



## Mennonites recognized at Manitoba Day Awards

by Conrad Stoesz

The Mennonite involvement in collecting, preserving, and telling stories about the past is strong in Manitoba. Of eleven awards, four were given to Mennonites or Mennonite related projects at the Association for Manitoba Archives (AMA) annual Manitoba Day Awards on May 19, 2016. Manitoba's new Minister of Sport, Culture and Heritage, The Honourable Rochelle Squires, was in attendance and kicked off the ceremonies. She noted the important role that archives play in maintaining community memory around the province. The Association also recognized archivist Ken Reddig with a Life Time Service Award.

Ken Reddig spent most of his career working in archives. He began in 1979 at the Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies. In 1990, he moved to the Archives of Manitoba where he was Head of Maps and Architectural Records, responsible for the Educational Program section, Chair of the Public Service committee and guided the processing of textual private sector records. In 1997, Reddig became the Director at the Mennonite Heritage Centre until 1999. After a brief time away from archives, he returned to the Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies as director 2005-2008.

Reddig was a key player in the formation of the Association for Manitoba Archives, and was active on numerous Mennonite and Mennonite Brethren committees



**Ken Reddig (left) receiving a print of a Ray Dirks painting. Andrew Morrison of the AMA (centre), and Conrad Stoesz (right), who spoke of Ken's service to the archival community.**

— Photo by Korey Dyck.

and projects throughout his tenure. Former colleague Alf Redekopp noted that "He was a good story teller, creative as an administrator, a leader and team player, diplomatic, cunning and wise." Reddig was one who understood the power of stories and was an advocate for those on the fringes or marginalized, the audience was told.

One of the Manitoba Day Awards was presented to Dr. Roland Sawatzky and his team from the Manitoba Museum for their project, "*Nice Women Don't Want the Vote*," in recognition of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of women winning the right to vote in Manitoba. Drawing on archival materials, this project "outlined the causes, the contradictions, and the people involved in the Suffragist movement."

Ernest Braun and Glen Klassen were recognized for the *Historical Atlas of the East Reserve*, as was contributing cartographer Harold Dyck, also in attendance as a member of the EastMenn Historical Committee which backed the publication. This was a multi-year project that, like so many projects, was a labour of love. The atlas drew upon numerous archives and archival collections as well as extensive field work. The hardcover, full-colour book is a social history of the peoples who have inhabited the area

(Continued on page 2)



**Left to right: Harold Dyck, who contributed maps, photos, and proof-reading, Glen Klassen, co-editor and Ernest Braun, editor-in-chief, and Chris Kotecki, archivist from the Archives of Manitoba.**

— Photo by Conrad Stoesz.

## Beyond Tradition: The Lives of Mennonite Women

by Alexandra Kroeger, Assistant Curator

This year marks the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of women's suffrage in Manitoba. Mennonite Heritage Village (MHV) wanted to mark this occasion somehow, but how to mark it when our mission is to exhibit the history of Russian Mennonites, an ethno-religious group who believed strongly in the division of the church and state, who desired to be 'in the world but not of it'? Additionally, the Wartime Elections Act of 1917 disenfranchised certain religious groups, including Mennonites and Doukhobors, for their opposition to military service, so neither Mennonite men nor women could vote.

Since this was an anniversary that was an important milestone in Canadian history, we decided it could not go unmarked, and so we chose to look at the history of Mennonite women. Often when we talk about Mennonite women in history, we concentrate on their role as wives and mothers in the home, raising and feeding their typically large families. This is a story that MHV's outdoor village tells well, but when Curator Andrea Dyck and I were planning this exhibit, we wanted to focus on a different story that is not typically heard.

What about the Mennonite women who, for one reason or another, stepped outside of the traditional female roles of wives and mothers? Our exhibit *Beyond Tradition: The Lives of Mennonite Women* is about women who influenced the decision to immigrate, became the heads of their families in times of need, worked outside the home during a period when this was still unusual, sought larger roles within the church, and chose not to marry. By stepping outside of Mennonite tradition, either by choice or by circumstance, these women made space for themselves within their communities and expanded what it meant to be a Mennonite woman.

MHV's exhibit features these broader themes of women in Mennonite history, but we also made it a priority to feature specific, individual women who did extraordinary things. Take Helene Reimer, for example, who received the Order of Canada for her services in the field of nursing.



**Preparations for exhibit of photographic essays, in which students reflect on the women in their lives and how they have stepped beyond tradition.**

Gertrude Klassen, also known as "Trutje," maintained a successful chiropractic practice while fostering fifty-three children over thirty years. Ann (Klassen) Wiens was a missionary and advocate among the indigenous peoples (Enlhet, Nivacle, Ayoreo) in the Chaco region of Paraguay; in one encounter, she traded her necklace for a warrior's spear (which visitors will see on display in the Gerhard Ens Gallery). These are women who played a prominent role in their communities and on an international scale as well.

In keeping with this theme, MHV is also hosting a temporary exhibit by Paul Reimer's Advanced Photography students at the Steinbach Regional Secondary School. In this series of photographic essays, the students reflect on the women in their lives and how they have stepped beyond tradition.

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*(Continued from page 1)*

around the R.M. of Hanover from before written history to modern day. The atlas is elegantly designed and eye-catching. This book has a wide audience thanks to the visual emphasis paired with detailed research and interesting prose.

Conrad Stoesz of the Mennonite Heritage Centre and Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies accepted an award on behalf of the Mennonite Archival Image Database (MAID) <https://archives.mhsc.ca> project. This new database is a collaboration between 7 Canadian Mennonite archival institutions; an American partner has recently joined. The database helps archives manage their photos and gives the public unprecedented access to a rich collection of images from around the world.

The AMA's Manitoba Day awards event was attended by a modest but enthusiastic crowd at the University of Winnipeg.

# Altona History Seekers Meet Again

by *Lawrence Klippenstein*

In Heritage Posting circles, "History Seekers" refers to a local group of individuals interested in history, who meet annually for a series of public lectures dealing with Mennonite history in some way. It is usually a late winter meeting for which the planners circulate copies of a projected program for the season – usually five topics or so. For a number of years, the group has met in a second floor facility ("old barn") on the premises of Dave and Grace Harms in the village of Altona.

The meeting of February 24, 2016, included a few changes. To get around the problem of climbing stairs, and to accommodate a somewhat larger group the *Seekers* were moved to the new premises of *Garden on Tenth*, a facility for seniors just opened for occupancy, and amply equipped for the changing demands of the group. Sixty or more persons gathered to hear a lecture on the story of Polish Mennonites presented by retired Canadian Mennonite University (CMU) professor Dr. John J Friesen of Winnipeg.

John gave emphasis in his presentation to the first 250 years of the Polish Mennonite experience, beginning around 1530 and finishing, in his treatment, with the appearance of Prussian Kings, like Frederick the Great and later Prussian rulers who annexed to Prussia most of the Polish area where Mennonites had settled during these earlier centuries of their sojourn here. This Prussian Polish era in Mennonite history began early in the eighteenth century and continued until all Mennonites evacuated the area around 1945 near the end of World War II.

John pointed out that many of the long standing practices and attitudes about church life, theology, and other aspects of community life could be traced back to that earlier Polish period for origins, and remained features of Mennonite life in subsequent earlier emigrations from this area, for instance, from Prussian Poland to New Russia in 1788-89, and in the case of many of the ongoing moves that took thousands of Mennonites from New Russia to Canada in the 1870s, and many of their descendants on to Mexico and Paraguay and Bolivia, etc. The Polish "DNA" of Mennonites has survived remarkably in many Mennonite communities of the world to this day. This can be most conveniently studied in what have come to be called "conservative" congregations (or Old Colonists) who remain in Canada, Latin America, to some extent the USA, and in other parts of the world. Various outside influences have impacted heavily on that "DNA" but even then it survives where we are most likely often not to notice the fact.

The program of the History Seekers was given early direction by retired CMU professor Adolf Ens of Winnipeg but has taken to rely much more on local leadership by now, to wit, David Harms and Joe Braun, along with other locals, who head up the "history seeking" of this body. Efforts are now being made to create more library resources to extend the teaching capacity of the annual meetings.

More information can be obtained from owltree@sdnet.ca (Joe Braun) about past programs and plans for the future. The "college off campus", notably its "history department" has proven very popular indeed with no signs of letting up any time soon.

## New Edenthal Autobiography Takes Wing

by *Lois Braun*

Marlene Wall Plett, formerly of Edenthal and Gretna, now living in Altona, recently self-published her memoir, *The Road from Edenthal: An Unhurried Journey*.

On April 8, 2016, a book launch was held in Altona at CAP's Café, only steps away from Marlene's current home. The program began with music performed by singer Linda Hiebert, who, like Marlene, grew up in a small Mennonite farm community with a one-room school at its centre. Norma Thiessen introduced Plett, followed by several short readings from the author and more songs from Hiebert. The audience of around 50 people consisted of family, friends, present and former neighbours, history buffs, and local literati. Guests enjoyed refreshments provided by the venue and visited well into the evening, as the author chatted with them and signed books.

In the following months, McNally Booksellers decided to carry Plett's book, and on June 29, hosted a launch for city dwellers, with about 40 people in attendance. This time, Plett was introduced by Hilda Franz, and following the sometimes poignant, sometimes gripping readings, the author's fans took advantage of the opportunity to connect with her and visit with one another over coffee and cookies.

Marlene Plett's book paints a vivid portrait of a farm family in a community in southern Manitoba, beginning in the 1930s and coming to an abrupt end one spring day in 1995. The story is about her experiences and perceptions, and her navigation through the circumstances that shaped her travels along a constantly diverging road.

In July, *An Unhurried Journey* made it to the top of the Winnipeg *Free Press* paperback non-fiction best-seller list.

### In Memory of

### Dr. Gerald "Jerry" Hildebrand (1929 – 2016)

Long time Brazil missionary, SBC teacher, pastor and mission director of the Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference, Dr. Gerald "Jerry" Hildebrand, passed away on July 12, 2016. He was 87. He authored several books including a history of SBC and a history of the EMMC. A funeral was held in Winkler on July 15. A full obituary is available on Google.

# Indigenous Peoples and the Land in Southeastern Manitoba

by Ernest N. Braun

The EastMenn Historical Committee hosted its first Local History Lectures at the Steinbach Regional Secondary School at 7 PM on Saturday, May 14, 2016 addressing the matter of the land on which the Mennonites settled in the 1870s. The date was not coincidental, since May 12 was Manitoba Day, honouring the creation of the



**Darren Courchene, Ph. D. candidate at University of Manitoba of the Sagkeeng First Nation, speaks to the matter of Treaty #1 of 1871, providing an interpretation and historical details from an Anishinaabe point of view.**

— Photo by Harold J. Dyck, Winnipeg

province of Manitoba in 1870.

Two speakers addressed the topic from two different vantage points. Professor Gerhard J. Ens of the University of Alberta (Edmonton campus) presented the sequence of events that arose during and after the passage of the Manitoba Act in 1870 and its impact on the Métis. Darren Courchene of the Sagkeeng First Nation presented an Anishinaabe perspective on Treaty #1, 1871. The chair of the meeting was Jacob L. Peters, and Glen R. Klassen as organizer introduced both speakers. An estimated 200 people attended. The event also celebrated the third printing of the Historical Atlas of the East Reserve by Ernest N. Braun and Glen R. Klassen which the EastMenn committee published in October last year.

## The Manitoba Act: The Métis and the Mennonites A Tale of Two Reserves

The first speaker, Gerhard J. Ens, has just published his own research on Métis history, *From New Peoples to New Nations: Aspects of Métis History and Identity from the Eighteenth to the Twenty-first Centuries* and speaks from a life-long acquaintance with the subject. He named his presentation, *The Tale of Two Reserves*.

Ens provided a short history of the part of the Manitoba Act that addresses Métis land grants, discussing the existing river lots already surveyed that were granted outright, and the extended two-mile hay land that the Métis claimed as well. He then went into more detail about the land to be granted to all Métis children born before July 15, 1870, presenting the chronology of the events to the final decisions regarding the land made in 1876.

He reported that two stages of negotiation occurred with regard to which land was to be reserved. Initially a “spontaneous” survey of Métis land aspirations would have included half of what became the East Reserve, but later negotiations changed the outlines of the Métis Reserves in ways that left the East Reserve area devoid of claims. Still later, at the behest of the religious leaders in June of 1870, Métis staked more land under the impression that only staking was necessary to prove “possession”, and under this new development, four sections of land were staked within what became the East Reserve, namely two sections along the north edge of Township 6-5E, and two more sections along the south edge of Township 7-5E along Penner’s Creek. After several investigations, these sections were declared ineligible, since there had never been evidence of actual “possession” of the land under Section 32 subsection 4 of the Manitoba Act – see Sidebar I. In 1897 the matter resurfaced when Sir Wilfred Laurier, a French Canadian, became Prime Minister, and the petition was renewed. After another investigation, the claims were denied again, and petitioners granted the same compensation as before, namely, to purchase unclaimed land at \$1 per acre, or homestead unclaimed land according to the Homestead regulations.

In the end, the Manitoba Act set aside 1.4 million acres of land to extinguish the Métis claim to the land. In administering the land grants, Ens noted that a complication arose when by mistake adults were counted among those eligible for land, and this produced some issues later. The land within each parish was assigned by drawing lots, so that children of parents living in each parish would not have land too far away from each other. Despite this precaution, and despite the safeguard that the land belonged to minors and could not be sold without some representation, much of the land was sold before the children got to be of age. Moreover, the government underestimated the number of Métis children, so that later another 250,000 acres of land were dedicated to them. For

*(Continued on page 5)*

(Continued from page 4)

these lands, scrip was issued in various denominations, 80 acres, 40 acres, 120 acres, etc.

In comparing the development of the two Reserves, Ens concluded that although the Mennonite Reserve was almost totally occupied within a few years, and duly homesteaded by the people to whom it had been granted, the Métis Reserves around and contiguous to it were mostly sold without much attempt at homesteading. Ens pointed out that the 1870s were particularly difficult years for homesteading, since there were grasshopper plagues, overland flooding, late frosts in spring, and early frosts in fall, all making it hard to start farming, especially for a people who had little experience in an agrarian life-style. The land was often sold simply to feed the family during these hard times. Often that land was purchased by the Catholic Church, who then attempted to secure French Catholic settlers from Quebec, the USA, and Europe in an effort to maintain the dream of a French Catholic province as envisioned by Riel.

He further concluded that the Reserves had little to do with each other beyond some individual contact, and referred to them as “two solitudes”. A question period after his presentation elicited a number of questions, indicating strong interest in the topic.

### **Anishinaabe Understandings of Treaty No. 1**

Darren Courchene, the second speaker, introduced his presentation with a few remarks in his native language, and traced the origin of the name, Anishinaabe, to its roots in the tradition of Sky Woman coming down to earth through a hole in the sky. He himself comes from the Sagkeeng First Nation, and is currently doing PhD studies at the University of Manitoba in Native Studies.

Courchene began by defining “Treaty” and then presented a short history of Treaties between the Queen and the Anishinaabeg (plural of Anishinaabe), giving the perception of a Treaty as it had evolved during the 200 years of negotiations with the Hudson Bay Company, as one of mutual recognition, intercultural negotiation, mutual respect, sharing, and mutual responsibility. Treaty #1 was signed at Lower Fort Garry by seven chiefs representing five First Nation Communities, but Courchene noted that in addition to the chiefs, seven children about age 12 (called Treaty Promise Keepers) were chosen to witness and memorize the terms of the treaty, and committed in later life to recite the promises made at every Treaty Day event.

He then reviewed the promises made by the First Nation: never to break the Treaty, to keep the peace and not interfere with the settlers, never to make treaties with the Americans, to hunt and trap only on land not settled, to respect the European laws, and to share the land they didn't keep for themselves with the Queen in exchange for her promises.

These promises, made by the representatives for Queen Victoria, the great Mother, were as follows: to give the First Nations their own land, hunting rights, rations, farming assistance, housing, special provisions for women, medicine,

police services, exemption from taxes, and education for “as long as the sun shines”. There were two special promises: to honour leaders with special benefits, and to proscribe alcohol. Courchene also referred to the \$5 per year annuity that “Treaty Indians” still receive as a result of having signed one of the Treaties. Various later numbered Treaties expanded the terms of the original agreement to include additional support and greater rights to the land.

The presentation closed with a summary of comparative benefits provided by the Treaty.

Many questions followed the presentation, again indicating the engagement of the audience in the topic. In responding to a question about how the oral treaty corresponded to the written one, Courchene indicated that the two were in accord with each other.

### **Staked Claims Manitoba Act**

Section 32: For the quieting of titles, and assuring to the settlers in the Province the peaceable possession of the lands now held by them, it is enacted as follows:--

(4) All persons in peaceable possession of tracts of land at the time of the transfer to Canada, in those parts of the Province in which the Indian Title has not been extinguished, shall have the right of pre-emption of the same, on such terms and conditions as may be determined by the Governor in Council.

**Source: Gerhard J. Ens, May 14, 2016.**

### **Treaty Framework: Seven Sacred Laws**

Niizhaaswo gichitwaa-onaashowewinan (seven sacred laws) of the Anishinaabeg:

Manidoo Gitigan (This is the creator's garden)  
Aki Gookomisinaan (The Earth is our grandmother)  
Ji-mino-de'ed Anishinaabeg (Act with a kind heart)  
Gi-giikidowin gichitwaa (Your word is sacred)  
Minogamig (The Earth is bountiful)  
Gakina-gegoo dibaamenimon (Everything in moderation)  
Gakina-awiya dibishkookaw (Everyone is equal)

**Source: Darren Courchene, May 14, 2016**

### **First Nations Benefits**

Health  
Education  
Land  
Hunting, Fishing, Trapping, Harvesting  
Taxation Exemption  
Housing

**Source: Darren Courchene, May 14, 2016  
By Ernest N. Braun**

### **Canadians Benefits**

Access to Land  
Access to Natural Resources  
Self-determination  
Religious Freedom  
Economic Development

## Mothers in Chortitz

by Ernest N. Braun

Saturday May 7, 2016 was a colourful event at the Chortitz Heritage Church in Randolph, as about 125 people filled the church to celebrate Mother's Day. Special decorations brightened the mood of the sanctuary and created a context for the celebration of motherhood.



Julie Doerksen with daughters, Hannah (left) and Greta (right);

The evening began with an introit by Julie Doerksen and daughters Hannah and Greta. Music characterized the event as vocalist Don Doerksen led the audience in singing German favourites selected by the mothers he contacted, and as special music by the Doerksen trio graced the rest of the program.

Three tributes to Mothers followed in order, each introduced by Rev. Sam Doerksen, the emcee. The first was a four-fold tribute by committee member Kathy Penner, eleven-year-old twins Sierra and Mason Malmsten, and their teenage cousin Mercedes Crutchley, providing an eloquent testimony to the impact of a mother from the perspective

of children. This family has roots in the area through the Wiebes of Chortitz.

The second was a two-fold tribute by husband and wife team Stefan and Amalie Hiebert, who presented the tribute in elegant High German, from the standpoint of young parents, who have small children of their own, and look to their mothers for inspiration.

## Manitoba Settlement and the Mennonite "West Reserve" (1875 - 1876)

by Lawrence Klippenstein

*This is the first part of an article published in **The Manitoba Pageant** in Vol. 21, Number 1, Autumn, 1975. It can be located quickly through Google to read the rest of the story.*

The dramatic significance of the 1870s for Manitoba (Mennonite) history lies in various facets of development for that period. Among these, immigration must rank high in the list. For thousands of newcomers, it was the beginning of new challenges and opportunities as those people chose precisely that time to pioneer the Western Canadian frontier in the "postage stamp" period of Manitoba history.

The seven thousand Russian Mennonites who arrived at that time were possibly the largest single newcomer



Matriarchs of Randolph: left Mrs. Grienke, Right Mrs. Neufeld;  
— Photos by Glen Klassen

The final tribute took a different spin, as Grandmother and Great-Grandmother Katarina Grienke (nee Schroeder) spoke from the vantage point of somebody who lost a mother early and did not really have a mother until she was one herself.

Dr. Corneil Blatz gave a brief update on the state of restoration of the church, and then the evening closed with "Wehrlos and Verlassen", a perennial favourite of Mennonites. Everybody was invited to refreshments, featuring *Schmaunt Küake* (traditional white cookies with pink icing), and each mother encouraged to select a flower seed package with the inscription: "A mother holds her child's hand for a little while, but holds their heart forever".

group to arrive in the province in the 1870-1880 decade. After investigations directed from the "Old Country" in 1872, the first contingent of settlers began to arrive in July and August two years later, in 1874. They along with all others who followed them that fall, headed for a "reserve" of just under eight townships of bush, swamp, and some dry prairie land located east of the Red River and south of the Lake Superior to Fort Garry Dawson Road just being completed at that time.

At least eight transatlantic trips are known to have brought just over 1500 men, women and children from south Russia (later Ukraine) to Canada in the same year. With very few exceptions all these families ultimately made their way to the twenty one village communities established

*(Continued on page 7)*

(Continued from page 6)

in the "East Reserve" before winter came in 1874.

The influx of Mennonite settlers peaked in the following year, amounting to fully twelve per cent of the total immigration to Canada in 1875. At least eight ships, loaded with a total of 3341 passengers left Liverpool, England, for Quebec, Canada, between May and October of the year. Many of the 1875 arrivals joined friends and relatives already residing in the East Reserve, usually waiting anxiously for their coming. But as the immediately available land was taken up, the search for more settlement room became more and more urgent. They were here. They could not go back, with resources depleted. Where should they settle down?

On the lookout for new options, Jacob Y Shantz, an Ontario businessman who had been helping the immigrants a good deal up to this point, now took his son Abraham, along with two Metis, a driver and a surveyor, and three earlier immigrants from Russia to explore the open plains west of the Red River. Shantz had realized early, as had some of the other leaders, that the land allotted for Mennonite settlement east of the Red River would not be nearly enough to settle all the Russian Mennonite families preparing to move to Canada.

They would have preferred wooded lands or lots along the Red, but with other settlers moving in at the same time, would need to look at the grassy lands north of what was just being designated the border between Canada and the USA at the 49<sup>th</sup> parallel, in the segment between Emerson on the Red River right at the border in the eastern, and Mountain City near the Pembina Hills in the western part of this region.

Earlier land hungry groups had by-passed this region in part because it was basically treeless, not totally unused by indigenous groups, in its central areas somewhat removed from market centres of the time. Mennonites were not without hope however, that this could become a usable area for settlement and set out to stake a claim of about twice the area taken up by their predecessor settler families of the East Reserve, a total of 17 townships to a depth of eighteen miles north of the Canada-US border.

The "Pembina Reserve" or as it came to be called, the "West (west of the Red River) Reserve" was in fact the first settlement area ever permanently established for agricultural use in Canada, without direct access to a major body or current of water. It also turned out to be ultimately some of the best agricultural land in all of Manitoba.

When an Order-in-Council of April 25, 1876, (hence the 140<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year) finally set this land aside for exclusive use by Mennonites from Russia, it brought the total acreage of the two reserves to just over half a million acres, or about 6% of the total area of Manitoba as it was constituted in 1881.

## Corrections for HP No. 83

The *In Memoriam* article in *Heritage Posting*, No. 83, March, 2016, p. 3, had a few items we need to correct. Firstly, the heading should have used its more formal version, **Theodore E. (Ted) Friesen**. Secondly, we discovered a title missing among Ted's publications, namely, *Memoirs: A Personal Autobiography of Ted Friesen* (Altona, MB, privately published, 2003), hdc, 180 pp., and finally a slip in the address to order the book which should have read, Friesens, Box 720, Altona, MB, ROG OBO. Our apologies!

It could also be added here that the Johann and Agatha Klippenstein book mentioned among his publications is now out of print and stock. In the end several dozen copies were shared as gifts with family and friends. Thank you, Linie and Ted!

Finally, it could be mentioned here too that the Altona and District archives, directed by Albert Schmidt, house some important papers from the late D. W. Friesen's personal archives. Foremost among these are dozens of business and other letters, now translated by Jack Klassen of Altona, which reflect on the work of the Friesen owners. They may be viewed at the archives, open to the public on Tuesday afternoons.

Many more of the Friesen papers are located at the Mennonite Heritage Centre archives in Winnipeg (to connect, call 1-204-888 6781).

### In Memory of Peter Bergen

**April 14, 1915 – April 29, 2016**

Peter was another of the important self-taught avocational local historians who contributed much to our knowledge about our communities and larger story of Mennonites in Manitoba. He grew up in the Langevin-Sommerfeld village area, north and southeast of Altona, eventually undertook serious university studies, and worked in various regions including North Dakota, USA, Altona, and Winnipeg as agronomist and related professions.

He is the author of several significant volumes of Sommerfelder church history including a major volume on the Bergen family, grandparents Peter and Maria Bergen m (1988), a study (1994) of the village of Sommerfeld southeast of Altona, and a history of the larger Sommerfeld conference community (2001). In his later years, in retirement at the Lindenwood Terrace of Assisted Living in Winnipeg, he kept up a walking regime that held up till only weeks before he passed away at 101 years and 15 days.

# Book Review

## **Favoured Among Women**

**a biographical novel**

**by Hedy Leonora Martens**

*Reviewed by Noreen Janzen*

Little Gretchen Enns clung to her mother, watching as she placed ice, piece by piece on her father's body. The year was 1909, the place Sergeivka, in south Russia, now Ukraine, and Greta Enns Martens' earliest memories began on that July day. While a father's death from a seizure disorder was perhaps commonplace when compared with the horrors we know lay ahead for Mennonite villages in pre-Revolutionary Russia, the decision by author Hedy Leonora Martens to write from the perspective of this small child pulls us into the story of this child's loss and sadness.

Martens' biographical novel depicting the life of her husband's relative, Greta, is an impressive compilation of detailed memories, imagined conversations, historical commentary and poetic reflection. It graphically depicts the peace and prosperity of Mennonite village life before the revolution, and the chaos and suffering during and after, mixing details of culture, faith and family in Russian Mennonite communities with the geo-political realities of greater Russia at that time.

Through the eyes of six year old Greta, Martens begins by describing the village of Sergievka with its Dnipro ("*Nippa*") River, so significant in the life and economy of the community, and the Janzen-Neufeld farm implement factory that brought in many Russian workers. Through intimate kitchen conversations "overheard" by Gretchen we get a glimpse of the sensibilities of Mennonite families, and women in particular. We hear them speak in hushed tones of the "*Goode-Manna*" who look after widows with children, yet "aren't always so good. *Uy yuy yuy!*" What do they mean? wonders Gretchen, as do we. We puzzle with her about secret home remedies for preventing pregnancy. Gretchen reflects on the custom of giving the same names to children in every family, yet how they can be distinguished one from another with clever variations."... like Ota or Agathe or Agatha or Neta for Aganetha, Zauna or Zuza for Suzanna..."

A story from a small child's perspective has its challenges. At times Gretchen's confusion about what she is experiencing becomes ours. As she grows some questions are answered and some mysteries solved.

We get a vivid sense of the characters in the story, particularly Greta's family members, not only through the inclusion of several haunting family photos, but through descriptions obtained from first-hand interviews. We come to care deeply not just for Greta, but for her family as well.

Greta always saw herself as "favoured", a remarkable perspective considering the suffering she endured in her lifetime. To her it is an accurate description however, as she remembers feeling very keenly the love and favour of both of her parents, her siblings and in particular her husband Heinrich, who treated her as an equal and with

great respect. If we are prone to minimize familial affection in the families of the past, with their numerous offspring and focus on practicality, duty and work, Greta's depiction of the warm humour-filled relationships challenge those assumptions.

Martens went to great effort to collect a wide and impressive amount of data for her book. Her sources include both primary and secondary interviews, diaries, and journals, letters, books and articles. Together with maps and photographs, they comprise an

exhaustive work, capturing both historical accuracy and personal drama. However, we know that remembered anecdotes evolve and grow with the telling, and some here may have done so. (Could Greta really have witnessed her teacher slice off the ear of a fellow student for a misspelled word?) As Greta matures, her recollections become more firmly supported by historical context.

Many have heard of the Holodomor. What many may not know is what that kind of starvation looked like in the daily lives of our Russian Mennonite relations. In one scene, Greta overhears her parents talking about the Dyck family next door, lying on their stomachs to nibble at the "*Tjeestjekrut*". They struggle with the decision of whether to plant the potato peelings in hopes of some sprouting, or feed them to their crying children. These situations are remembered with heart-breaking clarity.

Hedy Martens presents adult Greta as a kind, insightful woman with a quiet, steadfast faith that provides her with openness and warmth toward those outside of her background. An example is how she clearly recalls with gratitude the kindness of a Russian man who put his arm around her and comforted her with Russian prayers as her husband was taken away by police.

The book could have been edited more heavily without losing any of its integrity and depth. The attention to detail and thoroughness results at times in repetition (eg. the birth of every baby is noted and remarked upon, and there are many babies!) At times phrases become convoluted, for example, "And so the wailing of widows and fatherless children became a ceaselessly-silenced perpetual backdrop to a world in which nothing was named to be what it was."

The book is titled "Favoured Among Women", and this is not because Greta minimized the difficulty of her life. In spite of everything, it was her innate gratitude that carried her through unbelievable hardship as she raised her children alone. The novel ends with Greta and her children setting off by train into the unknown. Greta's story continues in Martens' follow-up novel, Volume 2 "To and From Nowhere" which includes the Siberia years and up to the 1970's. Any reader of the first volume will surely want to read the second, compelled by curiosity and concern for the fate of Greta Enns Martens and her dear family.

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