bartender said as we walked in.

"What can I get you? Beer?"

"Sure," Alf said.

"And for the ladies?"

"Apple cider," I said. "Two, please."

I took a sip of the cold drink. Ice cold, carbonated and



St. Peter am Kammersberg, postcard circa 1945. Louise Bergen Price collection.

slightly alcoholic. I turned to Mom. She took a big sip, and looked at me with surprise. "I think there's something in this," she said.

"Where are you folks from?" the bartender said.

"Canada," Alf said.

"Canada! *Mein lieber Gott. So weit weg,*" he said, shaking his head.

"My mom and dad lived here after the war. Do you know a farmer by the name of Moa? My father worked for him."

"*Ja, freilich.* He died a while back," he said crossing himself. "His wife and sons still live up the mountain. Just follow that path and knock on the door. They'd be thrilled to see you. Canada," he said, shaking his head. "Such a long way."

"Ready to do some hiking?" Alf said, looking at us.

"Of course, let's go," we said.

We walked down the road, turned left as instructed and headed up the mountain. I grabbed a stick along the way and handed it to Mom. We huffed and puffed toward the small house at the top of the mountain. The grass was high all around us.

As we got closer, Mom took the lead, walked up to the solid wooden door and knocked. A dog barked. I heard steps shuffling toward the door. I looked at my brother and grinned with nervous anticipation.

The door opened. A short, plump woman, dark greying hair pulled back in a bun, stood there, looking at us quizzically. "*Grüss Gott,*" she said. She wore a faded

black dress belted at the waist, and felt slippers.

"*Grüss Gott*," Mom said, extending her hand. "My husband, Jacob, worked here right after the war."

"Ah," she said, "there were many who came."

Mom pulled out a photo of my dad.

"*Ach, mein Gott*," Mrs. Moa said, clasping her hand over her mouth. "This is your husband? Come in, come in."

She opened the door wide. She motioned for us to sit at the heavy wooden table. The floor was made of packed dirt.

"Peter!" she shouted. "Hans! We have company. From Canada."

Within moments, two strapping young men in their late twenties or early thirties appeared.

"Fetch some *Apfelmost*," she said, "and *Speck*. I will cut some bread. Canada," she said again, clapping her hands.

She turned to Mom. "These are your children?"

"Yes," Mom said, introducing us. "Betty and Alf."

She clasped each of our hands in turn. Her hands were worn and wrinkled, the nails short and lined with dirt. She grinned, a couple of teeth were missing.

"Oh, Jasch, he was soooo handsome. All the girls liked him," she said.

I looked at Alf and grinned. We could hardly contain ourselves.

The boys returned with a jug of apple cider and a big wooden cutting board laden with *Speck*, which was nine-tenth fat with a narrow strip of lean. Thick slabs of dark, heavy bread sat beside it.

"*Tja, mein Mann*, God rest his soul," she said, crossing herself, "died a few years ago. Right in the field. Peter found him." Peter and Hans, both sitting at the table, looked down. "Good thing I've got these big boys to help with the farm."

"Peter needs a wife," she said, looking at me.

I pretended not to understand. I looked at Alf. He grinned. "Listen to her," he whispered to me in English.

"You should stay here," Peter said.

"I need to go home to Jacob," Mom says, "he's waiting for me."

"Not you," he said, "the young one."

There I was, 18 years of age, my thick auburn hair in braids, tall and robust, a farmer's wife indeed. I felt myself blush.

"Eat, eat," Mrs. Moa said and handed each of us a one-inch piece of *Speck* on an equally thick slice of bread.

"*Danke*," I said.

"*Ach*, you speak German?" she said, laughing. "That's perfect."

"*Ein bißchen*," I said.

Hans poured a glass of *Apfelmost* for each of us. I sank my teeth into the *Speck* and almost gagged. The flavour was smoky and nice, but the texture...! I chewed and chewed, then took a big gulp of cider. My head started buzzing. Alf looked over at me and saw me struggling. Under the table, he showed me his napkin. He had already placed his partially chewed *Speck* into it and motioned for me to do the same. I tried to do it discreetly, when it fell out of my hand. Within seconds, the dog scooped it up. Mom meanwhile, ate her whole piece, and downed the glass of cider.

"What's Jacob doing in Canada?" Mrs. Moa said.

"Farming," Mom said.

"Like here?" she said. "In the fields?"

"Well, yes, but mostly chickens. We have thousands of laying hens."

"Thousands? How is that even possible?"

"It works," Mom said, without going into detail.

"And with chickens and eggs, you can make enough money to fly here from Canada?" She shook her head in disbelief.

Mom looked at the two of us. "Well, shall we get going?"

We nodded and made to get up. "You're going already?" she said. "Let me give you some bread and *Speck* to take with you."

"That's all right," Mom said, "thank you."

"You're not staying then?" Peter said, looking at me.

"She has to study," Mom said.

"Say 'hello' to Jacob," Mrs. Moa said, taking Mom's hands in both of hers.

Halfway down the mountain, Alf opened up the napkin he had stuck in his pocket and flung the remaining *Speck* into the fields.

"I couldn't do it," he said.

"We were very grateful for *Speck* and bread after the war," Mom said sternly, marching down the hillside ahead of us. "Once you've starved, you're very thankful for a bit of grease and bacon."

Betty Wall was born in the Fraser Valley to Russian Mennonite parents. She is a Graduate of CMBC and the University of Toronto. Apart from living and working in Vancouver as a translator, she also studies writing with Barbara Turner-Vesselago.

How We Survived Famine

By Irene Plett

My father, Peter Plett, has always been a good eater who cleans his plate. That happens when you survive starvation more than once. On July 7, 2017, I interviewed him about his experience of famine in 1930s Neu-Schönsee, Sagradovka Mennonite Settlement, Soviet Union. Below is a slightly edited transcript of the interview published on YouTube (https://youtu.be/KPRofBu_MkA).

My voice is in italics. - Irene Plett

We were starving, you know? We had nothing to eat. All the wheat and the grain had to be shipped away, but we could keep those weed seeds. And they were distributed to people to live on, make soup and whatever it is what you could use.

Wheat seeds?

Weed seeds.

Weed seeds?! Seeds of weeds?

Yeah, from weeds. Not wheat. Wheat was shipped away. We had to deliver all that. And there was only enough wheat left in the village to seed in the spring again, or the fall. So we were, the people were starving, because this was the only thing we could have.

Water, we did have. We had wells. We could drink the water, but that was just – we were swelling up, you know. Legs were all swollen up, and arms, because of the water that we had in our bodies. From starvation. The rest of the body was starving, but only kept us alive because we had moisture.

There were no cats or dogs or anything alive left. That was all already used up. Animals in the farm, we had food for the animals, like straw and hay and stuff like that, that kept them alive, and that's how we had some milk. Milk was distributed to each person, each family, so and so much. So at the end of the winter, a lot of cows had died too. And some of them, when they died, they were eaten up by the people.

They didn't get enough food, either.

Yeah.

It was a collective farm still, right?

Collective farm, yeah. Stalin took all the wheat and everything out, and sold it to other countries. And Russia – Ukraine was a menace to Stalin, because Ukraine was always independent and they were quite wealthy, and had a lot of land, and they produced the wheat and all the seeds, barley and everything, corn, that's where it grew. But he took it all out! And let the people starve. *They weren't allowed to keep any wheat for themselves?*

Very, very little, and what we were allowed to keep, that didn't last very long, and then it was gone. And so that's the way it was.

My family survived. None of our family died. That was a miracle. We were all swollen up and so on, but we didn't pass out.

In the springtime, there were a lot of mushrooms growing, and we ate the mushrooms. That's what kept us alive in the spring. And I had so much of it, that I was tired of eating mushrooms. When I was in the army, they gave us mushrooms and I didn't like to eat them, but I did eat them, because you had to eat something. But I never did like mushrooms too much after that. I eat mushrooms now, and I like them, but at that time, no. (chuckles) We had too much of it.

But the grass grew very fast in spring, and that's what helped, kept us alive.

Grass?

Outside weeds, you know, the grass. All different kinds of grass was growing in the spring. Some plants with big leaves (motions), "*Luddage*" (?) we call it, but it was a different kind of grass. But that's what kept us alive. Because my brother, Henry, and I, we always had to go, and we gladly went into the fields and hedges and so on, and cut the grass, and brought it to mom, so she could make soup.

As soon as the spring came, then some of the mice that are in the fields, they came up out of the ground, because they were in the ground over winter. And there was very little meat on these mice, but we caught those mice, field mice, we called them. And I had a bucket of water, and I put the water into the hole, and then as soon as the bubbles came up, that's when the mouse came right away. And my brother Henry, he was so fast, and so quick (motions) to

There were no cats or dogs or anything alive left. That was all already used up.

grab them, and kill them.
And that's what we brought
home, and then we had good
meals! (chuckles) Field mice.
How did your mother --

We skinned them, and
there was a little bit of meat
on them, and that's what
mom used. And the skin, we
dried up in the sun, and we
sold them for 5 kopeks each
skin. There was a store in our
village, they bought the skin,
and they sold them to other
establishments that made
something from skins. But
that's what we did.

*Oh my goodness! What did
your mother do? How did she
prepare them?*

Well, she cooked them,
that's all she had, with water,
you know?

In soup, or?

Yeah.

So you had mouse soup.

She made soup from it, yeah. That was a delicious
meal for us! That's all there was, and it was the best thing
we could think of. Yeah, but there were a lot of field
mice in the fields, and they came up, and we caught
them.

You had the system worked out.

Oh yeah. Henry and I, we were very good at it.
(chuckles) We brought quite a few mice home, skinned
them. (chuckles)

Amazing.

Yeah. It was quite something. But to stay alive, you
have to do anything that is possible.

Yeah. And you were quite small at this time?

Yeah, well I was born in 1926, so this was in the 30s.
Yeah, but I remember it very well, the experiences that
we had. Starving, and just didn't have nothing, that's it,
you know?

Was it over in the spring then?

In the spring, as soon as the grass came out, we stayed
alive, because there were vitamins in the grass. Spring
came, and then the people started – and gardens, and so
on, and fruits, so that's where we kept alive.

Okay. Did it continue the following year, do you think,



Irene Plett with chocolate chip cookies. Photo: <https://ireneplett.weebly.com/blog>

or was it just the one?

I believe it lasted two years.

Two years. Wow.

Yeah, more than one year. Into the second year.
Sad.

It was pretty sad, so many people that we knew in the
village, that died. And just for nothing.

What ages of people?

Oh, any age. Many of them were young people, and
they just couldn't survive. Those were terrible times.

But your family continued to have faith.

My mother (Anna Plett, née Graewe) had a very
strong faith, and she would never give up the faith in the
Lord. And she was just, even at those times, she was
singing her wonderful songs with the guitar accompany-
ing, and she would always sing and talk about Christian
principles and so on. She was very, very strong that way,
and I am very thankful that we had such a mother.

*Irene Plett is an award-winning writer, poet and animal lover
living in South Surrey, BC. More stories can be found at her
blog, <https://ireneplett.weebly.com/blog>. Peter Plett enjoys
gardening, travel and spending time with friends and family.
He lives in Surrey, BC, with his Nicaraguan-born wife, Nola.*

“Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord ...” (Rev. 14:13)

“In memory of our dead in Russia”

By Gerhard Hein (GH), Sembach, Germany. Published in *Der Mennonit*, November 1951.

Translated by Wilfried Hein (WH in the text)

The following letter of a Russian-Mennonite woman [Johanna or Hanni Wiens, née Hein] miraculously reached her brother [Gerhard Hein] in Germany during the short-lived time of the German-Russian Peace Treaty in 1940. In it, she shares her experience of losing both her husband and mother within one week. All our correspondence, before and after the peace treaty, was lost, except for this letter. One year later, the author of the following letter was deported from the Ukraine to Siberia, along with thousands of other Russian-German Mennonites. Another year later [in 1942], the recipient of the letter [GH] walked through his mother's bedroom where she had breathed her last breath. He found the unkempt cemetery where she had been buried but could not identify her gravesite [in Nikolayevka] since everything was overgrown.

Comment by WH: My father, Gerhard Hein, while serving as translator in the German forces during World War II, visited the village of Nikolayevka in the Ukraine.

No one could tell him with any certainty which was the grave of his mother. Grief and sorrow filled his heart. The son is thankful to be able to publish this letter in memory of his loving mother, Katharina Hein (née Harder, of former Davlekanovo, Ufa), and of his brother-in-law Heinrich Wiens from [the Mennonite village of] New York, Don River area, who was permitted only a brief life. The siblings, relatives and acquaintances who read this letter will do so likely not without emotion. May the witness of these two devoted Christians, living in extreme misery in a remote area of Russia, be a blessing to those who mourn their lost loved ones.

N. [Nikolayevka], August 4, 1940
My dear G. [Gerhard] and L. [Lydia],

Heart-warming greetings to you with Psalm 10. You likely received the letter we sent you a week ago. (GH: “Unfortunately not.”) Today, I will try to keep it shorter. Nevertheless, I would like to share with you the grief and sorrow I am experiencing. You probably are aware that I have lost my treasured Heinrich and with him my earthly happiness.

Comment by WH: My aunt's husband Heinrich was imprisoned by the Communists only because he was a Christian and spoke German.

It is extremely difficult to describe this heartbreaking event. My husband's innermost wish was that I would be able to take care of him. Unfortunately, I was not allowed to do so. He had to suffer for six months, until the Lord freed his soul from his earthly body. Our lives' desire was to savour the happiness of being together. Now, our dear Lord has taken him to a place free of fear and pain. His life was dedicated to the Lord, and his sufferings preached a sermon to many. I was permitted to visit him [in prison] several times for a short while. It is indescribable to communicate the pain of separation that followed the joy of our short meetings. Only a heart which knows true love can understand what it means to experience separation and suffering [brought about by human injustice and hate]. A day's train trip that required changing trains three times separated us. A week ago, I was still able to speak with him. Now, he lay on his bed like a broken rose in full bloom. However, his eyes spoke

It is indescribable to communicate the pain of separation that followed the joy of our short meetings. Only a heart which knows true love can understand what it means to experience separation and suffering ...



Comment by WH on the photo of the Wiens family: The picture was taken in Russia in 1989, one year before the family immigrated to Germany. Hanni Hein, the writer of the above letter, is in the middle (front row) of the picture. Her son Heinrich Wins (to her right) serves as a pastor among the *Umsiedler/Aussiedler* in Germany. Some of his children now live in Kelowna, BC.

of a happiness that the world cannot fathom. The physicians mentioned that, after my most recent departure, his heart began to malfunction. [...]

When the telegram arrived, notifying me of my dear husband's death, I immediately left, leaving dear Mama alone. She also was facing the gates of eternity. She didn't open her eyes when I said goodbye to her. My sister-in-law, wanting to be at my side and help me bear my grief, accompanied me; she also wanted to see her brother once more. When his heart was still beating, he had always radiated love. Now he lay there, my tears no longer pierced his heart, and my presence left him cold. – O God, how could you tear our bond of love so early? This question remains unanswered to this very day. – On October 24, 1940, it will be one year. From the cemetery, we hurried to the train station. Will we find Mother still alive? The train, not moving fast enough, could not keep up with my racing, disjointed thoughts. When I entered her bedroom – it was early in the morning of October 29, 1939 – I noticed that she still was breathing, but the shallow, intermittent breath revealed the hour of her departure was near. When I quietly kissed her forehead, she opened her eyes, still recognizing me. She mumbled something that I could not grasp. Throughout the night,

she still spoke understandably. Lenchen [her daughter, who was with her during our absence] wrote down what she said:

“Everything is in vain under the sun!” Then, in her spirit, she saw Mariechen (GH: her beloved daughter, who had died at an early age). [WH: she died at age 2 in 1912]. Mama called, “Give Mariechen to me – I cannot hold her! O God, my sun and shield! He sustains me. How beautiful it is here! What a delight and joy! My Saviour directs me through the night!”

What a comfort for all of us. – I placed these words, written on a leaflet, into my Bible, so I will always remember them.

A little later, she opened her eyes and looked at us once again. Then she closed them forever. It was October 29, 1939, the same day I had returned home. Within one week, I lost my loving husband and my dear mother.

In the precious son [WH: Heinrich Wins, who now lives in Germany] whom the Lord has given me, I see the image of his loving father. May God grant that he will walk a life in Christ as his father did, so that we may meet each other someday before the throne of God. Wishing you all the best. Please don't forget your lonely H. [WH: Hanni for Johanna]

MHSBC Event: Lecture, Aileen Friesen
“Searching for an Identity: Mennonites in Revolutionary Russia.”
April 14, 2019, Level Ground Mennonite Church.

Reported by Robert Martens

In earlier years, Aileen Friesen wanted badly to visit Russia, but knew that her “over-protective Mennonite mother” wouldn’t want her to go. If she had an academic pretext, though, her mother might relent. Problem solved: she travelled to Russia during her undergraduate studies, later earned a masters degree in Russian Studies, and along the way became fluent in the Russian language.

Today she is assistant professor in Mennonite Studies at the University of Winnipeg and executive director of the Plett Research Foundation, as well as editor of *Preservings* magazine. Dr. Friesen recently flew to Abbotsford, where she spoke on the Mennonite milieu in the immediate aftermath of the Russian Revolution, prior to the Bolshevik takeover. Most Russian Mennonites, she said, know about the Makhno terror and civil war of the 1920s, but what were Mennonites saying in 1917 and shortly afterwards? It turns out, said Friesen, that many of them were “willing to embrace citizenship in a new Russia.”

The decade before the Revolution was tumultuous. Mennonites were grappling with new religious rights, especially the freedom to organize church institutions. They tried to find a unified voice but failed. Perhaps more important was the issue of land rights, both prior to and during Russian involvement in World War I. The tsarist regime was legislating the divestment of German-Russian land in the empire. Mennonites “had a solution for that,” said Friesen – “they claimed that they were Dutch.”

The fact is that Mennonites were finding life increasingly tough in the tsarist Russian empire. They were invited by other German-Russians – essentially Lutherans and Catholics – to cooperate in a political bloc of German-language speakers. Unfortunately, said Friesen, Mennonites generally looked down on their neighbours, be they Ukrainian or “German,” and resisted any efforts that

might compromise their stubborn independence; they said “no.”

And then came war and revolution. Mennonite rhetoric changed dramatically. Realizing that the era of exceptionalism and privilege was over, they realized that only universal human rights for all individuals and all ethnic and religious groups could ultimately protect them. In actuality, many Mennonites were relieved that the tsarist regime had collapsed. Some envisioned a new federal democratic republic in which local rights would be protected. In contrast to their earlier views, Mennonites now publicly “depicted themselves as victims of oppression” under the tsar.

The era following the Revolution, said Friesen, has been portrayed as a generational shift in leadership. Young men who had served as medics and forestry workers during World War I denounced the complacency of the older generation. They were especially critical of the dreadful treatment by ultra-wealthy Mennonite estate owners of their employees.

Mennonites organized and debated. The Mennonite Molotschna Assembly was formed to deal with new political issues. “Rural life,” Friesen observed, “remained relatively untouched by revolution fervour,” but times were changing. Disputes arose over issues of individual conscience: should Mennonites, as individuals, have the right to make up their own minds on military service? Even questions such as divorce were being debated. Mennonites, it seemed, were embracing global values of democracy and individual rights.

Traditionalists often won out. On the matter of divorce, church leaders stuck with the status quo. And, after deliberation, women were not permitted to vote on church matters – although, ironically, they were strongly advised to vote on public matters affecting Mennonite life. However, many Mennonites, said Friesen, “didn’t mind the loosening of church constraints.” That shift to individualism, she contended, significantly weakened Mennonite ethnic identity.

Aileen Friesen’s lecture, multi-faceted and complex, opened a new window on what Mennonites were thinking just after the Revolution. The previous day, April 13, at the Mennonite Heritage Museum, she launched the beautiful “coffee-table” book, *The Russian Mennonite Story: The Heritage Cruise Lectures by Paul Toews*, in which she has revised Toews’ lectures for publication and chosen pictures to illustrate them. The book can be purchased at the Museum.



Aileen Friesen presenting lecture.

Photo: Jennifer Martens

MHSBC Event:

Celebration: Remembering the Stories of the Postwar Mennonite Refugees

June 2, 2019, King Road MB Church, Abbotsford, BC.

Reported by Maryann Tjart Jantzen

A very special series of events took place at King Road MB Church on Sunday, June 2, to commemorate the late 1940s arrival of post-World War II Mennonite refugees in British Columbia. Sponsored by the Mennonite Historical Society of BC, the event began with afternoon lectures by Marlene Epp and Paul Born, followed by *Faspa*, and ended with an evening event featuring individual stories of remembrance.

Epp's lecture focused on tracing the history of Mennonite refugees who came to Canada after the Second World War: "Like many refugee immigrants today, they brought their talents and skills, beliefs and values, along with memories of trauma and loss that shape the lives of generations to come." She asserted that "Mennonites



Marlene Epp, Paul Born, and Jake Tilitzky.
Photo: Jennifer Martens

have not yet confronted all the silences in their stories – about wartime trauma, disappeared loved ones, or complicity in violence."

Born, who grew up in the Abbotsford area, focused on his experience growing in a church community of refugees, examining how postwar Mennonite refugees "were shaped by hardship and bound together by [their] story and faith." The event also featured congregational singing featuring much loved hymns that would have been familiar to these refugees, and an offering was taken to support the current work of MCC with refugees.

After a tasty *Faspa*, attendees reconvened in the sanctuary to hear stories of remembrance from four individuals whose families were part of the post-World War II refugee experience. Fraser Valley residents Linda Klassen, Laura Unger, Gerd Bartel and Selma Hooge shared stories of both trauma and miraculous interventions as their families managed to escape being repatriated to the Soviet Union.



Laura Unger's mother, Antonia Redekopp, and her grandmother, Irina Kusmenko, with Alex, Laura, and Helene in Germany in 1945. Photo: courtesy of Laura Unger.

Book Launch: Mary Ann Loewen, editor and compiler *Finding Father: Stories from Mennonite Daughters.*

June 5, 2019, Mennonite Heritage Museum.

Reported by Robert Martens

"You're here tonight if you believe in the power of story." With these words, Mary Ann Loewen opened her book launch for *Finding Father*, a collection of stories by Mennonite women about their fathers. The book is the obverse of *Sons and Mothers: Stories from Mennonite Men*, which Loewen published in 2015.

Mary Ann Loewen, teacher at the University of Winnipeg, told her book launch audience that she had given “free rein” to her writers but that “inevitably, themes emerge.” (1) Fathers are frequently portrayed as strong figures and role models. (2) The fathers in these stories generally “lived their faith,” and “refused to manipulate their daughters” into a belief system. (3) Frequently, struggles with fathers are part of the story. However, the daughters often find that they were, and are, like their fathers. (4) Fathers put stock in education and bought their daughters “a kind of freedom their mothers were not privy to.”

Of course, the stories are not all sweetness and light. Loewen said that she asked for “real” stories, not portrayals of saints. Conflict therefore often digs at the heart of these stories; and yet – “fathers are judged,” said Loewen, “less harshly than their mothers.”

Elsie Neufeld, one of the contributors to the book, lent an emotional charge to the book launch evening. Before reading a few brief sections, Neufeld expressed some regret about what she had included in or left out of her story. She went on to say that her relationship with her father was strong but sometimes conflicted. He rarely laughed with her, though she saw him laughing; and family secrets bedevilled family relationships. His faults, said Neufeld, must be understood in light of his horrific wartime experiences.

Neufeld, though, enjoyed a warm and affectionate connection with her father, much like the other writers in this book. One contributor, said Mary Ann Loewen, wrote, “This is a love story.”

Finding Father can be purchased online or at the Mennonite Heritage Museum.



Mary Ann Loewen and Elsie Neufeld at book launch for *Finding Father* at the Mennonite Heritage Museum. Photo: Julia M. Toews

**Book launch: Douglas J. Heidebrecht
*Women in Ministry Leadership: The
 Journey of the Mennonite Brethren
 1954-2010.***

July 13, 2019, Mennonite Heritage Museum.

Reported by Robert Martens

Nearly thirty years ago, said Doug Heidebrecht to an attentive crowd at his book launch, he was introduced to the issue of women in church leadership. That experience was, for him, both emotional and puzzling. Then, twenty years ago, while preparing for his master’s degree, Heidebrecht once again encountered the issue at a church conference in Wichita. During discussion on the floor on gender and leadership, “women’s voices were not being heard,” he said. The topic intrigued him, and it became the subject of his master’s thesis, his doctorate, and finally a book.

The location of the conference, Wichita, was fortui-



Doug Heidebrecht signing his book for MHSBC volunteer Helen Nickel. Photo: Jennifer Martens

tous, since it was there that he met writer and activist Katie Funk Wiebe. The two became good friends. She lent him original documents to use in his research. Nevertheless, she cautioned him: “You cannot speak on behalf of women.” “And here I am,” confessed Heidebrecht at the launch, “a man talking about women in the church.” His intent, he said, was “opening up the door for women’s voices to emerge in a new way.”

Heidebrecht made clear that he was not speaking with an agenda. His book’s mission, he stated, was to depict all sides of the debate fairly, to promote relational discussion, and to avoid language of “us versus them.” But Mennonite Brethren leaders have rarely acted with discernment on the issue of women in leadership, he said, pointing out that “conversation began with women, not with the leaders of the church.” Heidebrecht depicted Katie Funk Wiebe as a pioneer in the area.

Scholar David Ewert, on the other hand, “a key player” in the debate, acted the role of mediator. Ewert, said Heidebrecht, struggled to reconcile seemingly conflicting passages of Scripture on the issue. Late in his life, however, Ewert told Heidebrecht that he had “no problem with women in leadership.”

In the Q&A that followed the presentation, Heidebrecht noted that the Mennonite Brethren in the Democratic Republic of Congo have for some years been ordaining women to leading positions. They are advising their North American counterparts to do the same.

Book Review: Werner Toews

Sketches from Siberia: The Life of Jacob D. Sudermann.

Victoria, BC: Friesen Press, 2018.

Reviewed by Louise Bergen Price

The recent spate of Mennonite memoirs and biographies begs the question: do we need more books about the Stalinist era? Hasn’t every angle already been covered?

Sketches from Siberia: The Life of Jacob D. Sudermann by Jacob’s great-nephew, Werner Toews, differs from other Russian Mennonite memoirs in two major aspects: Jacob’s art, and the content of his letters from the Gulag.

Sketches from Siberia evolved from an art exhibit of the same name. Toews, a retired police officer in Winnipeg, had long been interested in Sudermann’s art. In 2003 he approached Ray Dirks, curator of the Mennonite Heritage Centre Gallery, with the question: would the gallery be interested in an exhibit of art from the Gulag? Dirks agreed, and to his astonishment, learned that the collection consisted of over one hundred works of art. The success of the exhibit motivated Toews to dig deeper into Sudermann’s life, and this book, augmented with photographs of the Sudermann family, a genealogy, and maps, is the result of that research.

The first section of the book, which sets Jacob’s life and art in context of the times, rings sadly familiar. Sudermann was born in 1888 on his family’s 2,000-acre estate, Alexejewka. His early life of privilege included a semester of studies at the University of Basel in Switzerland where he studied art history. In 1911, he and his sister Anna moved to St. Petersburg where Anna studied biology and natural sciences and Jacob majored in mathematics and physics. Jacob had hoped to pursue a career in architecture, but decided to become a teacher instead. World War I interrupted his plans and Jacob spent most of the war stationed in a military office in Moscow (presumably as a conscientious objector). During the civil war that followed, the family fled the estate, eventually moving to Rosenthal, Chortitza Colony. Lenin’s New Economic Plan (NEP) gave new hope to the Mennonite community, and many, including the Sudermann family, decided not to emigrate. Jacob worked as a teacher in Rosenthal and lived with his brother Heinrich’s family in a comfortable home he’d helped design. Although it is not known if he studied art, he taught painting to future teachers at the teachers’ college. He also became an ex-

cellent photographer.

These more settled years ended as Stalin's hold on power grew, and by the late 1920s, persecution of former landowners, religious leaders, factory owners and many others intensified. Although Sudermann tried to keep a low profile, he was arrested by the NKVD (state security) in February 1933 and imprisoned for three months, then released. In November, he was rearrested, first imprisoned in Zaporizhia, then transferred to Dnipropetrovsk. In April, he was sentenced to five years in a labour camp in the Amur region, likely one in the vicinity of Svobodny. According to the terms of Sudermann's sentence, he was allowed to write two letters a month, but could receive an unlimited number of letters or parcels.

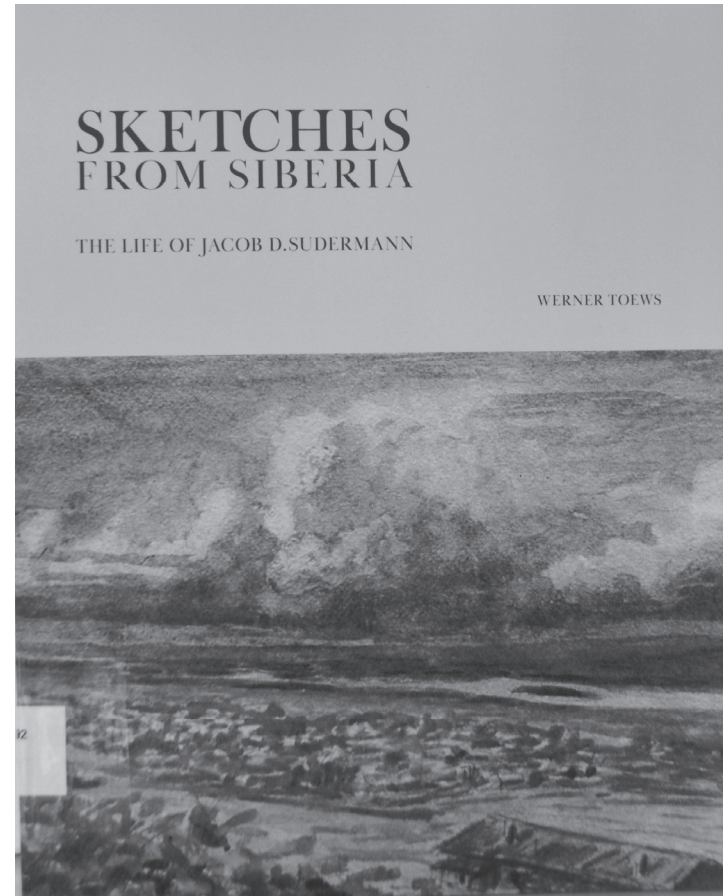
The letters in the second section of the book are mostly addressed to Sudermann's brother Heinrich and to Heinrich's children, although other letters are mentioned. Along with the letters, Sudermann often includes pictures or sketches. These letters and the accompanying works of art comprise the second section of the book.

Unlike the correspondence of his brother-in-law, preacher Aron Toews, arrested in 1935 and also imprisoned in a Gulag camp, Sudermann's letters touch little on religion. When he does ponder the meaning of suffering, he states, "When one thinks about it from a Christian perspective then one gets no satisfying answer" (84). As to why one's loved ones suffer and die, he muses that it is a difficult question, and offers this cryptic response: "Apparently it serves for our education" (104).

His main concern seems to be for the welfare of those in his family circle, especially his nieces and nephew; many of the pictures he sends along with the letters are gifts for them. "Sometimes it is indescribably hard when I remember the children. How much I would like to tenderly love them ... to give Heini a booklet, a small riddle to Leni, pencils to Lieschen or something to sew, and a toy to Gretchen" (93).

Often, he sends greeting to Ukrainian friends and asks how they are faring. Love for the country of his birth is evident: "That reminds me," he writes to Heinrich, "do you speak Ukrainian to the children? ... It is not good if one does not know the language of the country" (108).

As could be expected, the weather is often a topic in his letters, many times in connec-



tion with gardening. "But here everything grows so quickly that everything is ripe by August, and in the worst case by September.... Potatoes in particular are abundant and good here.... There are no watermelons and melons" (90).

Unlike many sent to the Gulag, Sudermann is assigned to office work. Occasionally, he is excused from regular duties to prepare for cultural events such as working on the backdrop to *Kabale und Liebe* (*Intrigue and Love*), a drama by Schiller to be performed by the camp's inmates. His evenings and his free time are devoted to letter-writing and art.



Artwork by Jacob D. Sudermann. See front and back covers for more artwork.

Indeed, it is the art that distinguishes this book from others of the same type. The paintings and sketches do more than illustrate the letters; they provide a narrative of their own. Whether it's a cow being led through a Siberian forest (89), a row of barrack buildings for prisoners (100), or a fox seemingly in dialogue with a raven (98), Sudermann's art takes us into the world of the Gulag in both its hardship and its beauty. Other paintings express Sudermann's longing for

the countryside of his youth. His passionate interest in painting is evident in that he uses whatever materials he has on hand. When he runs out of paint, he uses black ink and even boot blacking.

The last section of the book deals with the Terror years, 1937-1938, when Jacob is transferred to another camp and all contact with him is lost. His brothers Heinrich and Nikolai (the author's grandfather) are arrested and "banished." In 1943, the remainder of the family flees with the retreating German army, finally finding refuge in Canada. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the author learns that his grandfather and his brothers had been executed in the fall of 1937 but had been "exonerated posthumously" (140). When the author breaks the news to his mother that her father and uncles were declared innocent, she replies, "What does that help, now they are all dead?" (129).

For anyone interested in an intimate view of what life was like in the Gulag in the mid-1930s, *Sketches from Siberia: The Life of Jacob D. Sudermann* is a fascinating book, and a good addition to a collection of books on this tragic time in Soviet Mennonite history.

Book Review: Edith Elisabeth Friesen

Journey into Freedom: One Family's Real-Life Drama.

Winnipeg: Raduga Publications, 2003. 242 pages.

Reviewed by Irene Plett

It was hard to put down this riveting first-hand account of a Mennonite family's hardship in the 1930s Soviet Union and during the Second World War, ending with freedom in Canada. It was like sitting around the kitchen table listening to the author's mother, two aunts and an uncle, share their intimate stories of survival. Insightful historical background is added to the eyewitness records.

The author began her journey into the past after visiting Ukraine with her mother, Anne Friesen (née Dyck). She wondered, "How is it possible to lose everything – childhood, home, family members, health and every tangible expression of freedom – without losing faith, spunk, or grace? This is the puzzle that gave birth to this story."

The story opens one winter night, as the family is evicted from their home in Rosenort, in the Molotschna Mennonite settlement. All their possessions are carted away, including Anne's new warm red coat.

It began when Anne's father, Cornelius Dyck, was taken away when she was six years old, in about 1930. He was one of many young men (including my grandfather) wrongfully declared an "enemy of the people" in Stalin's Great Terror and used for forced labour. The shocking after-effect was that Anne's mother, Katharina Dyck (née Klassen), was soon after also declared an enemy of the people. Now she and her children had no rights.

They found shelter in a room in another village home, but battled starvation, since their mother couldn't work, and no one was eligible for bread rations. An aunt accepted the family in the village of Einlage, where they occupied one room, but food was still scarce. Anne lived with other relatives for three years, where she worked and saved crumbs to share with family on weekly visits.

Somehow Anne's mother survived typhoid fever. Her father returned from the labour camp in 1933, escaping with three others in a cavity they made in a boxcar loaded with timber. He met his youngest son, Cornelius, for the first time. Tragically, the child died after his fourth birthday, his starved body too weak to fight dysentery after scrounging rotten fruit.

The family's strong faith was a life-saver. When the children were able to attend school, they had to recite an oath of allegiance, ending with "and there is no God." Lydia said she whispered, "and there is a God," quickly after the required recitation. Their mother read the Bible every day, and when she was finished, would start again from the beginning.

Forced to move again, the father was able to find work teaching in Nikopol, where life normalized. The family lived in two rooms in the damp school basement. But authorities began interrogating city residents about whether they believed in God. The father couldn't deny his faith, despite the consequences. He was then arrested and squashed in a basement room with too many prisoners and no provisions, where he didn't survive long.

The others survived and thrived, even as war approached. Anne's brother John said, "I learned that being fearful didn't get you anywhere. To move ahead, you have to take a calculated

When the children were able to attend school, they had to recite an oath of allegiance, ending with "and there is no God."



risk, be aggressive and not look back.”

Although they often endured bombing raids, life improved after the German army arrived in 1941. Mother and the two oldest sisters found work with the occupying Germans, while John was apprenticed. Mennonites were considered German, despite their original Dutch heritage. Suddenly they were the “chosen” people, favoured over Ukrainians, Russians and Jews.

Jewish people were disappearing, with some reports of them being shot. Their mother refused clothing that she knew must have been taken from a Jewish family. The family were horrified to later see starving people wearing the Star of David behind barbed wire in the Warsaw ghetto. They later learned the full extent of what happened to these innocent people.

In 1943, when the German army retreated from Russia, the Dycks also fled. Mennonites would be considered traitors who sided with the Germans. “We knew we would be shot on the spot,” Anne said.

Unlike most Russian Mennonites, who left their villages in a wagon train of horses and buggies, the Dycks were given a boxcar. It took several weeks to traverse war-torn areas. Even after they settled, they didn’t stay

long, as the Germans continued to retreat. John was drafted into the German army, and shares his gruelling experiences of fighting to survive.

It was touching to hear the women’s experiences with violent conquering soldiers. When the Russians took over where the women were hiding, soldiers entered their bunker. Martha heard them saying in Russian, “Let’s bring many soldiers because there are nice ladies here,” before they left.

Martha later woke to the room crowded with soldiers. When her mother shouted her name, suddenly Martha was in her mother’s arms, not in the room where she had been sleeping alone. “I don’t know how the angels took me out,” she said. The soldiers started grabbing her arms, and those of Anne and other women.

Their mother’s loud prayers in the Russian language somehow sent the soldiers running, while screams of other victims were heard nearby. Some women fearing rape wanted to slash their wrists, but Katharina advised, “No, no, no. Don’t do that. God will help you.”

Order was restored a few days later, but they were now in the Russian zone of East Germany. John was amazed to find them. All managed to escape to the West and avoid the “repatriation” to the Soviet Union that many Mennonites suffered. (My father, Peter Plett, is the only one of his close family who escaped being sent to Russian Gulags, the crude camps where inmates endured backbreaking work on starvation rations.)

Life normalized in West Germany, but the Dycks never felt fully accepted until they came to Canada. An aunt initiated moving the entire clan. They found a sponsor in Yarrow, BC, immigrating in 1948, and worked hard to quickly repay their significant travel debt of about \$1,500. The young women began with housework for wealthy Vancouver families, joining the phenomenon discussed in Ruth Derksen Siemens’ award-winning book, *Daughters in the City: Mennonite Maids in Vancouver, 1931-61*. Each sibling found success with work and marriage, while their mother lived into her nineties.

I found it fascinating to compare similarities to my family’s story, and learn new aspects of Mennonite history.

The author says that Stalin’s Great Terror consisted of three waves, although typically the Great Terror is described as what the author calls the third wave. However, the privations under the regime can well be described as three waves of terror.

The third wave was when countless innocent men were arrested on false charges in the late 1930s. Interest-

ingly, Cornelius Dyck's first arrest was before this time in about 1930. I wonder how many others suffered false arrest in those early days. Although the author places this arrest in the first wave, another approach may be to extend the time frame of this wave.

The first wave is when wealthy farmers were called "kulaks" and their property was confiscated in the 1920s and early 1930s. This is when my father's family was forced to move from a large home and leave everything behind. Anne described a gradual process of property being taken, until the eviction after their father's arrest.

The second wave, placed in 1933, likely refers to the 1932-33 forced famine. Grain quotas were too high for the farmers of the Ukraine to have enough food, and many starved. My father talks about how he survived that famine in an interview I published (see "How We Survived Famine"). For the Dyck family, starvation began two years earlier when the state made them homeless.

The Dyck family went on to help other refugees, both relatives and people in need from Vietnam. Their original sponsor to Canada, Mr. Rempel, also sponsored more refugees. Perhaps we can be inspired by their example to help others in need today, thanks to this intriguing memoir.

Irene Plett is an award-winning writer, poet and animal lover living in South Surrey, BC. More stories can be found at her blog, <https://ireneplett.weebly.com/blog>

News Release

From Royden Loewen, interim chair, the Russlaender Centenary Committee, a subcommittee of the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada:

The largest Mennonite immigration in Canadian history took place in 1923 and following years. During these years some 20,000 so-called Russlaender Mennonites arrived in places across Canada from war-torn Soviet Union.

To commemorate this migration, a national Russlaender Centenary Committee has been finalized. It is charged to provide leadership in the national reflection on this important event in Canadian Mennonite history. The committee consists of 11 representatives, at least one from each of the six provinces that constitute the members of the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada.

They include Richard Thiessen and Cheryl Isaac from British Columbia, Ted Regehr from Alberta, Jake Buhler and Judie Dyck from Saskatchewan, Ingrid Riesen, Aileen Friesen and Royden Loewen from Manitoba, Marlene Epp and Henry Paetkau from Ontario, and Luke Martin from Quebec.

An inaugural meeting of the committee was held on November 15, 2018, in conjunction with the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada AGM. The committee at that point chose the name Russlaender Centenary Committee (RCC), and spoke about the vision for the 2023 commemoration.

The RCC at that point committed itself to remember this migration in all of its dimensions. Those aspects include the suffering from war and famine, the horrific uprooting and stress-filled transplantation, the reliance on and testing of religious belief, the joy of finding a new homeland. But the committee will also consider this migration with respect to Canada in the 1920s. This will mean an acknowledgement that the immigrants came as settlers and thus farmed lands once the homeland of Indigenous nations. It will also mean an acknowledgement that other would-be immigrants – African-Americans, Chinese, Jews – were not welcomed at the time. Finally, the RCC will also remember those who stayed behind in the Soviet Union and endured the terror and uprootings of the 1930s and 40s.

The RCC will give oversight of events in 2023 from across the land, with events planned for places such as Montreal (QC), Vineland and Kitchener (ON), Winnipeg (MB), Rosthern (SK), Taber (AB), and Abbotsford (BC).

The committee, under the leadership of Ingrid Riesen of Winnipeg, plans a special train trek from Montreal to Rosthern, with stops in Ontario and Manitoba, and a possible extension to Abbotsford. Initial conversations have been held with VIA Rail and future talks are planned with CPR

on how to operationalize this historic re-enactment. Talks have also been held with MCC Canada on how to use this year of celebration as a way of paying forward, with a special linked campaign for MCCC's refugee program.

This will mean an acknowledgement that the immigrants came as settlers and thus farmed lands once the homeland of Indigenous nations.

Roots and Branches

is a publication of the Mennonite Historical Society of BC and is mailed three times per year to all members. An annual membership is \$35. Life memberships are available for \$750.

Your contributions are needed to further this work! All donations will be receipted for tax purposes. Please note that, for reasons of legality, membership fees cannot be receipted for tax purposes.

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Endings: A Tribute to Don Fehr



Robert Martens writes,

We at the Mennonite Historical Society are saying goodbye to yet another indispensable volunteer. Donald Peter Fehr was born 7 August 1951 and died 25 July 2019. He leaves behind his wife of 46 years, Doreen; daughters Robyn and Heather; and grandson Jackson. The family writes that Don “got as much pleasure arranging details as he did from the destination, and we hope he finds peace at his final one.” Don was our neighbourhood techie at the Society, and worked seemingly incessantly to keep our computer network running. He will be dearly missed.

MHSBC Office and Volunteer Manager Jennifer Martens writes,

We have all been missing Don for over a year now at the MHSBC while he was undergoing treatments for his battle with cancer.... The reality that he will not be returning to us here

has hit us hard. He will be greatly missed. His big grin in the photo gives us an idea of just how much he enjoyed volunteering at the historical society.

Don spent a great deal of time mentoring me when I came on board at the historical society and I will forever be indebted to him for everything he taught me to do. He was a computer wizard, great coach, project leader and organizer of people and procedures. The Wednesday and Friday volunteers enjoyed his stories about his grandson and he often brought in lemon poppy seed muffins to share that he had picked up fresh that morning from Save-On Foods especially for morning coffee time. He was a Folgers coffee drinker and he made sure there was hot coffee made for us all at afternoon break time. His fingerprints are echoed all over our computer network and the codings he used for the icons on our desktops. He was instrumental in setting up and doing the genealogical look-ups we did at the MCC Festivals over the years and in organizing the Genealogical Workshops every November.



Don Fehr (left) at MHSBC.
Photo: Jennifer Martens.
Above photo: Diana Hiebert



Paintings by Jacob D. Sudermann.
See the book review of *Sketches
from Siberia: The Life of Jacob D.
Sudermann* by Werner Toews on
page 26.