

# The Sins of the Fathers: Fritz Senn's Novel *Panta Rhei*

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Fritz Senn's *Panta Rhei* (Greek: "all things are in flux") has hitherto been known only as a longer narrative work which he wrote in the 1930's and from which two brief excerpts have been published.<sup>1</sup> The remainder was presumed lost until Victor Doerksen found the original manuscript in the library of Bethel College in North Newton, Kansas. This article offers a brief description of the unpublished work—Senn's only novel—together with a selection of several thematically important passages I have translated into English.<sup>2</sup> Also included is my translation of a relevant letter Senn wrote to D. H. Epp.

Written for the most part in German ("Gothic") script, the manuscript consists of exactly 200 unnumbered pages of two different sizes, 20 x 27 cm (pp. 1-65) and 18 x 23 cm (pp. 66-200). Not included in this count are five inserted sheets that are extraneous to the novel, although they help put its genesis into perspective. One of these is a list of the highly irregular hours Senn worked at the J.D.C. Forsyth Co. in Kitchener in early March 1935, cleaning windows, painting, sweeping, and shovelling coal in the shirt factory—at 30 cents an hour, seven days a week.<sup>3</sup> The other four extraneous sheets contain fragmentary drafts of letters to Gustav Frenssen (1863-1945) and Hans Grimm (1875-1959), both of whom Senn admired for their *völkische* novels, and to Professor Benjamin Unruh.

Internal evidence (pp. 3-4) as well as Senn's letter to D. H. Epp of November 2, 1934, indicate that Senn began the novel in 1934 and concluded it around Easter (April 21) 1935. Written under very constrained circumstances,

the manuscript has the earmarks of a first draft that was never subjected to the necessary revisions,<sup>4</sup> and it is probable that Senn intended it to be treated with the same caveat he expressed in his letter to Epp. For reasons to be explained below, it is unlikely that Epp or Arnold Dyck<sup>5</sup> would have been eager to see *Panta Rhei* published in its entirety.

The work is divided into three sections: *The Deserted Village* (pp. 1-105), *In the Camp of Privation* (pp. 106-167), and *The Sins of the Fathers* (pp. 168-200). Set in Soviet Russia, it describes the fate of a group of Mennonite families from a Molochnaia village who are expropriated under Stalin's first five-year plan. Together with *kulaks*, political prisoners, and convicted criminals, they are transported in cattle cars to a distant forced-labour camp, where an unspecified number of unidentified men are killed in a coal-mine explosion.<sup>6</sup> While the historical time frame, October 1932 to January 1935, is quite authentic, some geographical references are deliberately vague or fictitious. Cognoscenti can identify the villages of H. and P. as Halbstadt and Petershagen respectively, but Kotlas and Krasnogorsk, the industrial cities adjacent to the labour camp, are Senn's inventions.

Throughout the novel, the Mennonite experience in Russia of the 1930s is supplemented by a good deal of narrative retrospection. In fact, the greater part of the novel is concerned with events that occurred before the Bolshevik era. Many of them are presented as memories and observations meticulously recorded by Bruno Pankratz, an unassuming and taciturn but critical member of the Mennonite group deported from H[albstadt]. Born around the turn of the century, largely self-educated, well-read in German and Russian literature, and pursuing his literary bent even under the most unfavourable conditions, he is in some ways Senn's self-portrait. Pankratz's manuscript is introduced as "the only valuable possession of this group" (p. 9) and includes scenes of Mennonite life in the previous two generations, thus encompassing a total time of about 100 years. The Mennonite milieu of Pankratz's grandparents, who emigrated from Prussia, is still remembered as the *heile Welt* with the same idyllic imagery that informs much of Senn's lyric poetry.<sup>7</sup> But in hindsight, this world also contains the seeds of its own destruction. Individual greed and instances of human exploitation, originally rare and affecting relatively few people, give rise to much larger and severe consequences in conjunction with industrialization, modern capitalism, and population growth in the Molochnaia. One example of this development is the far-reaching impact of a starch factory<sup>8</sup> founded by Pankratz's maternal grandfather Boschmann. His son Peter modernizes and expands it without the slightest regard for his own family and the community. Hordes of factory workers inundate the formerly peaceful village and help create a shiftless and malcontent proletariat. Eventually the Boschmanns' considerable wealth is usurped by the rich farmer Neufeld, whose insatiable avarice borders on a monomania that victimizes even his own flesh and blood.

In the third and final part of the novel, the indictment of Mennonite sins of omission and commission in pre-Soviet Russia becomes clearly the dominant

theme. Unable to cope with the Mennonites' suffering in the camp, the old minister Peters has died in despair—even though his correligionists have concealed from him the fact that his only son became a communist, hoping to thus safeguard his farm. Peters' successor is Siemens, who finds in St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans (ch. 9-11) the theological explanation for centuries of Mennonite martyrdom. In his sermons, Siemens demands introspection and a conscientious search for Mennonite transgressions in the decades before the destruction of their Russian commonwealth. After considerable prodding, various members of the group relate specific misdeeds that fall into three broad categories: "the problem of the landless, the treatment of servants, and repulsive materialism." (p. 163) These vicarious confessions mark a complete change in the group's attitude to the past. Two years before, they concluded the modest observance of their first Christmas in captivity with an effusion of nostalgia for the good old days. On that occasion Pankratz read a poem that characterized them as unjustly punished innocents, a statement vehemently denounced by Siemens. He has now made the group aware of their collective guilt. After all, many of the individual offenses were tacitly condoned by the Mennonite community, while others were systemic. "Until now all that dirt was swept under the cupboards. And there was dirt in every village." (p. 187)

Siemens's homiletics on this are largely identical with the ideas and formulations found in Senn's letter to D. H. Epp, which also defines the title as epitomizing the idea of imperative change. Only from an honest appraisal of Mennonite history, according to Senn, can one hope to understand its present and make intelligent decisions about its future (p. 9).

In the final analysis Senn's *Panta Rhei* is no less than an attempt to shatter all complacency by revising the traditional image of the Mennonites in Russia, upheld by themselves and others, as a community of model Christians.<sup>9</sup> Such controversial matter under a provocative Nietzschean motto<sup>10</sup> obviously did not fit in with the conservative Mennonite publication ventures conceived and guided by D. H. Epp and Arnold Dyck. The two selections from *Panta Rhei* which were published in Dyck's journal *Mennonitische Volkswarte* gave no indication of the entire work's intention. But it should be noted that what James Urry in 1985 termed a "conspiracy of silence"<sup>11</sup> could have been broken fifty years earlier with the complete publication of Senn's novel *Panta Rhei*. My 1989 publication of his *Purple Pulpit*<sup>12</sup> shows that he sustained the idea of retributive justice for Mennonite moral deficiencies in Russia, even though the literary texts he published during his lifetime did not mention them.

## I

## Fritz Senn's letter to D. H. Epp

Waterloo, Nov. 2, 1934

Mr. D. Epp, Editor of *Der Bote*,  
Rosthern

Dear Mr. Epp,

Enclosed I send you the product of a leisure hour—a kind of diversion from my “Panta Rhei.”

When I conclude it, it will be a significant call for “re-Mennonitization,” for striving and searching. The idea of “eternal becoming,” of “panta rhei”—everything is flowing—has always been in my blood. Among our people, there are far too few seekers and too many who persistently believe that they have found, preferring the illusion of absolute assurance to daring. Our people have lived far too little in the present but have been clinging to the past and have been reactionary.

And here is where the contestation has to set in, or we will all perish, by God! And this controversy may develop into a conflict of the generations—the younger against the older one. That is quite probable. The demons of the past, whose cold Mephistophelian lovelessness opposes all striving and searching and wants to prevail at all times, these demons must be overcome. Our people's Christianity is too narrow-hearted. Christ's will is the call to activate the greatest freedom, the arousal to sincerity. The uncritical majority [*die Vielzvielen*, a Nietzschean coinage] among us have always thought and continue to think that Mennonitism and its creed are the ultimate achievements of all times. Perhaps Mennonitism is a promise for the future, but an unfulfilled one, a possibility rather than a reality. Diversity does not lead to fragmentation, but the rigidity of particularism with its selfish claim of superiority invariably does. And all that has been said and written about our people creates the impression of editorial commentaries lacking a main work. Our great task must be to bring about a thorough transformation in our fate. Such change necessitates arousal and engagement. Quiring's essay “Controversy or Graveyard Silence” in *Der Bote* appeals to me. The terms religious, material, and ethical are too blurred among us and also convey too many disparities. On the one hand there is entanglement in worldly possessions, and on the other hand there is religious delusion [*Schwärmerei*] with its hidebound fanaticism. Our ancestors thought they were standing on firm ground when, in fact, they were dangerously swaying on the top rung of stateless isolation. Vertigo [*Schwindel*, which also conveys fakery] set in, and then the fall. That is our tragedy, and it is useless to conceal it. I could hate our ancestors for this. Even hate can be a form of love. What we achieve in life is not always as important as what we believe. And I always believe [*meine*, which can also mean love] in our people.

Yours sincerely,

G. Friesen

P.S. I could send you "The Deserted Village," the first part of my manuscript, perhaps even before Christmas, for perusal and verdict by you, but not for publication.

## II

### Introduction

The following depicts the experience of a time and the struggle for release [*Erlösung*, which can also mean salvation] from that time. I had wanted to have Santa Claus take it on his circuit. Is it a Christmas present? It seems to me that it may be more fitting for Easter or Good Friday. It contains more of the Passion than of the Advent. It is my wish that this sense of Passion be properly understood and accepted by our people. A spring of resurrection may then follow. [p. 3]

Fritz Senn

## III

### From Bruno Pankratz's Journal

It would probably be fitting to call this account "Land and Fate." "Homeless" [*Heimatlos*] would not comprehend the present situation, since our people actually have been homeless for 200 [sic] years. That we have been strangers in our "own land" has become evident again and again. Whenever we ventured farther than 20 or 30 versts [ca. 20 or 30 kilometres] beyond the region of our villages, we were like fleas in an armoury.

First of all there is the life of my grandparents. I will offer here what my grandmother told me. Her memory went back to the good old time. In those days our people were still true Mennonites, undiluted, sedentary, conservative. The bounty of the fertile young soil surrounded the tranquil villages. Here we had a human cradle as it were, the soil on which we grew up and on which we depended for our bread. Here we were among parents, siblings, and neighbours, among near and dear individuals. There were only familiar, expressive faces, and no one was desensitized by blurry and transient impressions. A small world. There were no petty social schemes that stand and fall with fads and fashions. There was only one hearty race of people with pronounced virtues and imperfections. Innovations and conflicts were settled in the context of family and neighbourhood. Social behaviour was based on time-honoured customs. This was before the advent of a nebulous cult of nature and tearful sentimentality. The farmers took delight in the useful gifts of God when on Sundays they attended church with shiny boots or walked through the nearby fields. And where human vitality or grief led to dramatic defiance, it was not a mere flash in the pan like today. The old time possessed greater spiritual

longevity, because tradition and nature provided for a steady pace. Hence the comfort and epic tranquility. Right and wrong were balanced without moral precipitation, simply according to the proverb "The pitcher goes so often to the well until it finally breaks." [pp. 11-13]

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It was often my impression that our village was experiencing an enormous change. It was no longer as peaceful and comfortable as before. Too many business operations sprang up and brought in strange people as well as too many inns and taverns. [p. 49]

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"Don't be surprised [about the decaying village morals]," said my father, "you can blame the taverns. The public is seduced into a pleasure that promotes poverty and unchastity. There are the wealthy farmers, many of whom are ignorant even though they think they know everything. Many of them contribute to the growing acceptance of daily liquor consumption. They give it to their workers. At harvest time, they give it to their threshers. They give it to their washerwomen. They serve it to visitors and on many other occasions. In their ignorance they even believe that it makes their helpers more eager and energetic. Indeed, initially the stuff stimulates them, and they work briskly. But in the following hours dullness along with fatigue of the limbs and sullenness set in."

Poverty in the village increased. Misery was a constant companion of the proletariat. Some sent their children out to beg. And in the village assemblies [*Schulzenbott*] there was much animosity and quarrelling. Nobody trusted another. Work was no longer strenuously pursued. The farmer who went into his field late or left it early thought, "Thank God, we can afford this." The poor and the day-labourers thought, "We aren't workhorses either. Everybody needs some rest." And came Sunday, they flocked to the taverns and spent all their money, sometimes even more, on drinking. There was gambling. Some lost their pay, others wasted it on drink. These fellows, most of whom worked in the factories rather than on the farms, could not stand a dry gullet. Meanwhile their wives and children often lacked food. When there was the least bit of money in these households, they had to get coffee and indulge in extravagant fare. They would say, "Good God, folks like us are rarely so lucky. We too want to have a good time once in a while. What else is there in life?" And they all inveighed against the bad times, the government and the other villagers.

Elsewhere materialism was growing rank. My parents always felt pity for the unsatiated land owners. And although at home we drank more imitation

coffee than the genuine stuff, our farm was thriving while our parents were thrifty but not stingy. [pp. 50-52]

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Many a change had come about in the appearance and life of the village, indeed the whole landscape looked different. In the environs several industrial enterprises had been established, and a railroad track skirted the village—much to the chagrin of some old farmers. For wherever the trains hiss and whistle, the good old time has abdicated. And the industries had attracted all sorts of rabble, most of them unknown to the villagers. Eventually it was the plants' sirens rather than the evening sun that signalled the end of the working day. Theft, tavern brawls, and rows of all sorts were daily occurrences. Wherever the young farmers congregated, they affected superior political knowledge, while the older ones observed in silent disgust. They witnessed horrible and bizarre contradictions rampant in the village and the world.

Around this time my father had me take a defective ploughshare to the smithy, where several farmers were sitting on various ploughs and cart-wheels.

The haggard Dyck stroked his chin and said, "As of *Nikolai* [May 6], I have hired a new worker. Whenever that fellow is late for work, I horse-whip him until he thinks that he is a goner."

"And I," said the misshapen, irascible Löwen, "I hired one two months ago. That fellow has the nerve to show up at eight in the evening instead of the morning, and I have to feed the livestock and clean the stables. I tell my wife, 'Just let me handle this—I'm going to cure him.' I serve him the cold noon-day meal and say, 'Look, we saved this for you. Why are you so late?' He doesn't eat [*frißt*] it, but begins to catch on. The next morning and noon he was served nothing but the very same food. From then on, the fellow became more cooperative. When he tried to use rude language, I bawled him out, and since then he has been pliant and docile as though he had eaten saddle soap."

Everybody burst out laughing. Some of the farmers were standing up and held their sides, scrutinizing me, when I did not participate in the laughter.

What will it take to break these hard voices and to fold these callous hands in all sincerity? Or is this to continue forever? With such thoughts I looked at the group and became frightened when the others began to stare at me, as if they sensed that my thoughts were touching the very core of their souls in order to reshape them. [pp. 63-64]

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Franz Neufeld's farm was one of the finest. Like a troop of seasoned soldiers, old acacia trees with their rough and cracked bark (of which our father carved toy

boats for the children) surrounded the buildings. There was not one crippled or wind-twisted trunk. They all intertwined with their branches and seemed to taunt the storms, "We'll take you on." Behind the large barn was a dense orchard, from which came a Russian servant girl's loud and melancholy singing. Leaning against the hindmost lower door of his stable, the owner was closely watching the garden, almost impervious to the monotonous singing. His eyes seemed to be filled with impatience, and fiercely he mumbled, "Just let me put my hands on that beast."

But the beast was not to be seen yet. For the past three days, each morning and evening, the furious and cursing Neufeld had driven the cow belonging to the Russian bricklayer Semashko from his cabbage patch. It now consisted almost solely of bare stalks, the wide, curly leaves having been eaten. Whenever the cowherd gathered his herd to lead it from the pasture back to the village, that cow would go its separate way through the gardens. The cowherd would hoot and holler but had to let it go.

It was now six o'clock. The cow had to appear any minute now. Neufeld quickly fetched a rope and a short cleaver, and just as he came out the door, the spotted cow was entering his garden.

Neufeld called for his farm hand and the nearby servant girl. Together they drove the cow into the cattle enclosure, where Neufeld tied it down, whereupon he ordered his helpers back to work and went into the house.

Darkness had descended upon the calm village when Neufeld quietly headed for the cow across the yard. He untied it and led it through two dark neighbouring gardens and tied it to an old tree. Twice he swung his cleaver, and then the cow was missing both horns. An observer would have been astonished at the farmer's facial expression. It mirrored anger and malicious delight, but the mouth made no sound. With his sharp pocket knife he cut, or rather broke the cow's tail off. That should fix her! Then he untied the animal and went home. On the following morning, the cow with its bloodied head and half a tail was back in Neufeld's cabbage patch. Although the hand reported it to the farmer, the latter did not bother to drive it off with curses and kicks as he normally would, but simply went into the house.—

Winter was approaching, the sun seemed blind, and the first snow fell onto the dirt ground. There was no more brightness in the farmers' houses. The days were peaceful and devoid of content. Boiling of watermelon syrup or butchering of pigs were meant to compensate for this. In the thin snow of the barnyards there were puddles of blood. Today pigs were being slaughtered at Neufeld's. The farmers dragged six animals outside by their long floppy ears. Knives slit their throats, and the steaming red blood gushed out. While the last carcass was being scalded, the butcher has already opened the second hanging sow's belly and is eviscerating it with both hands. A woman brings water for rinsing, and others are cleaning the entrails by the stable door.

The neighbour woman comes stalking with her freezing hands under her apron and disappears in the house. Children putting on adult airs surround the



hanging carcasses, slapping the fatty paunches and appraising them like their elders. Spitting like them, they are shivering with cold. Another female friend [*Tante*] plods through the yard into the house. She is compelled to ask how these pigs have turned out and whether they meet all expectations. Inside, all kettles are bubbling and steaming, their lids rattling; there is a thick smell of meat broth and seasoning, evaporating water and stewing greaves. Seasoning and tasting, two men are preparing heaps of the fresh warm pork for sausages, and one of them throws slices of bacon to the womenfolk for their approval. They chatter and cheer about his jokes.

Soon the sausage machine begins to work. Curling, twisting and winding masses of meat enter the gut. A woman stabs a needle into the bulging pockets while avidly listening to the womenfolk. She does not want to miss a single word.

For the third or fourth time Neufeld is making the rounds and pouring liquor from a jug. He is beginning to look cross-eyed, and his hands and feet are unsteady.

By midafternoon [*Vesperzeit*] the whole house is hot and humid. With a lot of animated talk and laughter, coffee is being drunk.

Neufeld, however, is outside to bury a bloody cowskin in the dunghill.

In the evening the last butchers stagger from the house. One of them is amazed that Neufeld obtained such a huge amount of meat and sausage from the two-year old steer, even though he sold a hefty quarter to his neighbour Enns, who is going to slaughter the next day.

Semashko's cow was never seen again. There were rumours, but the facts were never ascertained. [pp. 188-193]

#### IV

#### From Section 3

Equipped with such thoughts, Siemens in his sermon declares the moral bankruptcy of present Mennonitism in Russia. Like lashes his words hit and hurt. But the ideas are contagious, and at a convenient hour they proceed with their own judgement of the past. The old peasants strain their memories and become contrite. Necessity and harsh reality probe with hard knocks the woodwork of the past. It will be horrible if they detect worms and moths and all the vermin thriving on rot. At this critical time of our small group, it must be determined what is viable and worth preserving. For like a crucible, this time of sufferings will destroy the rot and whatever thrives on it. And now all sorts of things emerge against the background of stern reality, all sorts of events that happened not just in H[albstadt] and P[etershagen] but in all places where the old time feels itself convulsed and confounded. And now it is apparent that the past does not want to die but to cling to its historical prestige. Time and again the stubborn peasants brood over the past and cannot forget their lost posses-

sions. In an occasional quiet moment, Siemens is surprised that he himself is not immune to such nostalgic memories. Again and again Siemens has to redirect them, and the old recalcitrants bolt and veer like young steers. The careworn Fast and the athletic Spence are the least tractable. And yet Fast is an old sinner. Yes, he did lose his family except for a young girl, and he did receive a sabre blow to his leg, but he took revenge. He fled to the Crimea from the bleak bloodhounds and could not bury his loved ones. With the little girl on his shoulder, he ran into the pitch-dark night, the pursuers always on his heels. In the Crimea he worked for a farmer and one night, when the Red rabble were retreating before the Cossacks, he took the horses into the field in order to save them. When dawn came and he thought there was no more danger, he took the team home. And as he arrives at the farm, two Red stragglers accost him, each one demanding a horse. Under their threats he lets them choose. The one gallops off at once and leaves his companion behind whose horse is young and bucks, refusing to leave the yard. Fast has to guide it by the reins, accompanied by threats and curses. The pursuers' shots are cracking, and the pursued orders him to head for the shrubs in the garden. Fast is still holding the reins, but all of a sudden he merely pretends to be leading it on. Perhaps he can manage to secure this young horse and even rid himself of its Red rider. The latter, in his fear and preoccupation, does not sense the danger closest to him. And suddenly Fast makes his move. What a move! No sound and no breath to be heard. But the two openings by which the Red fed and relieved himself, were now of the same size. "Pidder has made a tremendous move."<sup>13</sup>

When Self-Defense [*Selbstschutz*] is mentioned, Siemens smiles and declares that it was perhaps an aberration. But perhaps it was not. In retrospect, now that the whole matter belongs to the past, it is easy to be judgemental. To take action in extremity or to argue by a warm stove and at a richly laden table is vastly different. "Furthermore," he says, "if Self-Defense was a sin, at least it was a brutally open one. Yet there are scores of secret sins and disguised faults that are far more serious, but they have remained unmentioned because they are less apparent and are treated as though they were subject to a statute of limitations. At least among our people, not by God. One can go even further and assert that our people during the last fifty years in Russia practised ample self-defense rather than non-resistance. Among us there have been too many idealistic enthusiasts and miserly materialists but far too few realists. The old Mennonite symbol—the Bible and the plough—has been displaced by another—wheat and gold. There is much injustice involved in this change."

"Yes," says old Pankratz, "that's probably true. Then there is the issue of the small farmers [*Kleinwirtsfrage*]. Those people were treated like a caste. A small farmer was not allowed to have a voice in village affairs, no matter how bright or capable he was. And then this silly ploy—these poor fellows would always end up with the remotest land. Time and again, when a small farmer or a landless individual expressed anything on his own behalf, he would hear, 'Is nothing, has nothing, and still wants to have his say.' These wretches were

looked down upon, not as brethren of the same faith but as annoying appendages, inferior and deprived.”—“And the treatment of the hired help was even worse,” exclaims Cornies. “There is a grievous chapter. Most certainly more so than Self-Defense. But few talk about it. Why? Perhaps because far more were involved in it and guilty than in connection with Self-Defense. Or is it because people have become inured to it?” Cornies is very agitated and is gaining momentum. Evidently he knows a lot. All that will now be thoroughly laid bare.

“There is the story of the large farmer [*Großbauer*] Heinrich Wedel of H[albstadt]. That was the greatest exploiter of men God’s sun ever shone upon. One summer, after the war, the threshing day on his farm came to a peculiar conclusion, although at first everything had proceeded as it did every year. But now Wedel’s largesse with his liquor proved counterproductive. By nightfall, a lot of grain had passed through the thresher and lay heaped in the yard. The half-drunk male and female farm hands pointed to the rising full moon and predicted a rainless night, hoping to leave the mountain of grain for tomorrow. All around the sheaves piled along the stable walls up to the eaves glistened in the light of the early moon and the lit lanterns. They also crackled under the feet of the workers. Whenever there was a moment of silence, Wedel appeared with a lantern in one hand and a bottle in the other, to threaten and order those who rested back to work. What he did was no longer easy and without danger, but he did it anyway.

It was past midnight, and with unsteady hands Wedel was pouring the liquor on the workers’ hands and feet rather than into their glasses. From the brickyard, in which Wedel was a partner, the old watchman brought a message from Marusja, a soldier’s widow. Wedel was to come to her, she was waiting for him. ‘Is that true?’ stammered Wedel, threw the bottle aside and was about to go. ‘But she asks that you bring along a smoked ham.’ Wedel hesitated. ‘That’s a woman for you,’ he mumbled, went up to the loft, and took down from the gable wall several hams from which he carefully selected the one he wanted. His shrewish wife blocked his way with her skinny body which she broadened with her hands on her hips. The supper she had prepared had got cold hours ago, and she had given up waiting for those who were supposed to eat it. ‘Who fed the hogs, you or I?’ she shouted. ‘Get yourself a ham, if you know someone to take it to,’ scoffed Wedel with his hoarse voice, and brushed past her with the smoked ham.

Wedel had hardly left when the male workers went up to the loft to tuck bottles of liquor into their trousers. From the supper table they took half a loaf of bread and headed for the brickyard.

Wedel was not walking but running through the garden, with his back bowed under the weight of the ham, as though he were gliding through the dark.

The workers followed him fairly closely, but he saw and heard nothing of them. They saw Wedel bent over in front of the closed door and listening intently. They saw him take a match from his pocket and strike it, but it went out immediately. Then Semjen the watchman stepped around the corner. The

angry Wedel yelled, 'Who's inside with that floozy?'— Semjen whispered, 'Who knows? I guess they are celebrating a reunion.'— 'Tell me, Semjen,' sputtered Wedel plaintively, 'can we stand for that? Shouldn't we do something? After all, she had you call me.' Wedel was confused and disoriented in his intoxication and sexual desire. Semjen led him to the straw piles, where Wedel threw down the heavy ham. His workers and those from the brickyard joined him. 'Did she have them called too?' laughed Wedel. Soon they were all lying or sitting on the straw. It was a calm and balmy summer night. At first Wedel kept saying, 'Quiet, quiet.' One bottle after another appeared while the ham was crudely being cut up. Patronizing he laughed at the gathering and kept on drinking. Finally he lay snoring among bottles, pieces of ham skin, and bread crusts.

The next morning brought a fine rain and a sobering return to reality. Wedel promised the workers extra pay if they could bring the more or less dry grain inside within half an hour. They managed to do so. But the extra pay was not forthcoming. Wedel threatened to call in the German soldiers that had occupied Southern Russia at that time. There were curses and angry fists."

"Yes, but wasn't this one of a few isolated, exceptional cases?"—"Indeed, but they were known in the village and were the subject of daily conversations. Wasn't the entire village thus, in a sense, just as guilty?"

"And then there is the story of the farmer David Wiens, who ran a large operation and hired many helpers for the summer. He didn't drink but was exceedingly brutal. In the springtime when the starved Russians from Poltava or Chernigovka came south, Wiens was uncommonly fastidious in selecting his seasonal help from among them, even though he always paid the lowest wages. To welcome the chosen ones, he would have his wife bake fritters inducing diarrhoea [*Schataporzilki*], the worst 'enemies of all those wearing trousers,' as he phrased it. This 'sudden feeding cure' was an annual routine on his farm and was adopted by other farmers as well. His wife rarely referred to the Russians as anything but elephant or whale stomachs. A few years later, it was the Wienses' turn to undergo a terrible cure by starvation. But it wasn't just Russian stomachs they mistreated. This slave-driver forced his workers to rise early, practically at midnight. They had to clean out the stables and feed the livestock. His dilapidated stables were much too narrow and always overcrowded. Countless rats inhabited the rotting timber work. During the summer nights, when the cattle were kept in the yard, two or three workers would sleep in the manger inside, where they were usually bothered by the rats. These workers did not own a watch, but they were not allowed to oversleep. If they did, there were rude curses or even blows. For this reason, one of the workers for a while slept on his knees. As soon as he dozed off, he fell down and woke up. Also in bad repute was Wiens's Easter borscht. On Easter Sunday his family had roasted chicken. On Easter Monday the gnawed bones were boiled, and this bone borscht was served to the hired help.

Of the pigs that were butchered in great quantities during good times, the

workers received only the refuse. When one of them could not resist stealing a smoked sausage, his employer gave him a merciless beating with a bridle. In an additional punishment by the county sheriff [*Urjadnik*] who was summoned, the poor fellow lost a bunch of hair. Was that an act of defencelessness?

And then there was the rich Dyck in H[albstadt]. He had acquired his wealth by avarice. In the good old days, when the grain was still separated by means of a threshing-cart, this old miser hired an eight-year old boy for one summer. In fact, that boy had to lend a hand everywhere and was constantly bullied. He had to push manure carts that were far too heavy for him. In the most extreme summer heat, he had to ride all day long the skinny, sweaty black horse without a saddle. If he was overwhelmed by heat and fatigue, the farmer would mercilessly hit the horse with a rake, to wake up the sleepy boy. The farmer's sons both rode with saddles, but this wretch was sore from riding and walked straddling 'like a stuck ram,' as Dyck said. He was supposed to eat with the Dyck family, but actually had to eat at his manger. There were always two kinds of fare. If the family had ham and milk, the boy had to be satisfied with cold cheese cake [*Glumskuchen*] and imitation coffee [*Prips*]. They considered having him join the Russian workers' table, but that was not advisable, for the Russians had too many unflattering things to say about their master.

At the end of the summer, the boy received his wages. The entire remuneration consisted of 2 1/2 *arshins* [less than four feet] of cotton the farmer had bought for 89 kopeks.<sup>14</sup> That boy was later one of the Red ringleaders, and the Wiens property was continuously beleaguered by rabble of all sorts.

And the large estates [*Ökonomien*]? Were they not more civilized? Weren't their owners after all rich and educated, consequently more humane?

There too were abundant covert sins. Rancid bacon, meat full of maggots, workers' unrest, and the *Urjadnik*, all these were part of their routine. Of course there were exceptions, but unfortunately too few.

The old drunkard Pauls, who was a dyer by trade and finally succumbed to the delirium tremens, was a welcome guest on a number of these estates. There he figured as a kind of court jester and delighted people with his drunkenness and jokes. When he was in the throes of the delirium, he was fair game for some pitiless scoundrels. They dressed him in a woman's gown and made him parade barefoot with his huge hunchback and spindly legs through the village street of H[albstadt]. Why was such a thing tolerated? Compared to that, Self-Defense was child's play." [pp. 169-184]

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>“Peter Quapp,” *Mennonitische Volkswarte* (1936), 284-286; “Eine Fahrt durch die Felder,” *Mennonitische Warte* (1937), 24-26. Both selections also in Fritz Senn, *Gesammelte Gedichte und Prosa*, ed. Victor G. Doerksen (Winnipeg, 1987), pp. 255-258 and 252-254, respectively. These texts correspond to pp. 59-64 and pp. 86-94 of the original manuscript (hereafter MS). Subsequent page references given in parentheses pertain to MS.

<sup>2</sup>I am grateful to Victor Doerksen for making a copy of MS available to me. It is our hope that a future supplement to his 1987 edition will include the German original of *Panta Rhei* as well as a number of other Senniana that have come to light since.

<sup>3</sup>In an unpublished autobiographical sketch of 1940, Senn also mentions night work and describes himself as totally overburdened while at Forsyth's.

<sup>4</sup>In a few cases, I have tacitly corrected obvious errors in the original text and incorporated such corrections in my translations.

<sup>5</sup>At this time Senn was in the habit of asking Epp and Dyck for their criticism of various autographs he submitted to them. Cf. ed. Doerksen, p. xix.

<sup>6</sup>There are textual indications (MS, pp. 103-108) that Senn planned a continuation or sequel.

<sup>7</sup>Unpublished vers interspersed in *Panta Rhei* consists of seven poems totalling 76 lines, 12 of which Senn deleted. I have been unable to ascertain whether an additional poem of 66 lines (MS, pp. 157-160) is by Senn.

<sup>8</sup>A marginal note shows that Senn had misgivings about being too specific in writing about this starch factory, because it might stir up too many unpleasant memories (MS, p. 19).

<sup>9</sup>In the above-mentioned letter to Benjamin Unruh in Karlsruhe, Germany, Senn writes, “With close attention and interest I have been following your recent publications in the Mennonite press. I was delighted by your statement that God does not exist for the satisfied [*die Satten* can also connote well-fed or smug]. When I expressed the very same idea some time ago in *Der Bote*, I was not understood, perhaps even purposely misunderstood. And yet this is the cardinal lesson in the life of Christ: *Per aspera ad astra*.”

<sup>10</sup>“I am the embodiment of the desperate need to know, curious to a fault and inquisitive to the point of cruelty” (MS, p. 4).—Since Senn did not know Greek, he may have become acquainted with Heraclitus's philosophy and its key concept *panta rhei* through Nietzsche, who held that Greek philosopher in high esteem. Cf. Walter Kaufmann, *Nietzsche, Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* (Cleveland and New York, 1964), p. 209.

<sup>11</sup>James Urry, “Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth and the Mennonite Experience in Imperial Russia,” *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, vol. 3 (1985), 30.

<sup>12</sup>*Journal of Mennonite Studies*, vol. 7 (1989) 84-95.

<sup>13</sup>An allusion to the ballad *Pidder Lüng* by the German poet Detlev von Liliencron (1844-1909).

<sup>14</sup>According to Urry (see fn. 11), p. 13, a male farm worker would be paid between 60 and 90 rubles for a summer season.