

Mennonite Historian

A PUBLICATION OF THE MENNONITE HERITAGE ARCHIVES and THE CENTRE FOR MB STUDIES IN CANADA



Visiting scholar, Dr. Natalya Venger, in more peaceful times in her home city of Dnipro, Ukraine. See story starting on page 2. Photo credit: Natalya Venger.

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“Accidental” Visiting Scholar, Natalya Venger

by Dan Dyck, Winnipeg

Dr. Natalya Venger sits and stares for hours at a computer screen in the research room at the Mennonite Heritage Archives in Winnipeg. Some days it's a microfiche screen. Or perhaps an archive box containing personal diaries.

Since arriving from Ukraine via New York on June 1, the history professor fills her days searching for tidbits helpful to her quest. She's hoping to make discoveries that will inform her study of Mennonite colonies under Russian nationalism. In the early 20th century, Mennonites were caught in a time of great upheaval. How did they navigate through the civil unrest, a collapsing monarchy, and then a revolution? As we talk, it feels like more than an academic pursuit, as though her research might shine light on how ordinary Ukrainians today can cope with the Russian invasion of her country.

Studying the Mennonite sojourn in Ukraine has become Venger's life's work. She pinpoints the 1830s as the time when Russia's empire-building project and ensuing nationalism began in earnest. It has waxed and waned over the generations and remains unfinished. It has now again shifted toward darkness as Vladimir Putin's guns and rockets ravage her homeland.

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The irony is poignant. The very thing she is studying has once again reared its head; it's one of the reasons she's in Winnipeg, away from her husband, her extended family, friends, her students.

The petite, fair-haired fifty-eight-year-old calls herself an “accidental” visiting scholar. Taking a sabbatical to further her studies—while also seeking safe haven from the war in Ukraine—became a convenient coincidence when she was offered a visiting scholarship from the Centre for Transnational Mennonite Studies at the University of Winnipeg. She's grateful to the trio that helped secure funding from the Plett Foundation: Dr. Aileen Friesen, Dr. Mark Meuwese, and Dr. Ben Nobbs-Thiessen. Venger met Friesen in Winnipeg while studying Mennonite entrepreneurship under a Fulbright Scholarship.

Friesen appreciates Venger's years-long contribution to the overall study of Mennonite history in Ukraine. “Especially as North American scholars are no longer able to visit Ukraine, Natalya's knowledge of the history of south Ukraine, of the land and its people helps to facilitate new conversations and new research trajectories,” Friesen wrote in an email.

Mennonite settlement in territory formerly known as South Russia is a relatively recent and growing topic of interest in Ukrainian academic circles. Venger is an early pioneer. She began studying Mennonites as a university student at Dnipropetrovsk National University in the early 1990s. The newly independent Ukraine opened access to previously secret Mennonite files that had been strictly controlled by the Russian regime. In search of a research topic, a professor at DNU sent her to the regional archive. Here, Venger first learned of Mennonite colonies. She was astonished. “After two weeks, I understood that it would become the subject of my life.”

The history of Mennonites as a separate group in Russia wasn't mentioned in Venger's early school textbooks. Instead, they were collapsed into a broad category labelled Russian Germans. But by the 1830s, to be truly part of the Russian nation meant belonging to one of only three Slavic groups: Russian, Ukrainian, or Belarusian, she said.

Venger's current work is focused on the late 19th to early 20th century, a time when the presence of minority groups was under discussion in Russia. By

comparison to other groups, Mennonites had become economically successful, and thus influential locally and regionally. Some politicians and officials saw value in minority groups and wanted a country that would embrace a multi-ethnic society. But geo-politics intervened. The ambition of a united German empire posed a political threat that changed attitudes toward Germanic peoples in Russia and distracted the nationalization project. All Germans—and their successes—became suspect. Russia feared a conquest, aided from within. The unfinished nationalization project stalled by 1917.

Now the director of the Centre of German-Ukrainian Studies and a Professor of Practice at DNU, Venger has the weight of numerous research projects behind her. She describes in glowing terms how a small population of Mennonites managed to live through South Russia's colonization and modernization, praising their robust agricultural and entrepreneurial work ethic. How they navigated ongoing changes that were critical to their future, negotiated politically with the powers behind the Russian nationalization project. How they adjusted economically, culturally, and religiously. How they communicated with the society around them. How, through it all, they worked to retain their identity and values.

Her goal is to understand better how a relatively insignificant group of 100,000 Mennonites spread across a large region could survive the turmoil of a great power's nationalization project—and how Mennonites influenced it. “Mennonites were a small group,” she says, “but they were involved in everything. Their [path] indicated all the changes in the Russian empire. I see so many connections with the history of the Ukrainian people.” Moreover, her studies will reach beyond the Mennonite communities to help understand the bigger picture of Russian nationalism and inter-ethnic relations in Ukraine as a whole.

She is keenly interested as Mennonite history continues to unfold in present day Ukraine. Pre-covid, she was aware of seven small Mennonite congregations. Most Mennonites in Ukraine today were not born into the faith but have chosen to join.

Venger describes how Ukrainians welcomed North American Mennonites who began visiting the country in the 1980s for heritage tours. It's an indication

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Genealogy and Family History

The 1920s Mennonite Immigration to Canada: Genealogical Sources, Part 3: Immigration to Canada

by Glenn H. Penner <gpenner@uoguelph.ca>

The Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization (CMBBoC) records have been the go-to source for many who have researched the 1920s immigration into Canada. These extensive records are found in the Mennonite Heritage Archives (MHA).^{1, 2} A starting point for genealogists is the Registration Forms (see images at right). A total of 5,704 two-sided forms accounts for 20,210 Mennonite immigrants.³ The information on these forms has been compiled into one very large spreadsheet by the staff and volunteers at the Mennonite Historical Society of British Columbia. This information will be available on the mennonitegenealogy.com website in the near future. Data from the registration forms is included in the GRANDMA database⁴ for just over 9,000 of the 20,210 people found on the cards. Efforts are underway to remedy this.

The situation with respect to ship passenger lists and Canadian government immigration forms is somewhat different. The records available from the Library and Archives Canada (LAC) website consist of passenger lists for some years and immigration forms for others. Although the passenger lists have been preserved, access to copies is not easy due to copyright by a third party (Ancestry.com).⁵ The “Ocean Arrivals” forms were microfilmed in the 1950s and 1960s and the originals were destroyed.⁶ Searching these records through the LAC website is akin to searching for a needle in a haystack. The records themselves are low quality scans of microfilm images taken many decades ago.

A considerable number of prospective immigrants were rejected as unfit due to illness, learning disabilities, and physical abnormalities. There is considerable correspondence on this, including lists of those rejected, in LAC documents.⁷ Some of these people did eventually make their way to Canada. Some ended up going to Mexico or South America.

As noted in part 2 of this series, several

hundred people immigrated to Canada via Mexico. The records of those families are found in the Mennonite Library and Archives (MLA) in North Newton, Kansas,⁸ and copies of many of these files are found at the MHA.⁹ Some lists of those immigrating to Mexico or wishing to do so have been translated.¹⁰ Nearly all of these people eventually ended up in Canada.

Some researchers may want to know something about the ship that took

their ancestors from Europe to Canada. Wikipedia has articles dedicated to several of these ocean liners. Unfortunately, there is not enough space here to list all the ships and provide links. For example, the *Melita* took hundreds to Mennonites to Canada.¹¹

Endnotes

1. For the GAMEO article on the CMBoC, see https://gameo.org/index.php?title=Canadian_Mennonite_Board_of_Colonization
2. For a more extensive description of the CMBoC files available at the MHA, see http://mharchives.ca/holdings/organizations/CMBoC_fonds.htm
3. Black and white images of these forms can be found at https://www.mharchives.ca/holdings/organizations/CMBoC_Forms/

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[illegible][illegible]

The CMBoC card for the family of Jacob Jacob Voth (GRANDMA #420354). Photo credit: Mennonite Heritage Archives, Winnipeg.

Visiting Scholar

(cont'd from p. 2)

that Mennonites have not forgotten the importance of place in their history, and that Ukrainians celebrate diversity. Some of those visitors saw great social needs and established numerous charitable efforts to help. She cites one: the Mennonite Centre in Molochansk in the southeastern province of Zaporizhzhia. Molochansk was originally founded by Mennonite settlers two centuries ago under the name Halbstadt. The centre's building was seized by Russian authorities on September 1.

"It's very good for Ukraine to have this kind of denomination. They're very productive in changing the world around them. It connects to the roots of their faith," she said. She's come to the conclusion that she "can't understand the history of Ukraine without the Mennonites' presence."

Like a gem miner with a headlamp and a pick, she hunts for treasures in the vast collections at the Mennonite Archives in Winnipeg. Chipping away at records, books, documents, looking for tiny glints of light that might illuminate the big question at the root of her current investigation: what does a Russian nation mean, and who can be included? Who must be excluded? It requires hours of reading to uncover even one relevant sentence, but such finds can be treasures. Eventually she will publish a monograph on the subject.

Venger is prolific in her work. A 1998 publication studied the Mennonite community in Ukraine from 1914 to 1931. A 2009 book focused on Mennonite entrepreneurship in southern Ukraine in the late imperial period. In between and since she has authored or co-authored numerous book chapters, essays, papers, and encyclopedia articles on Mennonites. She has become a recognized expert in her field.

Conrad Stoesz, MHA archivist, is grateful for Venger's unique contribution to the Mennonite story. "One of the big benefits she brings to this research is her abilities in reading the Russian documents and her connections to archives within Ukraine and Russia. She is a networker by nature, building rapport and relationships with people, which encourages sharing of knowledge and energies," he said.

Her visiting scholarship will conclude on May 31, 2023. She has no idea what kind of home she will return to. A deep love for her homeland makes her study of

Mennonites under nationalism visceral. In her heart, she feels Ukraine will emerge victorious. If Russia succeeds, will she as an ethnic Ukrainian become a second-rate citizen? "They will try to force us to change our identity," she says. Will she be forced to teach a history different from the one she's come to know? "Never! Russia has already politically destroyed the true version of its history."

Friesen admires her strength. "She is determined and has a strong moral compass, which keeps her calm and focused during this overwhelming moment in Ukraine's history."

Venger connects online with family and friends every day for updates on the war. It's not psychologically healthy, she admits. "I have everything here, for now, but I don't have a future. Just a year ago my future was predictable, and I thought about what I would do in ten years." She's compelled to know what's happening, to ponder outcomes and options that do not yet exist. Comfort is found in familiar activities: exercise, art, reading classic literature.

She puts on a cheery, brave face for others. So far, the flat in her building in Dnipro remains intact. Her husband, Oleg, who has studied history and law, has been pressed into service as an officer in the Ukrainian military. He cannot legally leave the country. Their only child, an adult daughter, lives in New York.

Some Sundays she'll venture out to visit a Ukrainian Orthodox Church, where the language and the people feel familiar. Other Sundays she'll attend a Mennonite Church, where, she says, "I feel very comfortable." Faith helps her believe in the future, in justice. At church she feels able to talk to God. "Faith helps me to keep my soul and my sentiments in order, to be strong." She identifies with a line from the movie version of Winston Groom's *Forrest Gump*, where Forrest says, "Life is like a box of chocolates, you never know what you're going to get."

When Venger's work first drew her to Winnipeg in 2001 for a conference organized by Royden Loewen, it was a happier time, knowing she could return to her peaceful home in Dnipro. Over the years, and especially during her current stay, she's found a strong sense of community among her history and archives colleagues. She feels welcomed, cared for.

For now, Venger's personal circumstances and her life's work have

intersected in Winnipeg. It's the right place to be for this moment; she's safe, putting in hours, studying, discovering, gathering new insights into a piece of Ukraine's history only a few people in her country know about. She hopes to glean insights into how a small group of Mennonites managed upheaval more than a century ago. Her aim is to ensure Mennonites are not again erased from Ukraine's history.

Dan Dyck is a volunteer writer at the Mennonite Heritage Archives.

1920s immigration to Canada

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4. According to the Sept. 7, 2022, update of the GRANDMA public online database (GMOL).

5. Passenger Lists and Border Entries 1925-35: <https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/immigration/immigration-records/passenger-lists-border-entry-1925-1935/Pages/introduction.aspx>

Note: these links will only give you summary information on the person you have searched for. Actual images must be requested or found by searching the online microfilms (which have no indices). Direct access to images of the ship lists is only available through Ancestry.com.

6. Ocean Arrivals, Form 30A, 1919-1924 (immigration forms, not passenger lists): <https://www.bac-lac.gc.ca/eng/discover/mass-digitized-archives/ocean-arrivals/Pages/ocean-arrivals.aspx>

Note: these web addresses may not work unless you cut and paste it into your web browser.

7. Canadian Government correspondence, including lists of those rejected by immigration authorities, https://heritage.canadiana.caiew/oochlm.lac_reel_c7349/1 and https://heritage.canadiana.ca/view/oochlm.lac_reel_c7350/1

Note: these web addresses may not work unless you cut and paste them into your web browser.

8. MLA. MS.12

9. Mennonite Heritage Archives, vol. 4883.

10. This will be found at <https://www.mennonitegenealogy.com/1920s/>

11. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SS_Melita

Research Participants Needed

If your Mennonite ancestors lived on the settlement at Namaka Farm in southern Alberta in the 1930s and you are interested in knowing more, please contact Liz Jansen at <ejansen@yorku.ca>.

Liz is doing research on the interactions between *Russlaender* Mennonites, Blackfoot People of Siksika Nation, and the "English" colonists in this environment—and what there is to learn from these experiences.

Eastern Vision: The Peter Epp Story

by Barry Teichroeb, Whitby, Ontario

I have clear memories of my great grandmother, Helena Fast (1878–1962), pictured below. I was a youngster, not even school age, and she was the oldest person I knew. She spoke a language I did not understand, but we established common ground from the outset. She made cookies, and I ate them.

I remember her small, white house in Laird, Saskatchewan, as clearly as if I were standing there now. It was a little house at the top of a huge garden. There was a rain barrel by the back door and an outhouse in the yard. The house was too small to have space for a bathroom. I did not realize there was no indoor plumbing. I was intrigued to learn that, in the old days, the older boys would go out on Halloween night, sneaking through the dark, to tip over the outhouses in the village. I also learned that the boys would hoist stray cows onto the roofs of houses. I do not know how much of this is true, but when you are four or five years old, it all seems plausible.

I remember only three rooms in the house. The kitchen had a wood stove and a table with chairs. There was always something cooking there. Helena slept in a tiny, back bedroom. Her youngest daughter, Dora Fast (1921–2011), lived with her, so I suppose she had a room, too. And there was the living room. All the adults sat there and talked in Low German to let Helena follow the conversation. I never spoke or understood that language, but I developed an ear for it. As infrequently as I hear it today, I can still recognize it.

I remember the village. Whenever we visited Laird, we would always walk to the grocery store where Dora worked and pick up farmer sausage. There was also a Rogers Syrup pail of cracklings to take back. That was important for frying potatoes. We would wander the gravel roads and go back to the house for dinner.

Helena died in 1962 at the age of 84. She lived a long, eventful life. Born in Russia to Heinrich Epp (1855–1906) and Margaretha Rempel (1857–1937), Helena came to Canada as a young teenager in 1892. Fourteen is a difficult age for a child to be uprooted from her home, taken away from everything she has ever known, and moved to a country an unimaginable distance away. At the age of 19, she married

Jacob Fast (1874–1939), and together they raised 15 children. Jacob died at the onset of the Second World War, and Helena was a widow for the last 23 years of her life.

At the time of Helena's emigration, Mennonites had been living in settlements along the Dnieper River in eastern Ukraine for a century. This territory was part of Tsarist Russia at that time.

Helena's great-great-grandfather, Peter Epp (1777–1844), was among the earliest Mennonites migrating from the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth to settle in Chortitza, Russia, at the end of the 18th century. His grandfather, Elder Peter Epp (1725–1789), played a significant role in encouraging and enabling the mobilization of the Danzig Mennonite community for this transformative undertaking. I wonder if Helena understood the influence her ancestor, Elder Peter Epp, had in preserving the culture of the Dutch Mennonites and establishing their settlement in the Chortitza Colony. Peter resisted cultural assimilation, tenaciously preserving the use of Dutch in church services. He actively promoted the resettlement of his congregation in Chortitza through the influence of his church and office. Even in his last years, when his health was failing, Epp prepared to journey to the new settlement to organize the congregation and preserve the church there.

Prior to this migration to Russia, Dutch

Mennonites had lived for more than 200 years in the greater Danzig region of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. For centuries, Danzig had been an important commercial center and trading hub on the Baltic Coast. The Dutch knew the sea route from Amsterdam to Danzig well, having operated large-scale commercial trading businesses along the Baltic coast since the 15th century or earlier. Mennonites settled in Danzig beginning in the middle of the 16th century, leaving behind the Inquisition and religious persecution.

Danzig in the mid-1500s was a safe place for the Mennonites to live. They had a reputation for industriousness and commercial acumen that granted them limited acceptance. However, Danzig's Lutherans and Catholics viewed the Mennonites with a degree of suspicion because of past violent political events that were not forgotten. In 1534, some extremists had attempted to overthrow the civic government of Amsterdam.¹ This coloured the perspective of Danzig's Lutherans and Catholics.

The Danzig city officials permitted the Mennonites to practice their religion and to operate businesses and farms, but there were restrictions. Most Danzig guilds barred Mennonites from entry, and city officials would not usually permit Mennonites to set up households within

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Helena Epp with her husband, Jacob Fast. Helena is the 4th great-granddaughter of Elder Peter Epp, the subject of this article. Photo credit: Barry Teichroeb.

Mennonite Heritage Archives

MHA Update

by Conrad Stoesz

With the removal of COVID restrictions, the Mennonite Heritage Archives experienced a large increase in the number of researchers visiting us in person—from a low of 11 visitors in January and February to a high of 81 in the month of October. The information gleaned from archival research at MHA is used in books, presentations, websites, and news stories on radio and TV.

Some of the increase in the number of researchers followed the Centre for Transnational Mennonite Studies (CTMS) conference held at the University of Winnipeg in October. Several people attending the conference took the opportunity to visit the archives. I appreciated overhearing two researchers from separate European cities as they sought common ground through the Mennonites they both knew. In one week in October, we hosted researchers from Amsterdam, Mexico City, Dnipro, St. Catharines, and Edmonton. We recently hosted 30 high school students from six Hutterite Colonies and 45 high school students from Westgate Mennonite

Collegiate. The students were introduced to the role of archives in society and were treated to some stories from the archives and shown some very rare diaries, documents, and manuscripts.

The October CTMS conference was entitled “Departing Canada, Encountering Latin America.” It was good to be at this annual conference in person again. Presenters came from across Canada and from Mexico, Netherlands, Paraguay, Bolivia, and the U.S. The in-person attendance on site fluctuated between 50 and 30 people, and I heard that the online community was up to 65. My presentation problematized the church split that created the Sommerfeld and Bergthaler denominations on the Mennonite West Reserve in 1894. Numerous American evangelists from at least six denominations visited the area between 1879 and 1894. I argued that the division was not just about higher education and the Mennonite Collegiate Institute in Gretna, but also about the presence and ideas brought by these outside evangelists.

The Mennonite Heritage Archives continues to aid in the development of the Mennonite Historical Library together with Canadian Mennonite University. As people downsize their libraries, some bring their Mennonite books to the Mennonite Heritage Archives. This year, approximately 900 books were added to the library collection. The books not needed in the library collection are added

to our second-hand book inventory, which has generated over \$5,000 in sales for the archives this year.

We are continuing our digitization endeavours at MHA. We have now digitized 850 cassette tapes from our collection. Some of these tapes are now 50+ years old and are showing their age. Thanks to the Young Canada Works program administered by the Canadian Council of Archives, we received support to hire CMU student Emmitt Ferguson to work with



Emmitt Ferguson scanning and digitizing the *Steinbach Post*.
Photo credit: Conrad Stoesz.

Voices from EMC & EMMC



EMC Missionary Evelyn Barkman spent several months travelling across Mali, teaching reading and writing for up to four weeks in each of the five communities she visited with her friend Carol in 1981. The teaching conditions were not ideal as she often shared her classroom space with donkeys and guinea fowl. In one city, her tiny classroom was located right next to a very noisy and distracting “butchering bee.” Despite the hardships, her efforts were deemed worthwhile—one of her classes increased from 53 girls to 130 in one year! Text and photo credit: Adrienne Funk.



MEMBERS of the Youth Committee, left to right: Walter Sawatsky, Board of Education representative; Dave Rempel, chairman; Jake Peters; Jake Driedger, secretary; and Henry Dueck, advisor. Missing in the picture are Leonard Sawatsky and Bill Driedger.

A major strength of the EMMC at the time it organized in 1959 was its large core of committed young people. The Youth Committee of the 1950s, combined with some creative leadership in a number of churches, served to draw the youth more firmly into the church. The commitment and enthusiasm of this younger generation would be tested in the next few decades as they edged their way into leadership positions. It soon became obvious that enthusiasm for youth rallies and events was shared by a limited number of strong youth groups. Some churches had little, if any, youth activity. In 1962, the board met with youth leaders during one of the conference sessions in Morden. The board appointed a Youth Committee. The group in the photo is one of the committees from those early years. Text and photo credit: Lil Goertzen.

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Recent Archival Accessions

by Jon Isaak

To give readers a sense of the recent archival accessions, here's a brief report. During the summer, I finished processing several donated collections and creating the online finding aids to help viewers identify what is in these collections, technically called "fonds."

Recent archival accessions include two sets of personal papers from individuals serving in the leadership in the Mennonite Brethren (MB) church, one in Bible teaching (David I. Bergen, 1929–2020) and one in music ministry (John C. Klassen, 1934–2016). In addition, there were two sets of institutional files that were donated after two churches ceased operations, Christian Centre Fellowship (1969–2021) in Thompson, Manitoba, and Northgate Community Church (1963–2021) in Dawson Creek, British Columbia.

David Bergen grew up during the Depression on a Saskatchewan farm. A member at Glenbush MB Church, he married Laurena Harms in 1954. While a student at Bethany Bible School (1948–1952) in Hepburn, Saskatchewan, David sensed a call to Christian ministry. After four years of farming, he decided to take further education in preparation for a life of Bible teaching and pastoral ministry.

His Bible teaching career spanned 21 years at Bethany Bible Institute (1964–1985) and nine years at Winkler Bible

Institute (1988–1997). The three years between these two postings, he served as pastor of the Richmond Park MB Church in Brandon, Manitoba (1985–1988).

In retirement, he and Laurena moved back to Saskatchewan, settling first in Waldheim and eventually in a Saskatoon condominium.

David continued an itinerant preaching and teaching ministry during retirement. He also edited his teaching and preaching notes from his long career into books of collected meditations, totaling more than 900 meditations of 600 words each. There were seven such manuscripts, which he self-published for distribution among family and friends.

For a complete listing of the files in Bergen's personal paper collection, see https://cmbs.mennonitebrethren.ca/personal_papers/bergen-david-isaac-1929-2020/.

John C. Klassen grew up in the North Kildonan area of Winnipeg, Manitoba. While a student at Mennonite Brethren Collegiate Institute (MBCI), he met Bertha Pauls. They were later married in the Elmwood MB Church (1958), which became their home congregation and where they were active in music ministry.

John and Bertha spent many years in the radio music ministry of Gospel Light Hour (later MB Communications, then Family Life Network, now Square One World Media). John trained as a schoolteacher and spent most of his 30-year teaching career in Winnipeg School Division schools, teaching instrumental music, mathematics, and computer programming.

A gifted musician, John played viola with the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra and double bass in various other orchestras. After retirement (1992), he and Bertha made several

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Bertha and John Klassen at an MB Communications event in 1978. Photo Credit: MAID CMBS NP149-1-4993.

trips to teach music in Paraguay and Russia. John composed and arranged music in many genres, both choral and instrumental. He published several collections of music, including a German hymnal, songs for a Russian Bible camping program (Kingdom Ventures), a collection of instrumental arrangements of sacred music, as well as two volumes of Low German hymns.

For a complete listing of the files in Klassen's personal paper collection, see https://cmbs.mennonitebrethren.ca/personal_papers/klassen-john-c-1934-2016/.

While church closures are often characterized with a sense of sadness and loss, not to be forgotten are the many lives that were shaped and nurtured over the years of ministry. This is where the archival collection of membership registers, congregational meeting minutes, bulletins, and photos proves to be valuable. Both the Thompson and Dawson Creek churches now have their ministry lives preserved, described, and accessible. For the file list of the Christian Fellowship Centre, see https://cmbs.mennonitebrethren.ca/inst_records/christian-centre-fellowship-church-thompson-thompson-mb/. For the Northgate Community Church, see https://cmbs.mennonitebrethren.ca/inst_records/northgate-anabaptist-fellowship/.



Laurena and David Bergen cut a celebration cake in 2019. Photo Credit: MAID CMBS NP215-01-02.

The Peter Epp Story

(cont'd from p. 5)

the city walls. Therefore, they settled in suburban villages such as Schottland and Neugarten, arranging their social lives around closed communities, speaking their own language, and preventing intermarriage. In their homes and churches, the Mennonites spoke Dutch, and, in the larger community, they spoke Low German, at the time a universal language of commerce.² Since a principle of their beliefs was that they would not swear oaths to state governments, they were excluded from the right to become citizens of Danzig. Adherence to their principles cost them social, political, and economic opportunities, but it helped to preserve unique customs, religious beliefs, and cultural attributes brought from the Netherlands.

By the late 18th century, political changes in the region made daily life more challenging. The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was nominally independent, but, in practical terms, it was a vassal state of Russia with a malleable king, Augustus III, who was easily controlled by the Russian crown.³ When Augustus died in 1763, his successor leaned toward more independence.⁴ Of additional concern to the Russians was the Polish nobility's struggle for greater influence and control over the governance of the Commonwealth. The constant unrest initiated a civil war.

For Russia, the Commonwealth was a costly distraction when there were more important international challenges to deal with. In 1770, Frederick II, the Emperor of Prussia, proposed a partitioning of the Commonwealth with the twin objectives of reducing the anarchy there and calming the contentious relationships of the Russian, Austrian, and Prussian empires through strategic territorial expansion.⁵ The proposal was enacted in 1772, with the dividing of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth among Russia, Austria, and Prussia. Eventually, most Dutch Mennonites found themselves under the rule of Prussia.

Until then, the Mennonite communities had thrived; their populations had risen; and their land holdings had expanded. Historically, they were granted exemption from military service. However, the Prussian state began to view this military

exemption as unacceptably costly. The military service burden was based on land holdings, which, over time, fell on a shrinking base, as the land controlled by the exempt Mennonites constantly grew. The political solution was to prohibit Mennonites from acquiring new land.⁶ This economic restriction added to the ever-increasing tax burden levied to purchase the military exemption and became difficult for the Mennonite communities to bear.

Social pressure to integrate and assimilate was an additional threat to the Dutch Mennonite way of life. Gradually, their use of Dutch at home declined, and the more ubiquitous and practical Low German language replaced it.⁷ Cessation of Dutch in religious services had been resisted by Elders for years, fearing the erosion of their culture. After the collapse of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, church officials gradually replaced Dutch in church services with High German, the language encouraged by the Prussian crown. In fact, Peter Epp was the last Elder to switch services to German—although mixed with Dutch—in the late 1770s.⁸ The right of the Mennonites to practice their own religion also became increasingly costly, with onerous taxes charged and transferred to Lutheran church coffers.⁹

A solution to these economic and social problems emerged. Since the 17th century, Imperial Russia had possessed large tracts of land in eastern Ukraine. After forcefully removing the semi-nomadic Cossacks from these lands, the government welcomed industrious settlers to this vast “uninhabited” region with offers of generous land incentives and religious freedom.¹⁰ The Mennonite communities in Prussia took note.

Georg von Trappe was an emissary selected by Russian authorities to recruit settlers from Prussia.¹¹ Despite the restrictions that the Prussian government imposed on their Mennonite citizens, it had no economic desire to lose subjects to Russia.¹² Von Trappe had to be circumspect in his recruiting efforts to avoid igniting an international political incident. The convenient loophole he exploited was that Danzig was not yet under the control of the Prussian Crown in the late 1780s. While Prussian officials might resist his efforts, they could not stop him. Von Trappe went to Danzig.

Peter Epp, born in 1725 to Peter Epp

(1681–1733) and Anna Claassen (1683–1730), was elected Elder of the Danzig Flemish Church in 1779. He had served as a deacon in 1757 and a minister in the rural community of Neuenhuben since 1758. Epp was the first minister of rural origin to be elected to this important position in the senior Danzig church.¹³ His predecessor, Hans von Steen (1705–1781), had been the Elder from 1754 until his resignation in 1779 due to failing health.¹⁴ Von Steen had spent his career advocating for his congregation in representations to the Danzig administrative council and guarding jealously the use of Dutch to protect the congregation from assimilation and integration.¹⁵ Now the welfare of the congregation was in Epp's hands.

In 1786, von Trappe presented his immigration proposal to Elder Peter Epp.¹⁶ Epp had already foreseen that there was no future for his congregation in Prussia. Economic restrictions and encroaching integration were clear threats. So, he endorsed the project at once.¹⁷ The invitation extended by Catherine II of Russia was read in the Mennonite churches of Danzig in 1786.¹⁸ Upon learning of this, the Danzig city officials summoned Epp and his counterpart in the Frisian church, Isaac Stobbe, to appear before Council. The Council rebuked the two Elders strongly and ordered them to cease communicating with the Russian emissaries.¹⁹

Clandestine discussions continued. Epp met with his congregants, and this group devised a proposal to send delegates to Russia to scout the land and negotiate terms to bring back to the Mennonite congregations in Danzig.²⁰ The Mennonites made their proposal to von Trappe, and he accepted. Two delegates made the trip to Russia in 1786, accompanying a group of Lutheran settlers on the ship to Riga. Johann Bartsch represented the Frisian congregation, and Jacob Hoeppner represented the Flemish congregation.

Bartsch and Hoeppner returned to Danzig in 1787 with an offer for settlement that they had negotiated with the Russian crown. Von Trappe appealed to Epp to allow the reading of the offer in church. Epp declined, adhering to the strict orders of the Danzig officials.²¹ No doubt he was reluctant to exacerbate the sensitivities of the Danzig Council and increase the risk that authorities would find a way to terminate the emigration initiative. Instead, he permitted von Trappe to distribute the

offer documents outside the church after a service.²²

The offer was good. It gave the settlers land, funds for travel, capital and materials for building, administrative autonomy, religious freedom, and a coveted exemption from military service. Von Trappe's recruitment drive was successful, and eventually 228 prospective settler households enlisted for the first wave of migration. Exit visas were required by the prospective emigrants, although some families risked leaving Prussia without visas. In June 1788, the Prussian government reluctantly issued formal permission for the settlers to emigrate.²³ While this formality clarified any ambiguities for emigrants, it applied only to landless householders. This constraint proved to be a significant problem even before the settlers reached their destination.

Emigrants wintering in Dubrovno, Russia, in 1788–1789 soon found themselves with 12 couples engaged to be married and no church officials to conduct the ceremonies.²⁴ At that time, all the Danzig church officials were landowners and thus ineligible for emigration.²⁵ The Russian immigrants implored the Danzig church officials to send an elder to help organize the Russian church.

For much of their history, the Mennonites held divided perspectives leading to longstanding fragmentation into several disparate groups—the two major ones being the Flemish and Frisian congregations. The Russian crown had suggested that they preferred a single, unified church. To that end, the Russian settlers had committed to establish a single church, including both Flemish and Frisian congregants.²⁶ The pressure to honour this agreement was substantial—both to establish a stable church in the Russian settlement and to forestall promiscuous acts by betrothed young people. In February 1789, Peter Epp declared his willingness to set out in spring to join the settlers.²⁷

Epp's health was in decline, and he fell seriously ill before his spring departure. Travel was impossible for him. Instead, the Danzig church officials issued a request to the Russian congregation to provide a list of ministerial candidates from which the Danzig church could appoint deacons and ministers.²⁸

The settlers complied, furnishing a list of candidates encompassing Flemish and Frisian congregants. However, the Flemish

church officials in receipt of the list rebuffed the Frisian candidates, appointing only Flemish members. This fateful decision led to immediate discord because the settlers naturally felt both congregations deserved fair representation in their new ministerial council. Once again, the settlers appealed to Danzig for an Elder to join them and help organize church affairs.²⁹

In May 1789, Peter Epp, on the mend, once again agreed to travel to Russia. August 4 was set as the date of departure. A wagon was built and provisioned for the journey. Four families made plans to accompany Epp. Two days before departing, Epp gave a farewell sermon. He fell ill the next day and became bedridden until his death in November.³⁰ Danzig church officials speedily granted the Russian settlers the authority to elect and ordain an elder from among their ministers.³¹ Left to themselves, the settlers established separate Flemish and Frisian congregations.

Peter Epp did not live to see the new settlement of Chortitza. However, his son, Heinrich Epp (1757–1805), and his grandson, Peter Epp (1777–1844), settled there, and his descendants lived there for a century before coming to Canada.

Barry Teichroeb is a retired financial industry executive with a keen interest in Mennonite genealogy. He hosts a website and blogs at "Dutch Mennonite Historical Genealogy," where a version of this article first appeared, <https://www.mooserungenealogy.com/>.

Endnotes

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MHA Update

(cont'd from p. 6)

Sara Dyck in digitizing the *Steinbach Post* newspaper. The digital images are made word searchable and then posted on our new digital platform. We continue to work with PeaceWorks Technology Solutions to develop the site. On our mharchives.ca website, we have added more materials to aid research, including "A Guide to the Genealogy of Prussian Mennonites," "Journal of the Ministry of Crown Properties, 1842," translation of *Orenburg in the Urals* by Peter P. Dyck, "Autobiography of Johann Donner (1771–1830)," and translation of *The Molotschna Mennonites* by Franz Isaac.

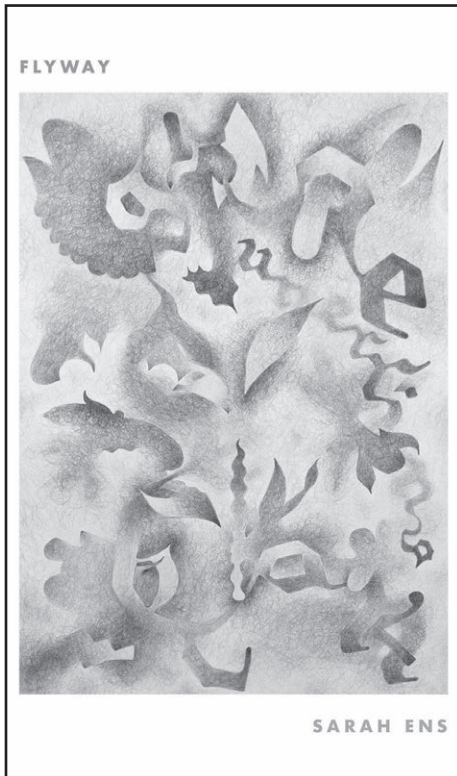
To help us look ahead, we have prepared a celebratory 12-month calendar for 2023, recognizing the 100th anniversary of the *Russlaender* migration to Canada. The calendar is entitled "From Revolution to Hope." (See the September issue of *Mennonite Historian* for the cover image.) Calendars are selling for \$20 (plus shipping and tax) and a limited number are available. If you would like to order one, email us at info@mharchives.ca.

We look forward to the coming year, serving our constituency and helping people find answers to important questions. All the best in the Christmas season and in 2023!

Book Reviews

Sarah Ens, *Flyway* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 2022), 110 pp.

Reviewed by Joanne Epp, Winnipeg



Sarah Ens's second book of poetry, *Flyway*, begins in a tallgrass prairie preserve in southern Manitoba. That tiny remnant of an almost-vanished ecosystem becomes the site of a quest to know the land and her place in it, and of a poetic inquiry into her grandmother's story. "I am here to think about grass and birds," she writes, "To ask & look & listen" (3).

Flyway consists of a Prelude and five sections. "Tallgrass Psalmody" parts one, two, and three explore the tallgrass prairie and ask questions of the self who is doing the exploring. These sections are lyrical, with many passages that feel like they want to be set to music. The voice alternates between "I" and "you." The "you" segments always begin with a question, moving from "What brings you to nest?" (7) to the concluding "& how will you go from here?" (103). The more introspective first-person voice rarely asks questions; when it does, it feels like a crucial moment: "But how to hear anything/ beyond my own/ mouth?" (69).

The other two sections explore Ens's family history. The first, "Flight," is told in the imagined voice of her paternal

grandmother, Anni (Niebuhr) Ens. This section recounts a multitude of hardships: hunger and terror under Stalin's regime; the arrest of Anni's father; her brother's accidental death; the family's tortuous route of escape from Ukraine at the end of the Second World War. The procession of place names that form the headings for each episode witnesses to the constant upheavals of this time.

The second history section, "Un/Settling," picks up the story in Canada, with the family making a new home but feeling both the pull of people left behind and the sometimes-uncomfortable cultural differences between themselves and the Kanadier Mennonites. It's told in the third person, often in fragmented and scattered lines, incorporating excerpts from letters and Anni's memoir.

One doesn't necessarily read a book of poetry from cover to cover, but in calling *Flyway* a long poem, Ens invites us to read this as a *book*, not a collection of individual poems. It's an assertion that the two main threads, family and land, form a single story; that it's important to understand both a family's escape from danger and the transformation of a landscape at the hands of Mennonite farmers. In bringing these threads together, Ens situates herself firmly within the tradition of Mennonites writing about their ancestry, and also within a growing body of Canadian poets for whom it is important to come to terms with their identity as descendants of European settlers living on this land.

An important question with any long poem is what holds it together. In *Flyway*, it is partly the pattern of alternating sections, with the meditations on prairie enclosing the family narratives. But just as much, it is the repeated words and phrases that echo between the sections. Birds are everywhere—swallows in particular, but many others, in both the psalmody sections and the narratives. References to bird migrations recur within the story of the family's immigration to Canada, alongside the motif of survival. As Anni and her family are caught in precarious circumstances, so are the birds, who face the risks of migration and the threat of extinction.

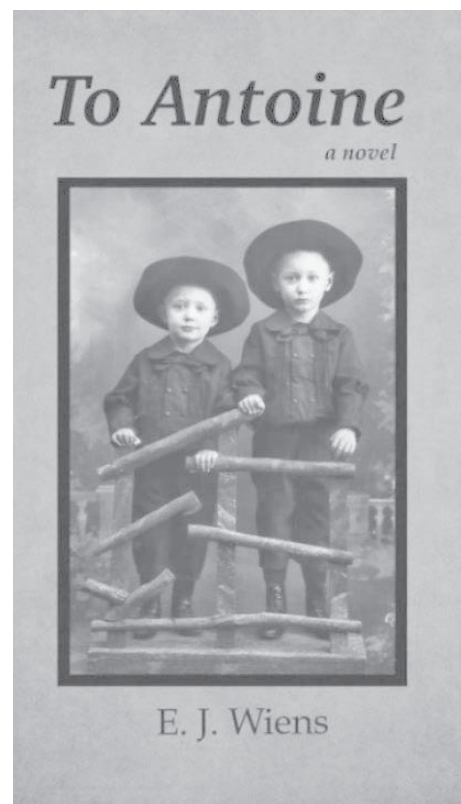
Ens is careful to point out, in her endnotes, that her presentation of her grandmother's story is "a creative reimagining," and thus should not be read as a historical document. Yet

her imaginative telling, supported by memories and thorough research, does what good historical fiction does: it puts flesh on history by bringing the stories of particular people to life. Likewise, her meditation on the tallgrass prairie is "a work of artistic attention" and should not be taken as a scientific resource (105). But her attentiveness, informed by research, results in questions that create an opening for the reader—an invitation to also ask, look, and listen.

Joanne Epp is a writer living in Winnipeg. Her most recent book of poetry is *Cattail Skyline* (Turnstone Press, 2021).

Erwin J. Wiens, *To Antoine* (St. Catharines: Gelassenheit Publications 2022), 374 pp. An audiobook version is in production, with the ISBN number 978-1-998027-05-1.

Reviewed by Maria H. Klassen, St. Catharines, Ontario.



Erwin J. Wiens's *To Antoine* is his first published novel. As a young child, he heard, or overheard, many stories told by some of his parents' relatives and friends who had personally experienced the horrors of Stalinism and the Second World War.

Decades later, these stories began to germinate into a novel; but it wasn't until about ten years ago that he did some serious

research, including travel to the USSR to locate relatives. Wiens wanted to write about the Mennonite refugee experience after the Second World War—the journey from Ukraine, through Germany, and in the case of the main character in the novel—his journey from Paraguay to Canada. Wiens says, “Excellent novels have been written about those who escaped the Soviet Union in the 1920s, but few have focussed on this group of Mennonites” that followed the Second World War.

The main fictional character of this book is Peter Enns, a young child growing up in Ukraine. He becomes good friends with Antoine, the son of a former Russian estate owner, living on a neighbouring estate. Antoine loses his parents and, as a poor orphan, spends the first ten years of his life scrambling to stay alive. His fiercely protective nanny drops him off at the Enns’s family cottage where he spends the next five years with the family. Peter and Antoine become close friends.

Peter grows up in a Mennonite village in Ukraine in the 1920s. His journey in this book includes the trek to Germany with many other Mennonites, and eventually he goes to Paraguay. After ten years there, he comes to Canada. The novel consists of letters written by Peter, now a retired high school teacher in Manitoba in the 1990s, to Antoine, recalling his boyhood in the 1930s and ’40s, including disastrous choices he made during the Nazi period. Most of his past is unknown to his family and friends.

This book is not a light or easy read. Wiens intertwines many themes in this book. Some examples include the contrast between a peasant Mennonite boy and the son of former Russian nobility, conflict between Peter’s Mennonite upbringing and his youthful delusions, Mennonite complicities in Nazi horrors, and conversations between a Mennonite and a Jewish man, both survivors of the Second World War.

I find the timing of this novel meaningful. Over the last six or seven years, a substantial number of reports, interviews, and records have been made public about the Mennonite involvement with Hitler and his political party in the Second World War. Controversial books have also been written about this period in

the last few years. However, Wiens says there is no connection between the ideas in his book, which evolved a number of years ago, and the current Mennonite ethos.

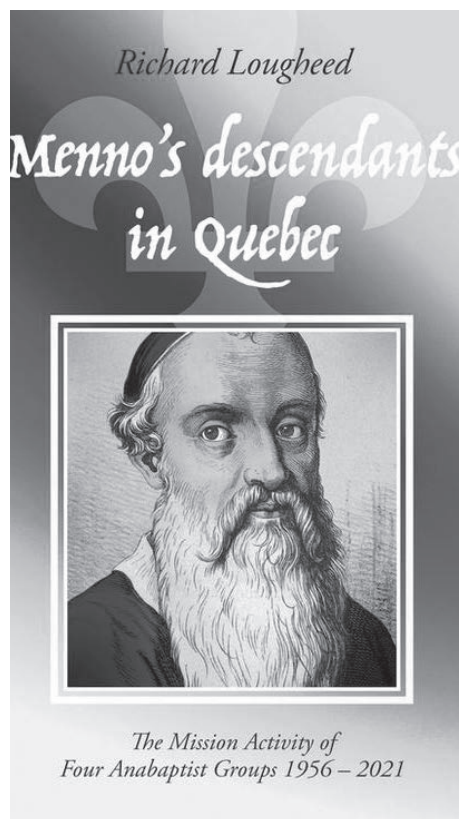
Wiens’s intention was to pay homage to the courage, faith, and suffering of those refugees from Stalinist terror. This book helped me to come to a better understanding of how decisions were made in those years, under trying circumstances, none of which I have had to deal with.

Wiens studied and taught English literature at several different universities. His beautiful descriptive writing brings the characters to life and brings vivid pictures to our minds.

It is a well-written novel. Even though the characters are fictional, they are very believable; one becomes immersed in their lives.

This book needs to be read slowly, absorbing each chapter, searching for the deeper meaning of the various threads at play. When this happens, the story becomes the reader’s personal story. What questions are we left with from our parents and grandparents’ stories? It is a thought-provoking novel.

Maria H. Klassen is a retired teacher living in St. Catharines.



Richard Lougheed, *Menno's Descendants in Quebec: The Mission Activity of Four Anabaptist Groups, 1956–2021* (Pandora Press, 2021).

Reviewed by David Wiebe, Winnipeg

The story of the Quebec Anabaptist communities has been waiting to be told. Richard Lougheed, a historian and pastor, provides the first reflective review of four Anabaptist groups in Quebec: the Brethren in Christ, Holdeman (Church of God in Christ, Mennonite), Mennonite, and Mennonite Brethren.

The story begins with a chapter devoted to the original call to enter Quebec in 1956 within the local context of the cultural shifts perpetrated by Vatican II and the Quiet Revolution. Lougheed then structures his story chronologically into three periods: “Slow Growth” from 1957 to 1969; “Revival” from 1970 to 1982; and “Coming of Age” from 1983 to 2019. The final chapters examine the development of English and immigrant (multi-ethnic) congregations, and that of various parachurch agencies and programs. Another context is provided—mission efforts in France—that has interesting comparison points.

Lougheed does not assume that the reader knows about Mennonite history so takes the time to provide a quick overview of the basics in his introduction. The advantage here is that the reader also learns of the French Protestant mission in Quebec—an important contextual feature for Anabaptist mission efforts.

During the “slow growth” beginnings, the differences in approach to the mission efforts emerge. Some workers were former missionaries in African Congo, unable to continue due to independence conflicts in Africa. Their aggressive personalities proved both advantageous and problematic. There are interesting stories about how Anabaptist or evangelical views of Roman Catholics created tension in sponsoring denominations. Quebec was like a foreign mission field in many ways. The chapter ends with a comparison of the number of churches planted in Quebec and France over the same period.

During the “revival” period, we see how rapidly the evangelical movements grew in the aftermath of the Quiet

Revolution. Loughheed has researched and written more extensively in French on this period, so this chapter hits the highlights. Most of the many converts at this time were young adults and newlyweds in their twenties—“boomers”—who were searching for God and community within a context of freedom of expression while leaving the strictures of Catholicism. This exhilarating time ironically became a set-up for struggles, discouragement, and even disillusionment later.

The secularization of young people accelerated rapidly during the 1980s, resulting in a reversal of momentum. Calling it “coming of age” is testimony to Loughheed’s capacity for perspective as a historian. The Mennonite Brethren and Mennonite efforts are reviewed in some detail, honestly showing how the original pietism, revivalism, and fundamentalism that grew the church became detriments to the mission. Through Loughheed’s reflection, voices like the late Eric Wingender, who described the problem well in the early 2000s but were misunderstood, are vindicated.

As someone who worked extensively in Quebec, I appreciated this book greatly. Anyone interested in the development of the “Anabaptist option” in Quebec will likewise appreciate this excellent effort.

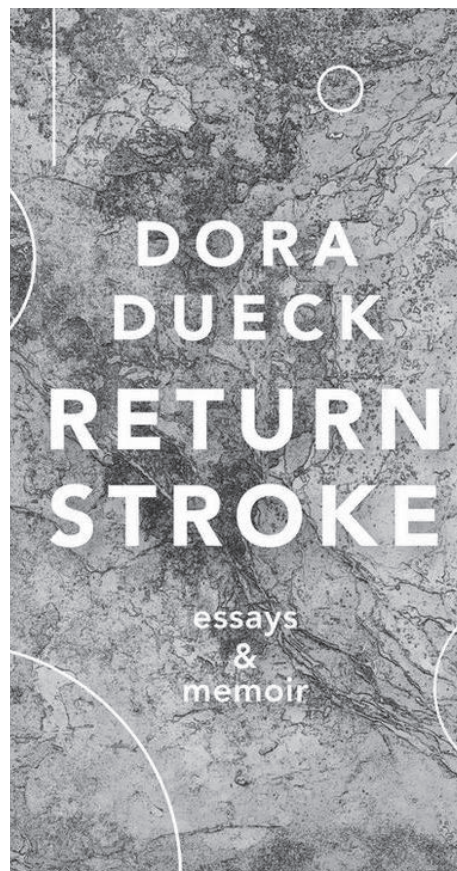
David Wiebe worked for the Canadian Mennonite Brethren Conference as Christian Education Director (1989–2000) and Executive Director (2000–2010). He is retired and lives in Winnipeg.

Dora Dueck, ***Return Stroke*** (CMU Press, 2022), 228 pp.

Reviewed by Ralph Friesen, Victoria, BC

Dora Dueck is a writer. Which is to say she has a talent with words, a perceptive intellect and heart, and knows the discipline of practice. She is also a Mennonite, both ethnically and in her confession of faith. Today we may think that neither of these facts is remarkable, but not so long ago you could count Mennonite writers (of poetry and fiction) on one hand.

A former editor of the *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, Dueck has produced a body of work including four books of fiction in a style sometimes reminiscent of Alice Munro. It is fitting now that she offers



this collection of essays and a memoir, in which she reflects on her experiences and on her craft.

The essays come at the beginning, followed by “In the House of My Pilgrimage,” an account of her years in Paraguay in the early 1980s. Her husband Helmut was engaged by Mennonite Economic Development Associates to train Indigenous men to operate heavy equipment, doing road work and land-clearing in the Chaco. Dora went along with the couple’s two sons (a daughter would be born in Paraguay). Astonishingly, with all the challenges of adjusting to a new culture, managing a household, and raising young children, she somehow managed to research and write a novel, *Under the Still Standing Sun*.

Dueck is always asking questions of herself and the world around her. Describing how Helmut’s relatives would stare at her, the outsider who might not measure up to their standards, she confesses that “I was making sly judgements of my own.”

She confesses, as well, that her understanding of Indigenous people was rudimentary, and in retrospect wonders if they possessed “medicine we needed for

our ills”—“our unstable innermost”—even though the prevailing Mennonite attitude toward these people was tainted with disdain toward a less “orderly” culture.

Much of “Pilgrimage” deals with the writer’s children. She worries about this—it turns out that, if she’s going to write this memoir, she will have to include her children, and yet she has a powerful desire to protect them from being misrepresented. It’s a dilemma. These are the risks of memoir-writing. Perhaps every effective memoir crosses over into some kind of betrayal. Bravely, she also asks herself, “Am I writing about trifles?” Readers will answer that in different ways, according to their level of interest in the details of domestic life on one hand, or philosophical inquiries on the other.

Each of the ten essays is deserving of commentary on its own. Because of recent developments though, one stands out. In “Mother and child” Dueck writes of her daughter coming out as gay. She and Helmut responded with acceptance.

Recently, Dueck also edited *On Holy Ground* for the Mennonite Brethren Historical Commission, a collection of stories of fifteen women who have served as congregational pastors and leaders. However, denominational executives instructed the Historical Commission to remove three pages from this collection because they deal with “LGBTQ+ inclusion.” The intervention, she says, has widened an already existing “irrevocable wedge between me and the formal apparatus of our church.” One wonders what happens next in the faith journey both of Dora Dueck and the Mennonite Brethren church in which she has spent most of her life.

Return Stroke is by turns personal, emotional, and intellectual. It asks the reader to engage thoughtfully, to join with the writer in probing under the surfaces, and it rewards those who do.

Ralph Friesen is a retired Family Therapist and writer of articles and books on Mennonite history, including a memoir/biography, Dad, God, and Me (Friesen Press, 2019).