

Gains and Losses: The Experience of Mennonite Women Immigrants of Late Nineteenth Century

Esther Epp-Tiessen, *Mennonite Heritage Centre*

The 1874 immigration from the perspective of several women can be illustrated by the diaries and memoirs of four Mennonite women. Although the women were of different age groups and came from different families, there are common themes in their accounts. And each reflected the larger framework of gains and losses that all immigrants experienced. These women had specific gains, that is, opportunities, *openings, and new possibilities.* They also shared losses that included disappointments, difficulties, and struggles.

Who were these four women? The first two women were sisters, Margareta and Anna Jansen, daughters of the famous Cornelius and Helena Jansen. They were born in 1849 and 1856, respectively, into the prominent and cosmopolitan Berdyansk family credited with being at the vanguard of the 1874 emigration from South Russia. The story of their father, Cornelius, the man who supposedly envisioned and commandeered the emigration, is told in the 1956 book, *Exiled by the Czar*.¹ Margareta and Anna were the first and fourth in the Jansen family of six children. Margareta began her diary in 1873 at the age of 24, while the family was staying in Berlin, Ontario. It ended at the time of her death in January 1875 in Pleasant Hill,

Iowa. Anna's diary entries begin when she is 18, also in Berlin, and conclude with her marriage in 1876 at age 20. By this time the Jansen family had settled in Beatrice, Nebraska, and was becoming well established in sheep-raising business.

Helena Penner, the third woman, also came from a well known and well-to-do family. Helena's father, Erdman Penner, had already earned a reputation and considerable wealth managing the estate of a Russian noble. Like Jansen, Penner also played an important role in the 1874 emigration; he was delegated the task of leading the Bergthal Colony to Manitoba's East Reserve. Helena was born within the first few months of her parents' arrival in Canada. Her family lived in Winnipeg and at several other places in and around the East Reserve, while her father sought out business opportunities, until finally settling in what would become the town of Gretna. Helena eventually went on to become one of the first women graduates of the University of Manitoba.

Susanna Banman is different in the sense that she came from a much less wealthy and less known family. She was born in the village of Altberghthal on the West Reserve in 1886, her parents having arrived in the East Reserve in 1874. She spent most of her life in southern Manitoba, moving to Hague, Saskatchewan, in the 1950s. Her story is filled with much tragedy and struggle.

Before looking at some of the themes that weave their way through the stories of these immigrant women, a word about the genre. The Jansen sisters wrote diaries; their stories are the day-by-day accounts of life as it unfolded in the 1870s, first in Ontario, then Iowa and finally Nebraska. Helena Penner and Susanna Banman wrote memoirs or autobiographies much later in life. Even though there is much that we can learn from both types of life-writing, there are some important distinctions.

Diaries are written at the moment of occurrence; memoirs are of necessity a reconstruction of the past. Diaries do not have the benefit of hindsight, of retrospection, of analysis of the way things were, whereas memoirs do. Someone writing about her life at age seventy will have a very different sense of what was significant, than she did at age fifteen or twenty. Her interpretation of the past will be very much influenced by the present context in which she is writing. This is one of the reasons that, as Jeremy Popkin has pointed out, historians usually think that autobiography is the least convincing of all personal records.²

A second important difference between diaries and memoirs is the audience. A diary is generally intended for private use only, whereas a memoir is usually meant for others, even if that is just a small family circle. Consequently, the content may be significantly different. Topics that would be taboo in public or even family discourse, for example, may make their way into a diary; it is very unlikely that they will appear in a memoir. Anna Jansen, for instance, makes several references to menstrual cramps and also to the morning sickness related to her sister-in-law's pregnancy. At one point, sister-in-law Gertrude's frequent vomitings cause Anna to declare vehemently that if being married consists of vomiting, I would never get married.³ It is also likely that feelings will be expressed more honestly and intensely in a diary than a memoir. Suffice it to say, for these reasons, a diary may reveal

significant experiences that a memoir may not.

Four themes are apparent in the writings of these women and each offers insights on the movement to and settlement in Canada. These four themes are: migration, death, gender and community.

The Migration

First, the migration itself. These women write little about the actual decision to migrate. The reasons for the move were not of primary concern to them. The only one who writes directly about her family's motivation for moving is Helena Penner. In many ways, she upholds the classic interpretation, that the reason for the move was to regain the privilege of military exemption that had been lost in Russia.⁴ She takes pains to describe Anabaptist beginnings at length, the Anabaptists' resistance to bearing arms, and her father's own commitment to pacifism. At the same time she notes that in Russia father Erdman slept with a loaded gun at his side to protect the family from thieves and prowlers. Also, while indicating that the invitation of the Bergthal elders to her father to lead the colony to Canada could have been the call of God, she also alludes to her father's spirit of adventure. She writes about the invitation:

Perhaps this was not just a coincidence, perhaps it was a call from above, perhaps it was a God-given command to them which they should obey. And, at any rate, America was not out of the world. Father could use his knowledge about banking and financial affairs and his comparatively worldly experience. They could sell out, take the trip to America, travel about, look around, and perhaps they would like it so well that they would want to remain. And if they did not like it, well, they could always return, settle back in again, and live more happily than if they had passed up such an opportunity.⁵

That the Penners contemplated a return to Russia if things did not work out as planned suggests that the military exemption issue was not as central as Helena may have thought. It sounds much more like a case of an adventurous entrepreneurial couple seizing an opportunity.

The Jansen sisters were already young adults when their family came to North America in 1873 and were certainly old enough to have understood the reasons for the move. Yet, interestingly, their diaries make no mention of this. The larger issues behind the migration were not the concern of these young women, at least not a concern that would appear in their daily accounts of life. What is very significant in these diaries, however, are the feelings that they share about the move.

Both Margareta and Anna express intense feelings of loneliness and homesickness for their relatives and friends and life in Berdyansk. This is a prominent theme that figures very strongly in the accounts, especially of the first year in North America. They long for cousins, aunts and uncles, yearn for familiar customs and

traditions, and experience a sense of alienation in the strange country and amidst a new set of customs. At the passing of their first Christmas, Margareta writes, "Today Christmas is being celebrated in Russia. We thought much of last year and especially of our people, and I think that they in turn thought much of us also."⁶ At Eastertime, her sister Anna writes: "Mary and I have painted some eggs... We revived old memories, and were homesick. I do not know very well why, but I am homesick very often."⁷

No where in the two diaries do Margareta or Anna declare explicit anger or resentment about the migration and the losses that it imposed on them. However, there were obviously some women who did. At one point Anna refers to a woman who blamed her husband for coming to North America and who threatened to return to Russia with the children.⁸

English literature scholar Helen Buss of the University of Calgary has studied numerous diaries of women pioneers in eighteenth and nineteenth century Canada. She describes the use of displacement in these diaries as a way that women give vent to darker and unacceptable feelings.⁹ According to Buss, the use of displacement—projecting one's feelings and experiences onto others—allows women diarists a way of uttering the unutterable. If we apply this analysis to Anna Jansen's reference to the blaming woman, Anna may in fact be articulating her own feelings of wrath — feelings that were possibly too frightening to acknowledge privately, let alone speak. After all, how could she entertain serious regrets when her father was so passionately committed to the migration?

There are other suggestions in these accounts that women may have been unhappy about the decision to migrate. Elsewhere in her diary, Anna Jansen mentions how difficult it was for her mother to leave the beautiful town of Weslinke, a community where the Jansens had lived in Prussia for a time before embarking for North America.¹⁰ Anna is also very explicit about the feelings she holds regarding her father's involvement with the migration. She was deeply troubled that migration-related business consumed so much of his energy, worsened his fragile health, and took him away from home frequently for long periods of time. In her diary she voices a lurking fear that the work will take her father's life.

What we learn about the migration, from the perspective of these women, is not so much the reasons for leaving as we learn that the migration often meant separation from loved ones and that in this sense, the migration was a painful experience that some regretted. Along with the supposed gains of religious freedom and new economic opportunities, the loss of family and community was very real.

Death

A second important theme in the accounts of these immigrant and pioneer women is death. Death was a frequent visitor in the homes of all these women; each one relates the account of the untimely and premature death of a family member.

Helena Penner writes about the death of three of her siblings—Margaret, Abram and Sarah—of diphtheria within days of each other. She describes this as her parents' most difficult hour, "the worst calamity of their married life"¹¹ Susanna Banman mentions the deaths of her 21-month-old daughter Martha, as well as two husbands (the first died in the flu epidemic of 1918, the second of a tractor-train crash), and a younger sister. Anna Jansen writes about the unexpected death of her 25-year-old sister Margareta.

As these women write about the deaths of their loved ones, the striking difference between the memoir accounts and the diaries becomes apparent. The memoir writers convey very little of the pain that these deaths represent. Part of this is no doubt related to the issue of time; a memoir written 50 years after a death will convey much less emotional intensity than a diary. But part of this is no doubt also related to the issue of audience and what is acceptable for women to share publicly. Since memoirs are intended for an audience, and since free expressions of grief have not been acceptable within many Mennonite circles, these writers divulge very little about the anguish of losing a family member.

Helena Penner, for example, mentions the pain that her parents experienced on the death of their three children, but doesn't mention anything about her own grief over losing three siblings. One senses that she is using displacement to reveal her own privately-held feelings. But perhaps, even more than that, she is exhibiting a kind of stoic denial that was – and perhaps still is — common among Mennonites, when she says, "There is nothing like work and the sense of duty to heal sores like that."¹²

Susanna Banman says a bit more about losing her little Martha when she writes, "we missed her dreadfully."¹³ But she also rationalizes the death by saying her daughter was "lucky to die in childhood."¹⁴ She is probably alluding to the very tough times that her family experienced later on, and her gratitude that her daughter didn't have to live through those.

It is in the diary of Anna Jansen that we receive a window into the depth of despair caused by sister Margareta's sudden death in January 1875. Anna was devastated by her beloved sister's death. Her diary is the place where she pours out her grief. Anna's references to Margareta and the pain of her absence appear not just in the weeks following her death, but over the months and the years. She visited Margareta's grave, commemorated her birthday and death anniversary, and made over one of Margareta's dresses for herself. The first Christmas after Margareta's death, she wrote:

Today I baked chocolate cookies. Last year Margaretha baked these cookies for the last time. Who would have thought at that time that there would be such a change? I am bound to remember Margaretha frequently. I know very well what treasure I have lost with the loss of my beloved older sister. I wish I could talk to her once again, because I feel very lonely . . .¹⁵

Death was very much a part of the lives of the immigrants. Perhaps because of its frequency we may sense that the immigrants experienced less grief and accepted death more easily than we might. Certainly, if we take the memoirs and their references to death at face value, that hypothesis would be borne out. Rather, given the significant difference between Anna Jansen's diary and the memoirs of the other women, I would suggest that the experience of sorrow was every bit as intense, but the expression of that sorrow, or at least its reconstruction in the memoir, needed to remain private. For whatever reason – and this would make a fascinating study – public expressions of loss were greatly tempered.

Whether the immigrants experienced more premature deaths in the early years in Canada than they had in Russia is not known to me. Perhaps not. But without doubt these family tragedies compounded the other struggles that accompanied resettlement in North America.

Gender

A third theme in these diaries and autobiographies is gender. There is much in these writings about the gendered relationships of the 1870s immigrants and their descendants. Scholar Helen Buss claims that one of the myths about the Canadian West is that it was a place where women could “escape gender binds and share equally in the adventure, work, and benefits of the settlement experience.”¹⁶ The West has been seen as a great equalizer of women and men. Yet Buss's studies shatter that myth quite convincingly. While women were thrown into circumstances which demanded tremendous adaptation and resourcefulness on their part, and while they certainly worked equally with men, if not more so, equality in their personal lives was not one of the benefits.¹⁷

Buss's analysis is certainly borne out in the life-writing of these four Mennonite women. That they worked very hard there can be no doubt. Their writings are full of references to the long hours – Margareta and Anna Jansen rose well before dawn to light the fire, prepare breakfast, begin baking and cooking for the day. On one occasion Margareta baked thirty-three pies in one day. Doing the laundry was a several days' job that included grinding potatoes for starch, boiling gallons of water over wood fire, scrubbing all clothing and linens by hand and hanging them outdoors regardless of the season. The Jansen sisters' work was mostly the work of the household; during their father's and brother Peter's long absences, they also fed the animals, cleaned the stables, and attended to tasks generally reserved for the men.

The writings of Margareta and Anna reveal that, despite the way they shared equally in the labour of the household, they did not participate equally at other levels. It was their brother Peter, the future Nebraska state senator and Margareta's junior, who accompanied their father on his forays to seek out land and to attend to migration-related business. It was he who helped make decisions about where the Jansen family would settle and how they would begin the sheep-raising ventures.

Evidently both Margareta and Anna did not think too much of their brother; in their diaries he is portrayed as a stubborn, rebellious and inconsiderate young man. It is possible that their feelings toward Peter stemmed from envy they may have felt about the special privileges he received.

Another relationship that reveals something of the gendered world in which Margareta and Anna lived was their relationship with their father. Their father, Cornelius Jansen, figures very prominently in both diaries; there are many fewer references to their mother, and most of them speak of her ill health. (I began to wonder if Mrs. Jansen suffered from post-migration depression.) The younger sister Anna chided herself when she slept in and father was the one to rekindle the fire and get his own breakfast.¹⁸ She also organized her workday to meet his needs. On 26 October 1875 she wrote: "Aunt and I had a big wash day, because we had not washed for a whole week . . . We prefer to do the big work like washing when Father is not at home, because he does not like to be inside all by himself when everybody else is outside."¹⁹ Both Margareta and Anna were very distressed when other brothers and sisters made their father angry. The father's influence and control over the family was very significant.

Susana Banman's memoir also is quite revealing with regard to the gendered life of the period in question. Unlike the Jansen sisters whose work was mostly "women's" work or "indoor" work, Susana did "men's" work from an early age. She hauled water, chopped wood, herded the cattle, helped build a stove, and stooked grain at harvest time. About this last task, she writes; "Hard work for a girl to do," though she adds proudly, "I was very good at forming these stooks."²⁰

Obviously, Susana's early life experience prepared her well, for very soon after her first marriage, her husband became quite disabled, so that she had to care for him, her two young daughters, and work away from home to earn an income. She also built her own new house. After the death of a second husband, she took over the organization of the farm work, and after a third marriage, she again put her building skills to use.

I helped Johan to build our home. That was not easy for me to be hammering boards all day. . . . I nailed the outside boards or siding. My husband went into the house once and I was wondering what he was doing. After a while [I] went to find out. He was checking how often I had missed the 2 X 4s. I told him point blank I too knew that a board would not stay in place if the nail was not in the 2 X 4. I never saw him checking up on my nailing after this. I told him it was not the first time I was using a hammer!²¹

Perhaps even more significant than this incident, in attesting to the gendered world that she lived in, is the reality that Susana, as a single mother, simply could not succeed economically on her own. About managing the farm and running a household of 14, she wrote; "For three years I did this after my [second] husband died but I got so played out that I just had to give up. We never made enough to pay all the debts no matter how hard I worked . . ."²² Although she is not very

explicit on the issue of remarriage, one gathers that this economic reality was the main reason behind her decision to re-marry a second and third time.

What else can we learn about gender through these immigrant women? It seems fairly clear from the various accounts that women shared equally in the task of passing on the faith to the children. In some families, it seems that women took the primary responsibility for the spiritual nurture of children.

In the Jansen family, Father Cornelius Jansen was obviously the main caretaker of the family's spiritual welfare; he often led devotions in the family home, reading scripture, tracts, or even *The Martyrs' Mirror*. But both daughters, Margareta and Anna, were regular Sunday school teachers during the years that they lived in Mount Pleasant, Iowa. (Sunday school would have been an American innovation unknown to them in Russia or even Ontario.) Anna played the harmonium at the African American worship service on Sunday afternoons. The sisters also took it upon themselves to ensure that their younger siblings got to church.

In Helena Penner's family, it was Mrs. Penner who was the custodian of the faith. The Penners tended to live on the edges of the Mennonite reserves, and therefore further from the centre of organized church life. Before a church was established in Gretna, Mrs. Penner regularly gathered her family and anyone else who happened to be around, read sermons to them and led them in singing hymns. According to daughter Helena, the sermons were quite incomprehensible, "but Mother was a good reader and it was nice to hear her read any kind of story."²³ Also, according to Helena, it was these moments which ensured that she and her siblings didn't grow up "little heathen."²⁴

Susana Banman writes very little about teaching the faith to her children. But, given that her first husband was severely disabled for years, and that she also lived as a young widow for many years, she must have shared the Bible stories and verses that she learned as a child. She did make a point of taking her daughters to the Sommerfelder church, even though this meant pushing her husband's wheelchair a quarter mile over rough country road.²⁵

It is clear that the women immigrants of the 1870s saw the spiritual nurture of children as an important task given to them. Religious teaching of the young was not just for men. However, it is also clear that Mennonite churches in this particular era (and for some churches the era has not ended), did not allow women to use their gifts and abilities in church, except perhaps in teaching Sunday school. They were not even allowed to participate in decision making within the church context. In this whole area of passing on the faith, women shared fully in the task of religious teaching, but they did not share the benefit of equality within the church.

An examination of these life-writings through the lens of gender analysis confirms Helen Buss's conclusion: women laboured hard and long, alongside fathers, brothers, husbands to build a new home in North America and to pass on the faith to young children. Yet, as Buss has noted, they did not share equally in the benefits of that partnership, either at home or in the church.

Community

A final theme apparent in these writings is that of community. Royden Loewen identifies the centrality of community in his examination of Mennonite women's diaries. Their task is that of "replicating the social networks;" in other words, rebuilding the community that they have left behind.²⁶

The writings of these women confirm this. In some ways, I have already made reference to this by describing the loneliness and homesickness of the Jansen sisters. The absence of community as they knew it in Russia is what made life in the new land so difficult. Writing and receiving letters was an important way of relieving the pain of separation. So was the anticipation that "dear ones" left behind would join the Jansens soon in America. When relatives of the Jansens arrived in 1875 and the years following, references to loneliness and homesickness lessened.

This theme comes through clearly also in the writings of Susanna Banman. In describing her home village of Altberghthal, it was important for Susanna to list all the residents of the village and where they lived in relation to one another. It was the people who made Altberghthal home.

The diaries and the memoirs of the four women are filled with wonderful examples of how the women were at the centre of building community. They cooked and baked for others, always making sure that there was plenty of food available for unexpected company, of which there was a great deal. They tended to the sick and assisted at the births of children. They made preparation for weddings and funerals. They visited back and forth a great deal.

Helena Penner of Gretna included some delightful stories about her mother's gift for extending hospitality as her way of building community. During the one winter the family lived in Winnipeg, Mrs. Penner made their home available to fellow Mennonites coming in from the East Reserve to do business in the city. Helena writes:

That winter . . . my mother performed a heroic task. From Michaelmas (23rd of November) till Eastertime, about five months, she turned far more than ten 100 lb. bags of flour—I forget the exact number of bags, but it was an awful lot and a good deal more than 10 bags—she made bread and buns out of that. To feed her own family, of course, but largely to feed the multitude. She sent word abroad that anyone coming to the city who could not find shelter or found it too expensive to stay in a rooming house, or simply wanted to be with friends, everyone, as long as she had room, could sleep at her place. She could not give them bedding, they had to bring their quilts or blankets and roll up on them and sleep on the floor, but that was infinitely more comfortable than sleeping in the open. She said that sometimes they lay, packed like sardines, on the kitchen floor and she could hardly get breakfast ready, she had so little place to work in. And to every one of these men she would give a hot breakfast—just bread and butter and coffee or buns and coffee, and as much as they wanted. At least they would start out in the morning full of good hot food.²⁷

Helena also describes how, when the family lived out on the prairie, her mother made it a point of burning candles in all the windows of the house on stormy winter nights, so as “to guide lost wayfarers to shelter.”²⁸ On several occasions, Helena remembers that lives were saved as a result. Mrs. Penner was also known for handing out food to any “tramp” who might come begging. Extending hospitality was an important way that women built community in the new land.

For these immigrant women, the existence of community or lack thereof was a significant factor in terms of their acceptance of their new life in North America. Adjustment was harder for those women, like the Jansens, who were in the vanguard of the movement, that is, who came alone, rather than with a large group of kinfolk. Those who moved more or less en masse brought their community with them.²⁹ But community was not just something present or absent; community was also something to be built. And as we have already seen, women were at the centre of that process.

Conclusion

There are many other themes one could explore in a more in-depth examination of the diaries and memoirs of these women of the 1874 migration – class, marriage, food, the role of the church, the various theologies represented. But that will have to be another assignment. What we have learned from Margareta and Anna Jansen, Helena Penner and Susana Banman deepens our understanding of a particular people and a particular movement. These insights include the following: 1) the migration separated women from their loved ones in Russia and as such it was a painful period of separation; 2) death, and the taboo against a full expression of grief, seems to have compounded the difficulties of adjustment; 3) despite the new opportunities which the frontier afforded women, gender roles remained clearly defined; 4) community, either as created in the new world, or replicated from the old, was a crucially important feature in these women’s lives.

For these women immigrants, it seems that migration and resettlement was a “mixed bag” of gains and losses. The traditional historiography has interpreted the migration as gain – as an escape from oppression into freedom. The writings of these women do not refute that idea. Nevertheless, it is evident that in their eyes, the migration involved significant losses. What helped to ease the pain of those losses was the security of the community.

Notes

¹ Gustav E. Reimer and G.R. Gaeddert, *Exiled by the Czar: Cornelius Jansen and the Great Mennonite Migration, 1874* (Newton, KS: Mennonite Publication Office, 1956).

² Jeremy D. Popkin, Historians on the Autobiographical Frontier, *American Historical Review*, Vol 104, No. 3 (June 1999).

³ Anna Jansen, "Diary," 9 September 1876, Mennonite Library and Archives, Newton, K.S.

⁴ E.K. Francis, *In Search of Utopia: The Mennonites in Manitoba* (Altona: D.W. Friesen & Sons, 1955), 34.

⁵ Helena Penner Hiebert, "Granny's Stories," Mennonite Heritage Centre, Winnipeg, MB.

⁶ Margaretha Jansen, "Diary," 5 January 1874, Mennonite Library and Archives, Newton, KS

⁷ Anna Jansen, "Diary," 6 April 1874.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 7 June 1875.

⁹ Helen M. Buss, *Mapping Our Selves: Canadian Women's Autobiography in English* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), 45.

¹⁰ Anna Jansen, "Diary," 1 October 1875.

¹¹ Penner Hiebert, "Granny's Stories," 128.

¹² *Ibid.*, 129.

¹³ Susana Banman Peters, "Memories of my Life," Irene Enns Kroeker, Steinbach, MB

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Anna Jansen, "Diary," 21 December 1875.

¹⁶ Helen M. Buss, "Settling the Score with Myths of Settlement: Two Women Who Roughed It and Wrote It," in Elspeth Cameron and Janice Dickin, *Great Dames* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 167.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 182.

¹⁸ Anna Jansen, "Diary," 1 May 1875.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 23 October 23 to 1 November 1875.

²⁰ Banman Peters, "Memories of my Life," 4.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

²² *Ibid.*, 17.

²³ Penner Hiebert, "Granny's Stories," 141.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Banman Peters, "Memories of My Life," 10.

²⁶ Royden Loewen, "'As I Experienced Them Myself': The Autobiographical German-Language Immigrant Woman in Prairie Canada, 1874-1910," in Angelika E. Sauer and Matthias Zimmer, eds., *A Chorus of Different Voices: German-Canadian Identities* (New York: Peter Lang, 1998).

²⁷ Penner Hiebert, "Granny's Stories," 119-120.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 127.

²⁹ Royden Loewen makes this observation of Mennonite immigrants in relation to other German-speaking immigrants who migrated not as groups but as chains. See Loewen, "As I Experienced Them," 137.