

The Year of the Apples

A story by **Naomi Duke**, Tacoma, Washington

Naomi Reimer Duke was born and raised in Corn, Oklahoma. For eight years she taught English in Canada and the United States and for twenty years she was with the Washington State Legislature, including time as an editor and writer. Recently she retired to devote herself to her true vocation, which is, in her words, "writing about the Mennonite world that I had such difficulty living in but that I cannot leave." The following story is excerpted from a novel she is writing.

Heinrich Thiessen was uneasy as he watched his children grow toward adulthood in the newly formed state of Oklahoma. There was something disheartening in knowing that his brother-in-law Johann, who had never read a book other than the Bible, who was skilled at computation but could barely read and write in German, and not at all in English or Russian, was more highly respected by the men who did business in Washita City than he was.

The homestead of Heinrich and Aganetha Thiessen brought to mind the village in the Old Country, the Ukraine north of the Sea of Azov. As much as possible the Thiessens resisted the changes that Johann and his sons embraced. In Aganetha's kitchen there was no oil burning stove. To accommodate the warmer Oklahoma winters, the bricked-in fireplace with the oven and miagrope was in the summer kitchen separate from the house, and a black range that burned wood and twigs was installed in the kitchen. The house was laid out like the one in Russia, an oblong structure with a steeply-pitched shingled roof that

graced the white-washed planks like a pleated Sunday cap. It faced toward the river and away from the Oklahoma wind. Heinrich framed a fence of planks to enclose the house and garden, and he built furniture for the house—a table, chairs and chests like those they had left behind.

Though Heinrich no longer used a heavy old-fashioned stone for threshing, he resisted mechanization. He had good plow horses, he assured Johann, and he continued to use them instead of a tractor for plowing and harrowing and seeding.

Aganetha and Heinrich walked out into the waves of ripening wheat on an evening in June to test the grain. He pulled off the head and rubbed it in the palms of his hands. It would be an abundant harvest, he thought, for there were many kernels in his palm and they were large and firm. But he knew the weather was unpredictable and the harvest needed to be done quickly.

Before the preaching began the next day, when Mennonites gathered in the white steepled church placed imposingly on the highest shoulder of land in Grunwald, Heinrich asked others about their harvesting. It seemed that most farmers had already begun. Maria and the girls were in church without Johann and his boys—who were in the fields, working. To cut wheat on Sunday would have been unthinkable in the Old Country.

Heinrich was chagrined at his own slackness. He should have recognized the signs earlier, the change of color from green to gold, and the swaying of the wheat heads, heavy with growing seeds. That evening he tried to remember what it was that had distracted him so that he had not paid enough attention to his farming. The family was sitting around the organ and Aganetha was playing softly while Susanna and Esther sang together, practicing a new song for next Sunday's Jugendverein. Heinrich, the boys and the two youngest girls sat listening. They were the audience pretending to respond as the young people would at the evening program.

"Esther, you sing louder. Susanna outsings you," Dafeed instructed.

Esther turned to her older sister, "You sing quieter. You always make it so hard for me."

"But the church is bigger than our house. We have to sing so everybody hears us."

Esther faced her father. She was fourteen, her body slender and strong as a willow twig. The fairest of the Thiessens, her hair was streaked to blond by the summer sun. Of all his comely children, she seemed the loveliest to him, the most like the little sister he had left in the Old Country. "Foda," she was cajoling him confident of his support, "You tell her to listen when I sing so she knows how loud to be."

"Yo," he said. "You sing together, make it sound good together. Not one above the other, not one more beautiful than the other."

"But she sings so soft."

"But when I sing loud I lose my pitch."

"Esther," Heinrich would not be turned aside by her defense, "you practise

this week. Mutta will help you so you make your voice louder but still beautiful.”

He remembered then the music that had distracted him from his farming. First it had been the Easter music. He had ordered one copy from Kansas and it had been new to the choir. He had spent hours copying the words and notes so that all in the choir would have a copy to look on to at choir practice. And the choir had come together twice a week to learn the words and the music. It had been a wonderful program, the sounds filling the church on Easter morning until the walls seemed to tremble.

At the end of May it had been Kjinjafast, the children’s celebration. In the Sunday School he had moved from group to group for a month before the program was put together, helping the smallest children first. They learned the word so quickly but had such trouble singing as one voice. To have them all sing together, singing the words in unison, keeping their voices on pitch, was hard for them. It took weeks and then their performance was far from perfect. But he was grateful for their improvement, for how much better they had gotten from the first practice to their final singing—that Sunday afternoon when they stood in front of all the church members, their parents and grandparents and aunts and uncles and cousins, and sang with feeling and gusto.

Just when things settled down, when everyone in the community was looking toward the June harvest and there didn’t seem any reason for special music, Taunte Leenkja died. She left a long list of instructions for her funeral. The Thiessen children were to sing and she named the songs. They were very old and quite long, one with nine verses. Heinrich had the children practise every evening before the funeral, insisting they learn all the words by heart.

That was why they had all been singing instead of farming.

In the third week in June the Thiessen family put aside books and music to reap the harvest. That Monday morning Abe hitched the two teams to the binder and after three false starts, with the twine breaking and tangling, the reaper took on a monotony of movement through the grain. Though Susanna objected, she was placed in a saddle on the lead horse and given the reins. She sat straight and rigid, her long brown braids flapping around her slender shoulders as the horse plodded along. Heinrich sat on the binder to keep the machinery moving properly and Abe, Dafeed, and Kjnals followed behind to stook the grain into sheaves. It took them most of the week and there was still the threshing to do.

Later in the week Johann and his sons came around to the Thiessens and offered to thresh their grain for a share of the yield. Heinrich could not recall that it had been done that way in the Old Country. Rather he remembered men gathering to help each other, eagerly and generously. But he acquiesced to Johann’s proposal because neither he nor his sons found such work agreeable and because he knew of no way to counteract Johann’s acquisitiveness.

Johann at work was a powerful man. He assigned each of the boys a responsibility, for pitching the grain into the thresher, for keeping it flowing, for hauling the newly threshed grain into the granary to be taken to Washita City later. He himself tended the gas engine that powered the threshing machine and

his second son Jakob moved quickly when he shouted for help. By the first half hour all six of them were hot and grimy, and under layers of chaff and dust moved like the peasants who had worked for hire in Russia. And Johann was quick and tyrannical in the way he guided their work.

Mid-morning Aganetha and the girls came to the field hauling food and drink in the wooden wagon that Heinrich had built for the boys one Christmas when they were still little, and had filled with play blocks he had shaped and painted. Now it held the food and drink and a cream can of fresh water and a wash basin. Heinrich motioned for Johann to begin the cleaning up and after all the men had washed their hands and faces and dried them on a dark cloth that had once been an overall leg, Heinrich prayed the blessing he had learned from his grandfather, "Komm Herr Jesu, sei Du unser Gast, und segne was Du uns bescheret hast. Amen."

Aganetha spread an oil cloth in the shade thrown by the threshing machine, untied the flour-sacks that protected the food from dust and flies, and set out baskets of rye bread and cheese and freshly baked perieschkje, the triangles of cherry-filled pastry warm and oozing with sweetened fruit. The men and boys ate quickly from hand to mouth with no plates or utensils. They slurped hot coffee from tin cups. When the food was gone except for several slivers of cheese, Johann got up quickly, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and walked over to the idling machine, opening the engine to fuel. The others followed him so they were at their work places by the time the threshing machine began its noisy beat.

The crop was good that year and the price high. Heinrich prayed a prayer of thanksgiving for the abundance that had been given them. He and Aganetha took the four girls, Susanna, Esther, Martha and Helena to Washita City to buy new shoes. It was not a trip they took often. Usually it was Heinrich and his sons who went to town, selling the wheat or buying the supplies that couldn't be found in Grunwald. And the little girls were excited to go to town. They had brushed each other's hair and put on their second best dresses, the ones that Aganetha had made from the cotton goods that Maria had given them for Christmas. Although it was going to be a hot summer day, Mutta insisted they wear long, tan cotton socks and their good shoes.

But the little girls had been going barefoot all summer long and Helena's feet didn't want to fit into her old good shoes. She whimpered and pushed and finally Aganetha said, "Leenkje, I carry you to the buggy and you hold your shoes till we get to town. You put them on in the buggy as best you can and walk in quick and take your shoes off right away in the store."

"Mutta, the town people will think me ignorant if I take my shoes off before the man says, 'Can I help you, little girl,' the way he always does."

Heinrich had been waiting and listening and now said, "We don't have so much pride that we pay attention to what the town people in Washita City think. They hardly notice us, Leenkje. Do like Mutta says and you will have pretty new shoes to wear home today." He picked her up and carried her out to the buggy to

sit between him and Aganetha.

In Washita City they climbed from the buggy and moved together to cross the street to the dry goods store. They were old-fashioned Mennonites and though Heinrich had said they would not be noticed, they were outsiders. He saw family groups walking together, stopping to talk to others like them, but not smiling at the Thiessen family or greeting them. There were men standing together smoking and arguing, at ease with each other and the town. But the Thiessens were not at ease—it was not just the youngest, Helena hobbling along on her pinched feet. They all felt pinched here, and Heinrich felt the pang of homesickness for the Mennonite village in the Ukraine where he had felt rooted, where he had been at home—a feeling that always came to him when he entered the big town in Oklahoma.

In the store the girls sat on the stools in the shoe department and Aganetha said in Low German so the young man who was showing shoes to a woman nearby would not understand, “Leenkje, take your shoes off now. He comes right away and you can be first.”

The man recognized the sound of her words as Mennonite Low German, and hesitated before coming over to her. He was young and brisk, the son of the store owner, and had recently been made manager. He was determined to make his store a success. Now he looked around to see if there was an employee nearby to deal with the Mennonites. They could be difficult—the language was always a problem and worse than that, some farm families came in to buy shoes wearing dirty socks. But this family appeared respectably clean, though decidedly foreign, their clothes too large and bulky for the Oklahoma summer.

The manager noticed the father of the group, a small man with a slender face, dark, deep-set eyes, and a neatly trimmed beard flecked with gray that gave him a scholarly look. The wife had the same deep-set eyes, as if they shared a blood tie, but her face was angular, broad at the cheekbones with a narrow pointed chin. The four girls were not unattractive, he thought, and as a group quite pretty, less brawny than most of the Mennonites who lived across the Washita next to Indian land. He spoke to the mother who stood protectively between him and the daughters, “Can I help you?” But he knew she didn’t understand, she looked so confused.

The father came over quickly to respond, “We buy shoes for the girls. First you wait on the littlest one.”

The manager brought out a metal device, measured Helena’s feet with it and looked in her shoes. “These shoes are too small for her. She shouldn’t be wearing them.”

Heinrich nodded, “Yo, she gets new ones today.”

“Well,” the clerk sighed, placing her feet against the metal again, “I don’t know if we have shoes wide enough to fit her fat little German feet.”

Helena seemed about to cry and Aganetha asked in Low German, her voice quavering with anxiety, “What does he say, Heinrich?”

“I tell you later, Aganetha. We find shoes for her first.”

The man came back with a pair of black, high top shoes. "This is the best I can do for her," he said as he slipped one on her foot. "They're a little longer than she needs but it's the only way we can get the width. She'll just have to wear them longer."

"She takes them," Heinrich said ignoring the tears on Helena's cheeks.

Aganetha lifted her face toward Heinrich as if about to complain but he turned from her and she settled back, her mouth tight. The other three girls were fitted with the same kind of shoes and the family left the store walking closely together more ill-at-ease than when they had first crossed the street. "I buy you candy," Heinrich said to them. And they bought it quickly before they got back into the buggy and left the town that was like a foreign place to them.

Aganetha rode home that day, disappointed that the expected buying had been incomplete. In Washita City she liked going to the general store where there were bolts of cloth—wool and silk and cotton—and buttons of many kinds, some from France and China. And on a wooden stand next to the yard goods, spools of thread and floss in many colors were displayed. She had hoped Heinrich would let her go there to buy enough cloth in new pretty colors for school dresses for the girls. But she recognized his anxiety in the purchase of the shoes, though she didn't understand the words that had been spoken between him and the man in the store. She thought perhaps the shoes had cost too much and she couldn't understand why he bought such long shoes for Helena unless he thought her feet would grow the most, since she was the youngest.

To Aganetha the community seemed small. In the Old Country there had been other villages to visit, one after another, dozens of them, and one could go for many miles before the Ukranian world was reached. Here there was only one village—Grunwald—and the farms of the families who lived in it stretched for a mere twelve miles or so.

And the lawlessness was so near. Heinrich had thought that when Oklahoma became a state in 1907, things would be different. But the bank had been robbed twice in the last year. Once a banker had shot one of the bandits and he himself was killed in the robbery. Heinrich heard the story from Ferd Goering, the German Lutheran who came for fruit one day.

Heinrich was out gathering apples with the three oldest boys, Abraham, Dafeed, and Kjnals. It was the fall and God had blessed his orchard that year—the fruit hung heavy on the limbs of the trees. His sons were on ladders picking apples into pails, their voices bouncing back and forth from tree to tree as they grunted and complained, or teased and laughed. This blessing was God's blessing, the plentiful harvest and his boys happy and gathering it in—he knew a thankfulness that afternoon that he hadn't experienced since he left Russia. He could see the Washita winding through the plain beyond his brother-in-law's farm. It was not the Molotschnaya but this afternoon it seemed a reasonable river and the land fertile and generous.

He heard the rumble of an engine, saw a swarm of red dust coming toward his farm and saw the truck of Ferd Goering turn where his driveway met the road.

He got down out of the tree and walked toward the shed where Ferd had parked and was getting out of his new Ford. Ferd was a muscular, energetic man. His beard was clipped and his shirt starched and clean. Though by paying attention, the two men could understand each other, their words had different sounds. Ferd spoke and his words had the brisk vowel sounds of a German from Germany, "I heard you had a good fruit harvest this year. My wife wants some of your apples."

"Yo, help yourself. How many can she use? I have plenty," and Heinrich's words came slowly, the sounds moving across his tongue like the start of a plain song as he offered his hand and Ferd grasped it in greeting. Heinrich gestured toward the truck and said, "You must have a good harvest, too."

"Ya, my wheat made twenty bushels to the acre and the price is good. The war in Europe makes the price go up."

"I know, that's sad that others suffer and we profit."

"Well, that's the way it is and I hear your brother-in-law Johann Reimer profited more than anyone else in the county. They say he had the biggest crop of all."

Heinrich sighed, "That may be true. I can't say."

They were walking toward the wagon piled high with fruit. "How much would you take for half that load?" Ferd asked.

"Oh, I don't know. Just help yourself, Gott has been good."

"I'll tell you what. I take half that load of apples and you come to my place and pick out a heifer before I take them to sale next week."

"I'll send Abraham."

"Thiessen, did you hear about the latest bank robbery in Washita City?"

"I heard it got robbed last Thursday and the banker got shot. How is he?"

"He died. But the story they tell in town is that the bandit that got away is the brother of the County Judge and he won't ever be arrested."

Heinrich shook his head in disbelief. "How can that be? If everybody knows it, how come the sheriff doesn't know it?"

"Oh, he knows it alright. I think he's been paid off."

The feeling of thanksgiving that Heinrich had experienced earlier that morning was gone. His clumsy way of dealing with the shrewd German—Aganetha would complain—and the cheerful way Goering told the robbery story depressed him. If the story were true, Heinrich thought, he had come to a Gomorrah-like place to make a home for his family.