



# Roots & Branches

Periodical of the Mennonite Historical Society of BC

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

Vol. 29 No. 4

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BONUS CHRISTMAS EDITION

PSALM 78



"Beautiful songs fill the house. I have never heard Christmas music before. I don't know the words, but I listen and I feel the music chase away the dark of winter."

Picture and quotation source: *From Schoenau: A true story* by Andrea Gibb.

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# Editorial

■ By Julia M. Born Toews

Reminiscing about her first Christmas experience in Paraguay in 1948, after the deprivations of World War II in Europe, and in spite of the heat of the South American summer, Agnes Martens states in her autobiography that “from somewhere came something resembling the Christmas spirit.” Her childhood memories of the season were similar to those described in Dave Loewen’s article “Christmas in Pretoria.” From our archives files, we reprint a Christmas program from the East Chilliwack MB Church that reflects how this group of people celebrated the holiday in 1947. Finally, Ray Harris’ poem, “We Are All in the Pageant,” shines a contemporary reflection on the Christmas experience. We hope that the selections in this mini-edition of *Roots and Branches* will help bring a “Christmas spirit” to our readers’ celebrations and be an encouragement for the coming year.

With this Christmas edition, the editorial team and staff once again send their best Yuletide wishes to all our members and readers.

## About the author and artist:

Andrea Gibb is a writer and illustrator. As a book designer, she loves to help writers bring their books to life. She is the author of *The Sanarii Chronicles*, a series of high/epic fantasy novels. She lives with her family in the forest near Abbotsford, British Columbia. Websites: [www.windandroot.ca](http://www.windandroot.ca) [www.andreagibb.com](http://www.andreagibb.com)

Andrea describes her book: *From Schoenau* reminds us that small miracles are waiting even after the darkest nights. My grandpa has told me many stories about his life and his time in Europe during World War II. I decided to turn this story from 1943 into a children’s book so my grandpa’s remarkable experience can live on through the words and illustrations of this book:

*Hans went searching for an adventure.  
And two meals a day.  
And a pair of real shoes.  
But winter has arrived and with it something dark and lonely.  
But Christmas is coming. And for a Mennonite boy from  
Ukraine who grew up with nothing and was not allowed to  
celebrate any religion, Hans learns that winter can bring sunny  
days and unexpected gifts.*



Andrea Gibb with her book *From Schoenau* at the Books & Borscht event at the Mennonite Heritage Museum, Nov. 9, 2023. Photo credit: Julia M. Toews.

## Roots & 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. And please consider remembering us in your will.

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**Editor this issue:** Julia Born Toews

**Associate editors:** Maryann Tjart Jantzen, Robert Martens, Louise Bergen Price

**Design:** Bill Glasgow

**Editorial Committee:** Louise Bergen Price, Julia Born Toews, Robert Martens, Maryann Tjart Jantzen

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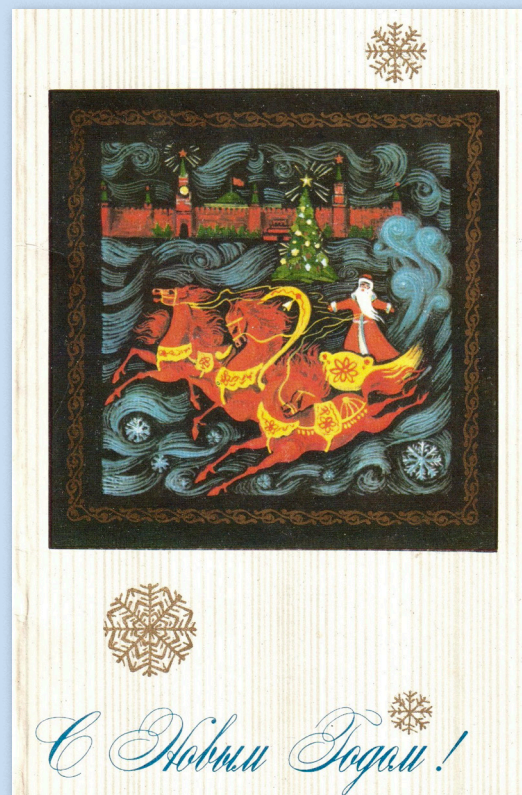
**Mennonite Historical Society of BC**  
1818 Clearbrook Rd, Abbotsford, BC, V2T 5X4  
Phone: 604-853-6177 | Fax: 604-853-6246  
Email: [archives@mhsbc.com](mailto:archives@mhsbc.com)  
Website: [www.mhsbc.com](http://www.mhsbc.com)

The Mennonite Heritage Museum has reopened. The Mennonite Historical Society is open by appointment.





New Year's cards sent to Canada from Russia in the 1960s. St. Nicholas driving a troika (three-horse sleigh) and a skier careening down a mountain at the speed of a rocket, possibly a nod to the then-current space race, make for interesting Christmas/New Year's images. The greetings on each card are "Happy New Year's wishes." Source: Louise Bergen Price family archives.



**A Nativity Scene. Painting by Heinz Klassen.**

Used by permission.

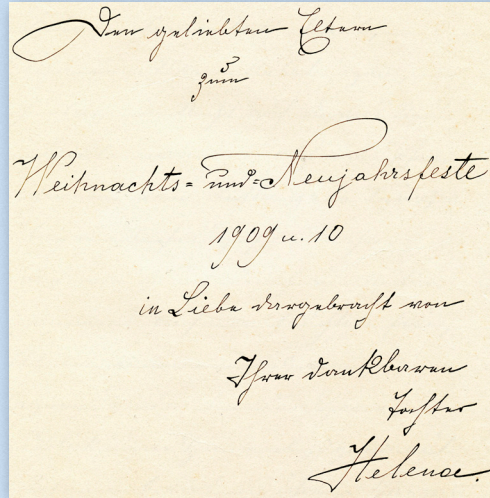
Heinz Klassen studied at the BC Institute of Technology and completed a Diploma in Fine Arts at Vancouver Community College (Langara) and a Bachelor of Fine Arts at the Alberta College of Art and Design. He was a studio assistant at the Vancouver School of Art (now Emily Carr). His work was exhibited at the Vancouver Art Gallery, the UBC gallery, the Reach in Abbotsford, the O'Connor Gallery in Chilliwack, and more recently in the Mennonite Heritage Museum. He made his home in Yarrow.





Helena Loewen, ca. 1925.

Photos source: Dave Loewen.



Helena Loewen's Christmas & New Year's card, made for her parents in 1909. "To my beloved parents on Christmas and New Year's Day, 1909/10. With love from your grateful daughter Helena." Source: David F. Loewen.



## Christmas in Pretoria

■ By David F. Loewen

An extract from his article, "Life in Pretoria before the Turmoil." Pretoria was a village in the Orenburg colony.

Jacob Loewen's recollection of Christmas in Pretoria was that the first observations and activities occurred at school:

*The first Christmas joy we experienced was at school. We had a beautiful Christmas tree – the only one in the whole village. At home we did not have a tree, as we had no forests with spruce or fir trees in our region. To get one for the school, we had to travel to Orenburg, 70 km. away. The majority could not afford this.*

Apart from school, Christmas was a three-day celebration in Pretoria. On the first day, in the morning, church services were held, followed by two days of visiting grandparents, uncles, aunts, and friends. Christmas dinner was usually fruit *moos* and ham. Protocol had the adults eating first, followed by the children, a practice which continued after their arrival in Canada (this writer recalls that practice). The children enjoyed asking the adults, while they were eating, for the plum or apricot pits (in the *moos*). They would then find a hammer and a board, break the pits, and eat the inside, which they found very delicious (children's appetizers?). On Christmas morning, the children would be eager to

get up and look for their plate of goodies at the table, which the parents or older children had prepared the evening before. This was their Christmas gift – a plate of a few nuts, candies, cookies, and a handkerchief. Jacob Loewen recalls:

*Christmas Eve was the most important for us younger ones. We received presents from Santa Claus (Grandfather Frost). We would receive walnuts, cookies, dates or dry figs, candies, and sugar candies. It would make a nice full bag. We also received similar presents from our aunt, my mother's sister, Margaretha Driedger, who lived in our village. On the second day of Christmas, the Driedger and Loewen families usually gathered at the Eitzens (parents of my mother and Margaretha Driedger). They lived in Suvorovka, 3 km. from us. As a result, each one of us had three bags of sweets, which was very much appreciated. This we enjoyed twice a year – at Christmas and at New Year's. During the following months we were not spoiled with candies and sweets. That is why we were so excited at Christmas and at New Year's."*

The children might also have received one of their toys (a doll) that had mysteriously disappeared shortly before Christmas and fixed with either a new wooden head or new stuffed body and new clothes, along with new bedding for the cradle.



# Christmas in Paraguay

■ by Agnes Martens

from *Der Maulbeerbaum in unserem Garten: Meine Geschichte* (The Mulberry Tree in Our Garden: My Story) by Agnes Martens. Brunnen Verlag Gießen, 2008. Translated by Julia M. Born Toews, edited by Robert Martens

Background: The author, Agnes Martens, was born in Einlage, Ukraine, in 1930. Their house had a large mulberry tree (*Maulbeerbaum*) in the garden that overshadowed the house. To her it represented something that protected the family, lent beauty to the yard, and was something that she missed when her family had to flee during World War II. They escaped to Germany and, several years later, in 1948, with the help of MCC, Agnes, her mother, and disabled brother Peter moved to the other side of the world, to the Chaco in Paraguay. In *Der Maulbeerbaum in unserem Garten – Meine Geschichte*, she recounts their first Christmas celebration in their new homeland.

The fields were coming along well when the feast of the year drew near, and we began to prepare for Christmas for the first time. Our traditions and customs were adapted to a cold time of year, for ice and snow, ice-blossoms on frosted panes, burning candles on windowsills, snugly wrapped women, men and children. Here, the thermometer climbed to 43 degrees Celsius. But, from somewhere came something resembling the Christmas spirit.

All the yards in the village had been raked and groomed. Here and there, embers glowed in ovens where delicious *platzt* had been baked. A great heat also prevailed outside the ovens; muggy air hovered over the central Chaco and didn't want to move on.

It wasn't yet dark when parents with their children walked past our yard. All were aiming for the centre of the village. There, in one of the yards, stood the first barn – now containing a quickly-built stage – that would serve as a space for our first Christmas service. Some boys had cut a wild plum tree in the bush which, at least from their point of view, seemed equivalent to a Christmas tree. It was decorated with various garlands and colourful paper. A few benches had already been placed nearby; the villagers brought their own chairs and stools with them. With the singing of a few Christmas carols, the celebration began. The children recited poems. At this meagre celebration, they beamed as much as they would have in a wealthy country, where



Agnes Martens standing with her brother Peter behind her mother, Anganetha Martens, in Steinfeld, Neuland Colony, Paraguay.

Photo source: *Der Maulbeerbaum in unserem Garten* by Agnes Martens, p. 135.

the Christmas tree was richly ornamented and large presents were at their homes waiting to be unwrapped. But the adults kept looking in a northerly direction where a dark wall of clouds rose ever higher and a distant rumbling indicated that bad weather was on the way. It was absolutely still; there was no breeze; and even the birds had stopped twittering. The children sang “Silent night, holy night.”

Suddenly the wind gusted up, instantly blowing clouds of dust before it. Parents rose up in alarm, hurried forward to the Christmas tree, grabbed their children and ran with them as quickly as they could to their huts. The Christmas tree toppled. The decorations swept across the yard. No one bothered about this – the wind was swelling into a storm. The air was grey with swirling sand.

Since we had to take Peter with us, Mama and I



couldn't run as fast as we wanted to but luckily, we didn't have far to go. Just as we reached our porch, the rain pelted down. We quickly climbed the ladder into the attic, which served as our temporary bedroom and was our only windtight and waterproof shelter. The wind had nearly reached hurricane force. A blast tore several bunches of thatch from the roof.

Mama shouted at me, "Agnes, hold on tight to the thatch so the hole doesn't get any bigger!" I stood on a stool and held the thatch with all my might. The wind could have dug at the thatch and taken off the entire roof. Water streamed down my face and in a few minutes I was completely soaked. Thunder followed lightning. From one second to another, the whole attic was blazingly lit, and then only the lanterns would glow, casting dancing shadows upon the floor during blasts of thunder.

After half an hour, the storm and thunder subsided, and we could begin to repair the roof. When I turned around as I was doing this, my mother, standing behind me, held the lantern to my face and began to laugh loudly. Perplexed, I looked at her. Still laughing, she said, "You should look in a mirror, Agnes." Since there wasn't a mirror at hand, my mother described my appearance. Flying mud had painted my face brown-yellow, falling raindrops had drawn weird lines across my complexion, so that it looked more like a mask than a human face. Of water there was plenty, for it continued to rain and, since it was a tropical rainfall, it was pleasantly warm. I had only to hold out my hands to wash my face.

On Christmas morning, the villagers worked hard to repair the storm damage. Others had experienced what we had, and they had to repair the roof thatch. But we still had some things to do: the chimney had tumbled down and had to be restored, some adobe bricks had to be replaced. However,

punctually at nine o'clock, the entire village community – no one was missing – gathered for the church service. The Christmas tree was set upright. Not much remained of the decorations but no one minded the loss, not even the children. Wholeheartedly, everyone joined in the song, "*O du fröhliche, o du selige, Gnaden bringende Weihnachtszeit!*" [Oh joyous, oh holy, Christmas time that brings blessings] Our joy did not only emanate from the knowledge that we had endured the terrible storm without injury or serious damage. Rain in the Chaco is always a reason to celebrate, no matter what the circumstances.

By evening, the yard was dry enough that we could sit outside, a preoccupation that in the lapse of time became our favourite way to relax. Whoever has endured dreadful heat for the entire day will enjoy all the more the cool breezes of evening. The loveliest starry sky in all the world stretched above us. I have never seen the heavenly bodies again so clearly and distinctly. In the Chaco, the Milky Way lives up to its name, springing with incredible distinctness from its dark backdrop. And so we sat outside where the temperature was comfortable, and talked about our homeland, about Ukraine. "To talk about the earlier time" was also a tradition. Later, my children often implored me and my husband, "Tell us about earlier!" And then we talked about snow that lay metres high, and about ice-blossoms on frosted panes.



Agnes, Peter, and their mother, Anganetha, in front of their first house in the Chaco, Paraguay.

Photo source: *Der Maulbeerbaum in unserem Garten* by Agnes Martens, 2008, p.133.



***Bescherung*** (handing out Christmas goodie bags)



A Christmas goodie bag or *Tutje* was handed to each child after the Christmas Eve service. It usually contained an orange, peanuts, chocolates and candies.

Photo credit: Julia M. Toews, 2023.

Photo credit: Julia M. Toews, 2023.

# A Christmas Lullaby

By Robert Martens

*Leise rieselt der Schnee,  
Still und starr ruht der See,  
Weihnachtlich glänzet der Wald,  
Freue dich, Christkind kommt bald.*

*The snow drifts oh so softly,  
The lake so peaceful and calm,  
The woods glisten like Christmas,  
Oh joy, the Christ Child is near. (loose translation)*

When I was a boy, this lullaby-like Christmas carol invariably touched my heart. “Be at peace, find hope, help is at hand,” it seemed to say. And we kids would sing it gently, almost as though the song was fragile and might break.



# We Are All in the Pageant

By Ray Harris

*We are all in the Pageant.  
Costumes askew, quizzical,  
Wondering what to do?  
How did I get myself into this?  
Like the shepherds  
We just try to do our jobs.  
Serving some guy,  
a farmer or landowner  
We may like and know well  
— or not.  
Like the angels (really)  
no ordinary people,  
no mere mortals but beings of everlasting splendour,  
Who also have good news to share.  
Like foreigners seeking  
on a journey,  
Give us a chalice for Frankincense  
and gumdrops of Myrrh.  
Marred by life's knocks, but  
Immured in Love.  
Even Mary and Joseph  
are Types for our best acts of surrender  
and simple faith,  
Excusable scenes of doubt.  
Hand me that bathrobe,  
the halo, or wings,  
Deck me in glitter, fine robes,  
costume rings.  
Push me onstage where everyone sees  
Grant me deep Joy  
And let my acts please.*

From *Fullness of Time: Devotionals, Poems, Pictures, and Prayers* by Ray Harris. Published by Mill Lake Books, Chilliwack, BC, 2023. p. 5. (Used by permission of author)

## FROM THE ARCHIVES

# A Christmas Program – Seventy-Six Years Ago

■ By Julia M. Born Toews  
(edited version – by R.M.)

This fall my Aunt Ethel gave me some documents to put in the MHSBC archives. While sorting through these papers, I came across this Christmas program in which her father, John K. Brandt (my grandfather), participated.

The Brandt family, John & Anna with their three youngest children, Ethel, Bernie & Gilbert, moved from Manitoba to Chilliwack, BC, in July 1947. By Christmas time, as this program shows, they were already involved in the East Chilliwack MB Church. My grandfather had been a schoolteacher for many years, had conducted many choirs, and continued to serve as secretary for many committees and organizations, including the Clearbrook Credit Union, now renamed Envision. Looking through his files, I noticed that he had an extensive collection of songs, poems, and plays available for Christmas programs.

Glancing through this program, I see that it is all in German with only one nod to the English language – No. 13, when the Sunday school children sing “O Come All.” There are also several references to the coming of “*Das Christkind*” (the Christ Child), an idea not so prominent in today’s thoughts. The program seems quite long, even without the addition of the *Freiwilliges* (open mic) opportunity given to the audience. I hope it was an enjoyable evening – and also hope that, as readers glance through it, this will bring back precious memories to anyone who was involved in, or attended this celebration, or might recognize a name of one of the participants.



# East Chilliwack MB Church Christmas Program on Dec. 24, 1947

1. Einleitung (opening remarks) Brother (Br.) Joh. Esau
2. Song Sunday school "Welchen Jubel" (O What Joy and Exultation) Victor Janzen
3. Poem "Willkommen!" (Welcome!) #13 Raymond Kornelsen
4. Song "Willkommen!" (Welcome!) 6 girls
5. Poem "Gruess dem schönsten Feste!" (Greet the loveliest of feasts) #58 Marlene Penner
6. Song "O du fröhliche!" (O thou joyful) primary class. Olga Hodel
7. Verhandlung der Weihnachtsgeschichte (performance of the Christmas story)
8. Song "Herbei, herbei, ihr Kinder" (Come here, come here, all children) Br. Brandt
9. Recitation "Heiliger Abend" (Holy night) 7 children
10. Song "Ihr Kinderlein kommet" (Oh come, little children) primary class
11. Recitation for two "An Bethlehems Krippe" (At Bethlehem's manger) 2 girls
12. Recitation "Weihnacht" (Christmas) 9 girls. Evangeline
13. Song Sunday school "O come all" [in English] Victor Janzen
14. Poem "Weihnachtswunsch" (Christmas Wishes) John Hamm (Olga)
15. Poem "Am schönsten Weihnachtstage" (On the loveliest of Christmas days) #2 Gracie Willms
16. Recitation "Huldigung" (Homage) 4 boys
17. Poem "Das schönste Fest" (the loveliest festival) #46 Nelly Fast
18. Recitation for two "Stern der Hoffnung" (Star of hope) 2 girls
19. Congregational singing "Freue dich Welt" (Joy to the world) Ev. L. #255 (Evangelische Lieder)
20. Recitation "Ich bin gar klein" (I am very small) 3 girls (Laurina, Neta, Martha)
21. Poem "Wie gut muss doch der Heiland" (How good must be the

East Chilliwack MB Church  
Weihnachtsprogramm am 24. Dez. 1947

1. Einleitung: Br. Joh. Esau.
2. Lied: S. Schule "Welchen Jubel". Victor Janzen.
3. Lied: "Willkommen!" #13 Raymond Kornelsen.
4. Lied: "Willkommen!" 6 Mädchen.
5. Lied: "Gruess dem schönsten Feste." #58 Marlene Penner.
6. Lied: "O du fröhliche" Klein Kinderchor. Olga Hodel.
7. Verhandlung der Weihnachtsgeschichte.
8. Lied: "Herbei, herbei, ihr Kinder." Br. Brandt.
9. Gespräch: "Heiliger Abend." 7 Kinder.
10. Lied: "Ihr Kinderlein kommet." Klein Kinderchor.
11. Zweigespr. "An Bethlehems Krippe." 2 Mädchen.
12. Gespräch: "Weihnacht." 9 Mädchen. Evangeline.
13. Lied: S. Schule "O Come All." Victor Janzen.
14. Lied: "Weihnachtswunsch." John Hamm. (Olga)
15. - "Am schönsten Weihnachtstage." #2 Gracie Willms.
16. Gespräch: "Huldigung." 4 Knaben.
17. Lied: "Das schönste Fest." #46. Nelly Fast.
18. Zweigespr. "Stern der Hoffnung." 2 Mädchen.
19. Allgem. Gesang: "Freue dich Welt." Ev. L. #255
20. Gespräch: "Ich bin gar klein." 3 Mädchen. Laurina, Neta, Martha.
21. Lied: "Wie gut muss doch der Heiland." Evelyn Neufeld.
22. Gespräch: "Das Christkindlein." Heinz Thiessen, Eddie Thiessen, Gilbert Brandt.
23. - "Der Brief an das Christkind." Rudy Hamm, Susie Delesky.
24. Lied: "Fröhliche Weihnacht." Br. J. Brandt.
25. Lied: "Ich stehe an der Krippe." #41 Victor Wiebe.
26. Gespräch: "Öffnet dem Christkind die Herzen." (Open your hearts to the Christ Child)
27. Lied: "Weihnacht ist es heute." Frieda Wiens.
28. - "Freuet euch ihr Menschenkinder." #44 Wilma Wiebe.
29. Freiwilliges.
30. Lied: "Stille Nacht." Br. Brandt.
31. Schluss.

Bezeichnung.

- Saviour) Evelyn Neufeld
22. Recitation "Das Christkind" (The Christ Child) Heinz Thiessen, Eddie Thiessen, Gilbert Brandt
23. Recitation "Der Brief an das Christkind" (The letter to the Christ Child) Rudy Hamm, Susie Delesky
24. Song "Fröhliche Weihnacht" (Joyful Christmas) Br. J. Brandt
25. Poem "Ich stehe an der Krippe" (I stand at the manger) #41 Victor Wiebe
26. Recitation "Öffnet dem Christkind die Herzen" (Open your hearts to the Christ Child)

27. Poem "Weihnacht ist es heute" (Today is Christmas Day) Frieda Wiens
28. Poem "Freuet euch ihr Menschenkinder" (Rejoice all ye people) #44 Wilma Wiebe
29. Freiwilliges (Open "mike" - Voluntary contributions from the audience) (or offering?)\*
30. Song "Stille Nacht" (Silent night) Br. Brandt
31. Schluss (Concluding remarks) Br. B. Boldt.

\* Some readers have suggested that "Freiwilliges" (voluntary) could also refer to an offering being taken. Others say that in that case it would be termed as "Freiwilliges Opfer" (free will offering). At times, children who had not been chosen to recite a poem or to sing would be coached by a parent and encouraged to recite one or sing a song anyway. Or, sometimes a child would take advantage of this opportunity and tell a story of their own invention (often inadvertently funny). Or at times an adult felt strongly that they had something to contribute and take this opportunity to share what was on their heart. Perhaps our readers could share with us their memories of public participations at church Christmas programs or if "Freiwilliges" refers to taking an offering.



# The 12 Books of Christmas

## Follow the Black Lines

The Story of George and Margaret (Siemens) Braun



1st  
Book

by Elsie K. Neufeld  
with Henry and Velma Braun

### **Follow the Black Lines: The Story of George and Margaret (Siemens) Braun**

by Elsie K. Neufeld with Henry and Velma Braun \$35.00

This book is a journey, with a daunting itinerary that spans four continents: Europe, the west coast of Africa, South and North America. It begins in southern Ukraine, then touches down in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Germany, Holland, England, the Cape Verde Islands, Recife, Brazil, Asuncion, Paraguay, into the Chaco, then back to Asuncion, on to Rio de Janeiro, Lima, Peru, New York, crosses the Canadian border, lands in Milton, Ontario, heads west to Winnipeg, southeast to Steinbach, back to Winnipeg, and westward again, across the prairies to, finally, Mission, BC.

MHM

mennonite  
heritage museum

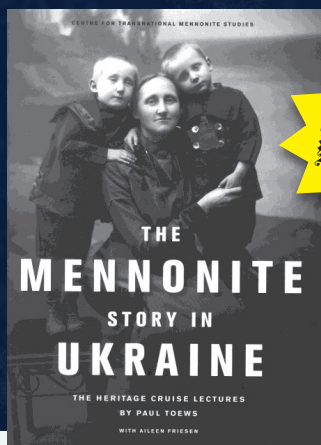


2nd Book



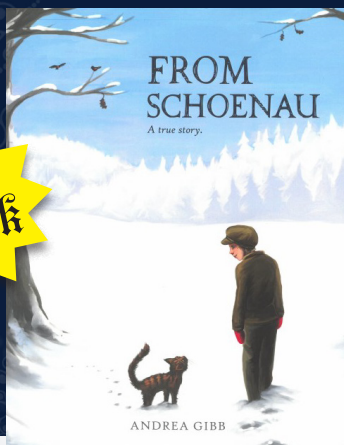
This meditation on the impact of human and ecological trauma explores the cost of survival for three generations of women living between empires.

3rd Book



The Mennonite Heritage Cruises ushered a new era of ethno-tourism for Mennonites. For sixteen years (1995-2010), these cruises created a “floating community of Mennonite pilgrims,” transforming a passenger ship along the Dnieper River into collective space for fellowship and reflection on the Mennonite story in Ukraine.

4th Book



Hans went searching for an adventure. And two meals a day. And a pair of real shoes. But winter has arrived and with it something dark and lonely. But Christmas is coming.

5th Book



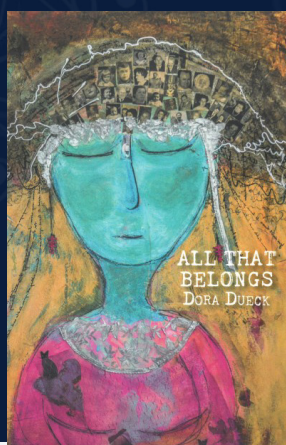
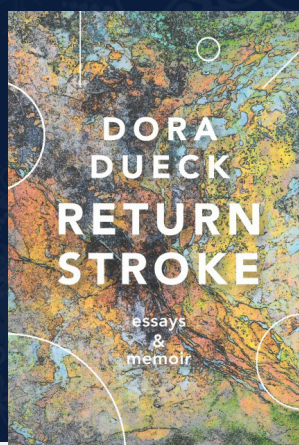
The *Best of the Bonnet* is an absolute must have for fans of *The Daily Bonnet* or anyone in love with the absurdity of day-to-day life.

At times both heartwarming and heartwrenching, *All That This House Has To Offer* pays tribute to the enduring power of home and family.

6th Book

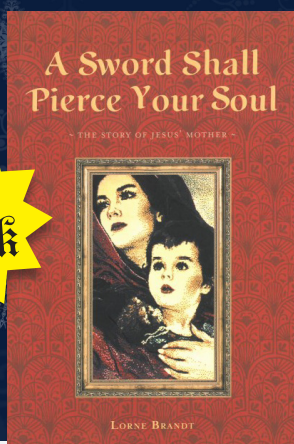






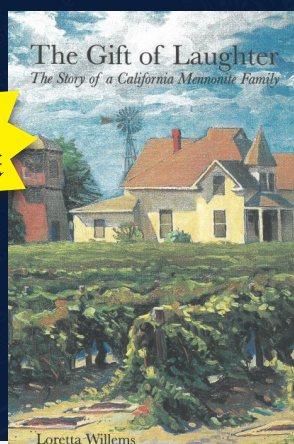
**7th Book**

The graceful, probing fictional stories and personal essays in *Return Stroke* by award-winning fiction writer Dora Dueck engage with a diverse range of ideas (becoming a writer, motherhood, mortality, the ethics of biography, a child's coming-out) because in non-fiction, she writes, "the quest for meaning bows to the experience as it was."



**8th Book**

Based on the biblical account of Mary, mother of Jesus, *A Sword Shall Pierce Your Soul* takes readers back to first-century Israel, where they meet a young woman whose "Yes" to God heralded the first notes of the gospel.



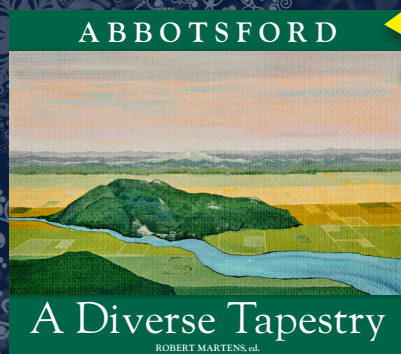
**9th Book**

Willems lovingly describes the irrepressible character of her family. Laughter was their gift to each other, their story a gift to others.



**10th Book**

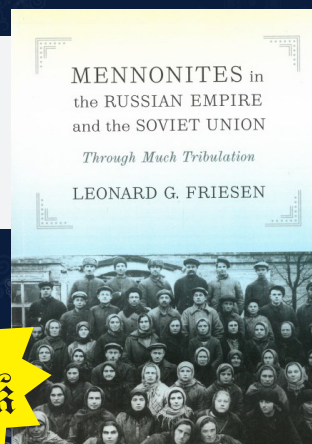
This is the story of a Mennonite refugee's journey from peril to the safety of a new home in Canada.



**11th Book**

This book is filled to the brim with honest, unique, historical perspectives, shedding much needed new light on our diverse community's history.

A new account that for the first time covers the Tsarist and Soviet periods across the entire Mennonite experience in Russia and Ukraine.



**12th Book**