

“Gott es hiea uck:” Gender and Identity in an Immigrant Family from Paraguay

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On June 22, 1948, hundreds of women, men and children gathered at a remote train station in the small prairie town of Letellier, Manitoba. The somber dark clouds overhead reflected the mood. Some four hundred of those gathered were leaving on the waiting train for the port of Quebec City. There, along with 1,100 other Mennonites from Manitoba and Saskatchewan, the group set sail for South America aboard the S.S. Volendam.¹ Lured by an opportunity for religious seclusion, the immigrants left the Canadian prairies for an uncertain future in the jungle of East Paraguay. Hymns of gratitude floated over the water during the three week voyage as the pilgrims dreamed of a new life in communal isolation where they hoped to recreate a German speaking community free of the modernizing influences they felt threatened their cultural exclusivity. Among this group of pioneers was Helen Esau Froese, her husband Henry and their three children. This family remained in Paraguay for almost forty years.

The story of my great-aunt Helen's migration and her relationship with the extended family who remained in Canada during decades of separation is a particular story grounded in a Mennonite context.

Although physically separated, their relationship was sustained and negotiated through an identity framed by specific religious and cultural elements profoundly imbedded in their consciousness, namely, their mutual identity as Mennonites, not as Canadians or Paraguayans, and their shared experience as women in a rural agricultural context. This paper will explore the immigration experience of this particular family through the voices of its women and explore how these sisters negotiated relationships with one another over a forty-year period. Through gender analysis, this work will argue that the cultural and spiritual identity shared by Helen and her family sustained them through decades of physical separation and provided a final conduit for her return home to Canada in 1987. The 1948 migration to Paraguay has not received the academic attention given to similar migrations to Paraguay and Mexico in the 1920s nor its contemporary European exodus to Paraguay at the end of World War II.² Therefore, while this paper focuses on the microcosm of a single family, it will also document another important aspect of Mennonite immigration history.

Unable to communicate via the telephone, Helen and her sisters remained in contact by means of letters and cassette tapes sent either by mail or with visitors from Canada. The tapes were played and replayed during family gatherings in both countries. On them, families exchanged news of community events, births and deaths, and sang to one another.³ While the entire family in both countries was often present for a recording, the primary sources of conversation occurred between the sisters; Helen in Paraguay and her sisters Aganetha, Margaret, and Annie in Canada.⁴ These recorded conversations represent the conduit for Helen's relationship with her Canadian family for close to thirty years and serve as a unique primary historical source for this story.

I grew up hearing about this family living in Paraguay and spent hours listening to their voices at my grandmother's (Aganetha Esau Reimer) house. I remember my grandmother's concern for the well being of her beloved sister as well as her excitement as Helen and Henry's children began to return to Canada as adults with families of their own. Therefore, my purpose in recording this story is both personal and professional and consequently my role in the writing of this paper is a complex one, at once as a participant as well as an academic whose role it is to analyze this story. As Hasia R. Diner notes, the tension found within such a dual role can be a productive one as the scholar is privy to insider information unavailable to one outside of the cultural bounds.⁵ My intimate knowledge of this family, however, also presents certain difficulties as some elements of this story are painful. Decisions, therefore, as to which elements to reveal

and those best left out have been balanced with a desire to present a full picture of this family's experience.

The Immigration

The 1948 immigration to Paraguay represents a reaction to the encroaching secularization of the Manitoba Mennonite communities. While all Mennonite communities were confronted with social changes prompted by modernization following World War II, the people in this particular group chose to isolate themselves and their children from any further changes. One conservative reaction to the secularization of Canadian society had already occurred with the migration of many from the Old Colony Church to northern Mexico in 1922, and the Sommerfelder and Chortitzer congregations to the Chaco region of Paraguay in 1926. Those who moved to Paraguay just two decades later in 1948 were from the same Manitoba communities.⁶ Therefore, this willingness to separate from civil society was an integral aspect of the community mentality. The three principle motivators which prompted the search for an alternative settlement in Mexico and Paraguay during the 1920s included the imposition of a municipal form of government, compulsory public school attendance and mandatory registration for military service.⁷ While these same factors were also significant motivators for the 1948 immigration, for the Mennonites who believed that to remain in Canada constituted a direct threat to their religious convictions, the migration represented the opportunity to re-create a space for themselves and their children free of secular influences.⁸ Sociologist Winfred Fretz supports this conclusion and notes these fears of continued secularization in his 1953 *Pilgrims in Paraguay*, suggesting that they played as strong a role in the immigration as the external factors such as the potential loss of military exemption.⁹

The immigrants themselves frequently framed their motivations in far more personal terms than traditionally noted by scholars. When questioned about the motives of her own parents, Helen and Henry's daughter Margaret recalls her father stating that the world was too finished and too modern with the advent of hydro electricity in rural communities and the threatened supremacy of Low-German in both public and private spaces.¹⁰ Similar sentiments were expressed by another young immigrant who moved with her husband's parents and siblings.¹¹ She also noted that there was a growing concern among the Manitoba Mennonites of increased intermarriage between their youth and the neighbouring French Catholic communities. Karl Hildebrand, one of the three delegates sent to Paraguay to survey and

purchase land for the group, reveals the growing concern the preservation of Low-German in his travel diary after visiting with a Mennonite colony in the Chaco:

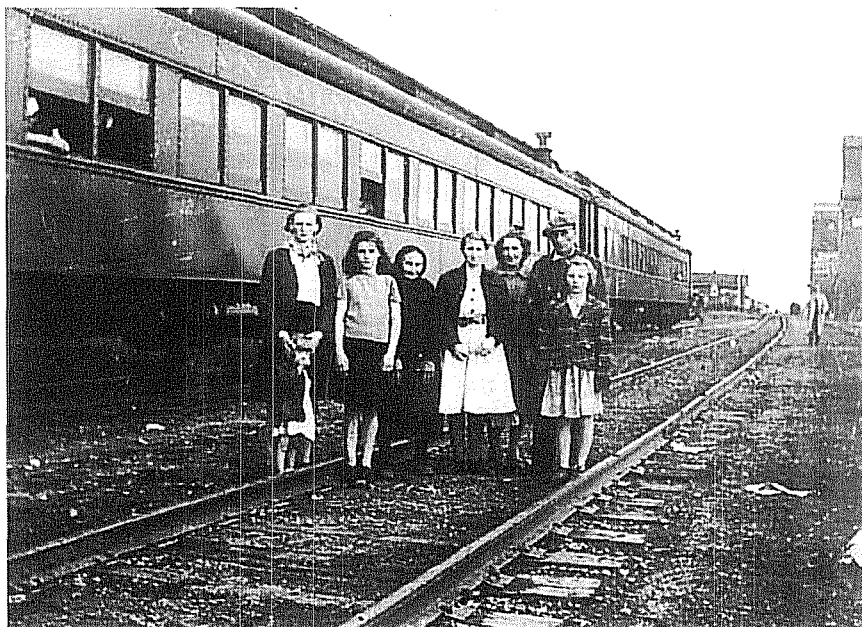
We did also visit schools there. I must say when I compared their students with ours, and observed and heard their presentations, I couldn't hold back tears. Yes, everything was in the mother tongue. Perhaps not everybody would agree with me on this but I believe that the mother tongue is a good fence or enclosure for us Mennonites.¹²

While a majority of the Mennonites immigrated out of religious and cultural motivations, one immigrant noted there were others who migrated out of a sheer sense of adventure or went in search of economic profit they believed existed in the Paraguayan jungle.¹³

Within an array of external motivators, the personal decision to immigrate defies simple gender categorization. According to her daughter Margaret, Helen Froese did not want to leave her family in Canada and did so under pressure from her husband Henry. The strength of her desire to remain in Canada is evident in a letter dated June 2, 1985, nearly forty years later. Writing to her sister Aganetha, (my grandmother) Helen states, "I did not want to go to Paraguay; you can't blame me. It was Henry and he is gone. I never would have gone, so he [is] gone; you can't say anything to him. I know I would have another heart. I would go back."¹⁴ Her two daughters, who were twelve and fourteen also did not want to leave. Margaret recalls feeling resentful of her father for making them leave their home.¹⁵ Other immigrants recount that sometimes it was the wife who pushed for the move while the husband wanted to remain in Canada.¹⁶ Helen's son-in-law Peter Schroeder states that he wished the truck he was driving in the heavy rain to the Letellier train station on that morning of June 22nd, 1948 would get stuck and he would somehow be left behind. The intensity of his feelings is still evident in the clarity of this eleven-year-old boyhood recollection.¹⁷ As with Peter and many other young people, entire extended families frequently migrated, negating the option of individual choice. In some instances, families were separated as adult children remained in Canada while the parents and younger siblings migrated. As with other Mennonite migrations, the core of the 1948 migration remained the mass movement of entire communities and the sublimation of the individual. Despite personal desires, the sense of family remained the foundation of a successful re-creation of Mennonite community and identity.

The moment of departure for both those who wanted to migrate and those who were reluctant was a heart wrenching experience. One

young immigrant recorded these words in her journal. "Many people were gathered here. Many families, friends, and neighbours came to say their good-byes...at that time it seemed, we were going into a far away unknown country, and these goodbyes were forever, never to see our families and friends again."¹⁸ In an even more personal account, she recounts watching her usually reserved father weeping as he slumped against the car bumper. Helen's daughter Margaret who was twelve at the time was unwilling to speak about the event. Despite the passage of more than fifty years, her memory and the feelings surrounding the departure remain sharp and painful.



It was the S.S. Volendam which carried this hopeful group of Mennonites to their new home.¹⁹ The ship was boarded on June 24, immediately following the groups' arrival via train in Quebec City. The day was spent waiting in custom lines while the tractors and other personal effects necessary to establish a new agricultural community were loaded. The voyage itself went without incident according to all accounts. Margaret Froese Schroeder, however, recounts a welcome diversion from the monotony of the voyage when the entire ship was required to practice getting into the lifeboats for two days. While this drill represented only a relief from the daily tedium at that time, she later learned that the crew had discovered a hole in the side of the ship. For a brief period of time, the crew was not convinced that the Volendam would arrive at its Buenos Aires destination.²⁰

The Mennonites arrived in Buenos Aires, Argentina on July 18th and were split into two groups. The larger of the two boarded a train while the smaller group took a small ship up the Paraguay River to Villarica. Upon their arrival the immigrants realized that no large-scale preparation had been made for housing 1,700 people.²¹ While waiting for their belongings which were five weeks behind, the group was again divided and housed in a hotel and a large abandoned flourmill. While there had been little physical discomfort during the ocean crossing, the reality of a new and oftentimes hostile environment now struck the Mennonites fully. Within days, people became ill from drinking unpurified water. The filth resulting from the overcrowded flourmill further exacerbated the precarious situation. The most vulnerable were soon ill and Margaret Schroeder recalls that as many as two to three children died every day in the first weeks.²² Katherine Schroeder noted in her diary that "for the little children the climate change from Canada was just too severe and also the nourishment was not adequate so almost daily we saw a small child pass away. In just a short while there were thirty children buried in the cemetery at the Independencia." One family lost three children within a few days.²³ It was a rude welcome to a new land.

Once out of the flourmill, families set up tent communities on a local farm at a place called "Independencia." However, these conditions were often scarcely better as the immigrants were vulnerable to both human and animal invasion. The Mennonites were forced to contend with both poisonous snakes crawling dangerously close to sleeping infants as well as local bandits who preyed on the unsuspecting newcomers. Many families occupied the tents for upwards of ten months while the road to their new land was under construction.²⁴



The 1948 immigration to Paraguay is distinguished from other Mennonite migrations by the return of a full one third of the original immigrants to Canada within the first two years, a number which drew concern from the Paraguayan government itself.²⁵ For many families, the sudden deaths of so many children along with the adverse physical conditions inherent within the tent community prompted many to return before even reaching their land.²⁶ The unexpected return of many families simultaneously drew criticism from some of the immigrants and further anguish as some families were once again divided and separated. However, it was the nature of the land itself, purchased several years earlier, which remains the most controversial issue of this particular immigration as it influenced the return of so many families. As groups began to arrive on their land, it became evident to all that this new land would require years of intensive labor in order to clear and prepare it for planting. For reasons not entirely evident, the Mennonites were unaware that a large part of their new land was heavily forested, in fact uncut jungle. The time and energy needed to adequately prepare the land for agricultural production caused many to conclude that the land was of inferior quality.²⁷ The scarcity of food for many families in the following years and the subsequent physical hardships created both immediate and long lasting consequences for the immigrants. While many simply left, others remained but continued to feel bitter about what appeared to them to be a deception, by whom remained unclear. Due to the significance of the land issue for this particular migration, further investigation appears warranted.

In the fall of 1944, the group investigating the possibility of migrating to Paraguay received confirmation from the Paraguayan government that the Mennonites would be welcome.²⁸ On July 16th, 1946, a three-man delegation consisting of Karl K Hildebrand, Peter G Funk, and Jacob P Hildebrand of Sommerfeld flew to Paraguay to survey suitable land. On August 24th, they met with a government representative who confirmed the religious guarantees granted to the Mennonites who had immigrated in 1926.²⁹ The government official assured the delegates that these privileges were guaranteed for every region of the country.³⁰ Since land near the existing Mennonite colonies in the Chaco was more expensive than anticipated, the delegation turned their attention to the eastern portion of the country. Karl Hildebrand's initial reaction to the region was favorable as noted in his travel journal: "The soil is dark red. Generally the land is undulating and in many places there are springs of good, clear water. According to what they told us, 20% of the land is supposed to be open. We feel that it will not be less than they say since they are always pointing out the value of timber."³¹ Due to logistical changes in their

departure date, the delegates were unable to survey other potential land sites and returned to Canada with the proposal to purchase the surveyed area. On November 30, 1946 the emigration committee received confirmation that 44,000 hectares had been bought at approximately \$2.53 per acre.³²

Despite the delegate's 1946 report that 80 percent of the land was wooded, many of the immigrants believed that their land would be suitable for farming immediately upon their arrival. Once a crude road had been cut through to the communal land holding, a task that took four months, they discovered that it was mostly dense jungle and therefore not ready for wheat farming or cattle raising. From his own inquiries in the early 1950s, Fretz concluded that the investigating committee had been misled to believe that 30,000 acres was open land and suggests that the delegates did not do³³ a thorough job to avoid such a misunderstanding.³⁴ For many of the immigrants like Helen and Henry Froese, this discrepancy was interpreted into "we were given the wrong land," a perception that remains to the present.³⁵ Reverend Abraham Wiebe who immigrated with his parents as a twelve year old boy contends, however, that despite the initial misunderstanding the Mennonites benefited tremendously from the jungle land. They were able to use the enormous supply of lumber and establish farms on the rich soil.³⁶ While some immediately took advantage of the economic possibilities available on the sale and processing of lumber, the difficulties experienced in the early years due to a lack of adequate nutrition and physical labor necessary to clear the land created a permanent dissatisfaction with Paraguay and the decision to immigrate.

As one of the primary motivations for this immigration lay in the social and cultural seclusion from secularizing influences, the *Ältesta*, or bishop, attempted to extend both social and political control of the colonies. While the colonies were an attempt to create community secluded from the world, for some of the Mennonites such as Henry and Helen Froese, the seclusion was experienced as isolation from both outsiders as well as other Mennonites. Once in Paraguay, the Mennonites settled into the two colonies according to theological affinity.³⁷ The Bergthaler of Saskatchewan joined the Manitoba Sommerfelder and participated in establishing *Colonia Sommerfeld*, while the Chortitzer group changed the name of their congregation back to Bergthaler and formed *Colonia Bergthal*.³⁸ While the group had migrated together, cultural differences between the Bergthaler and Sommerfelder groups emerged early even while on board ship. When some of the Sommerfelder young people carried on the tradition of dancing, the Bergthaler *Ältesta* moved to forbid such activities and when some of the passengers started to sing hymns one evening, the

leaders again intervened and prescribed the hymn book from which the Mennonites could sing.³⁹ For reasons that remain unclear, Helen and Henry moved to the Bergthal Colony even though they were members of the Sommerfelder Church and came from the Manitoba West Reserve.⁴⁰ Once in the *Colonia Bergthal*, the Froese family was advised to keep themselves separate from the Mennonites living in the *Colonia Sommerfeld* and intermarriage between the two colonies was prohibited. When the Mennonite Central Committee attempted to bring relief packages to the families struggling to provide daily food, the colony leaders rejected the offer of basic necessities.⁴¹ The Froese family found it difficult to reconcile the rejection of help from Mennonite brothers and sisters with their struggle to provide daily food for their children. The cultural demands of the colony combined with the physical demands of life in Paraguay made the first years challenging ones.

Helen and Henry Froese lived in Paraguay together until his death in 1984. They immigrated with three children, Margaret, Justina, and Abe and had three more children, Henry, Helen and Dorothy, once they had settled on their land in the *Colonia Bergthal*. They remained poor throughout their lives in Paraguay, never making more than a subsistence living. Although it was difficult, they remained in close contact with a wide variety of family members back in Canada. Helen and Henry's efforts to maintain relationships with their family created the legacy of conversations now preserved.

Listening in on Her Story

In his 1999 work *From the Inside Out*, Royden Loewen argues that Mennonite historians and historians of immigration commonly use autobiographies, letters, memoirs, fiction, and community histories while neglecting the diary as "poor stuff."⁴² This is particularly true of Mennonite immigration historians who traditionally publish accounts of migration leaders or focus on those individuals who left extraordinarily insightful accounts of significant historical events. These works traditionally are written from the male perspective and focus predominantly on male leaders. The taped conversations left by Helen and her family, while not written as diaries, were recorded in a diary-style format.⁴³ These records represent a combination of a diary and those thoughts recorded as a memoir as described by Esther Epp-Tiessen.⁴⁴ They are personal, informal, and frequently disjointed as the speaker records a few thoughts and then returns to daily tasks. The tapes reflect the routine comings and goings of family, documenting births, deaths, illnesses and weddings. They mirror the

agricultural cycles of planting, harvesting, and planning for next year's crop and garden. Daily weather reports are a reminder that the success of rural agrarian life was dependent upon the whims of nature. As Loewen notes, personal records such as these turn the often hidden contours of household and community inside out.⁴⁵ In short, these conversations are made up of the "poor stuff" of life and therefore offer a rare glimpse into a female world heretofore hidden from view.

The dating of the tapes themselves ranges considerably due to the nature of their composition. Helen's family and her siblings in Canada began to exchange taped conversations in the late 1960s and continued this practice until her return in 1987. In addition to the tapes, numerous letters were written, of which only one has been recovered. Unfortunately, due to both families' practice of taping over the cassette once the conversations on it had been shared with all family members, years of exchanges have been irretrievably lost. At present, however, eleven of the tapes have been located and identified, ranging in dates from 1972 until approximately 1985, providing more than twenty hours of information.

The construction of the recorded conversations reflected the nature of Mennonite identity and communal life. While much of the conversation was recorded by an individual as one would record events in a diary, frequently several people can be heard speaking simultaneously. The recording of a new tape provided an excuse for a gathering of any number of relatives. While the intentions of those gathered was always to send out the latest news and family events, there was commonly as much discussion between family members as there was conversation recorded for those on the other end. There are frequent good-natured debates (and sometimes not so good natured) over the exact sequence of events or specific dates in question.⁴⁶ One tape recorded a memorable conversation between grandmother Aganetha and her two sisters, Annie and Margaret. They were trying to describe to their sister Helen how each of them had changed in appearance since they had last seen one another. There was much discussion on who was the youngest looking, and who had gained the most weight. In a rare moment of unity, everyone agreed that it was great aunt Margaret who was the fattest.⁴⁷

The women recorded conversations rooted profoundly within an agrarian Mennonite female culture. Family and kinship was the primary arena of her social relations while the church and community were secondary. The discussions focused on daily activities, their household duties and the garden in particular. An accounting of household functions provided a mainstay of the recordings. Superficially, the act of planting potatoes and sharing the news of a

good crop of strawberries may appear mundane. For these sisters so long separated from one another, the conversations of yearly agricultural cycles maintained a significant continuity. It was a familiar pattern to which each could relate. The cycle of planting, harvesting and then waiting through the winter for it to begin all over again was and still is a sacred connection to the earth, and to a way of life that is threatened in many ways now. For this family, sharing descriptions of what they both knew to be familiar and important in their own lives kept their connection strong despite the many other changes with which they were living.

The siblings were also concerned about keeping their children connected to one another. There was constant urging by these mothers to have their children speak into the recorder. Often the children were heard to say "I don't have anything to say" or "I don't know these people." Clearly, these sisters knew the danger of their separation and how their large extended family could feel disconnected from one another. Frequent admonitions from both sides can be heard as to why they have not heard from their nieces and nephews lately. For the sisters in both countries, it was easier to keep those children who had been born prior to 1948 and remembered the Froese family more interested in keeping up the connection.

Absent from the recorded conversations was mention of either spiritual matters or the religious impetus for the family's migration to Paraguay. Sprinkled throughout the conversations are references to church related activities such as women's meetings but never any personal spiritual reflections. While this might be construed as unusual within an ethnic society founded primarily on religious conviction, the failure to mention such matters also reflects the intensely personal nature of Mennonite faith. One's own spiritual convictions are not routinely shared as this is viewed as a matter between the individual and God. It is not something that others may question. One recorded comment from Helen occurs in the late 1970s approximately thirty years after they left Canada and it is suggestive of some family tension over matters of cultural separation. Apparently my grandmother Aganetha had mentioned that her children and grandchildren did not speak Low-German anymore and that she was concerned about the loss of the language. While that part of the conversation has not been preserved, Helen's reply is. She said, "We have a German school and a German church—we can do whatever we want—we don't have to speak English if we don't want to—we can but don't want to—you could do the same thing if you wanted to."⁴⁸ The precise motives for Helen's response are unknown and it is unclear as to whether a rift was created by this comment. Perhaps this comment was made in defense of their move in the face of cultural

disintegration in Canada. Whatever the motives, this is the only recorded entry suggestive of dissent due to religious convictions.

Although Helen and her sisters kept in close contact throughout their forty-year separation, this migration severed ties between her and other siblings. In the one surviving letter that has been uncovered between Helen and Nettie, Helen refers to the rift between her and several other siblings related to their migration. She writes, "well how is Susie coming along.....is she better, they never write and tell us how they are....It did hurt Henry very much the[that] Abe and Susie never did want anything to do with us." [presumably after their migration to Paraguay]⁴⁹ Helen and Henry's experience was not unique as Katherine Schroeder noted in her travel diary. She recorded in her journal years later that the immigration to Paraguay

created tension in some marriages, because one spouse would be very much in favor of moving and the other for various reasons didn't want to move. One spouse would give in to the other stronger spouse but oftentimes felt bitter about moving...in some families one family member would prepare to move while others were strongly opposed to it; this resulted in misunderstandings and for some a lifetime of friendship lost.⁵⁰

Helen's reference to a rift between herself and several siblings raises one of the most difficult aspects of this story. While it is clear that Helen did the best she could in Paraguay under adverse physical conditions, she suffered emotionally for her decision to move. Her daughter describes a radical shift in her mother's personality following the immigration and she continues to have a difficult time reconciling such painful memories.⁵¹ The tension Helen herself describes in her letter to her sister Aganetha is so evident in her brief reference: "I now would have another heart." It appears that she was never able to reconcile her two hearts, one that stayed with her husband and built a life in Paraguay and the other heart which remained in Canada with her extended family. Due to the private nature of the rift between the siblings, it is unclear as to whether they were able to reconcile upon Helen's return to Canada.

Helen's one heart that remained in Canada surfaced during every recorded conversation sent to her siblings. Her sisters responded in kind with a yearning barely concealed for one another. This is the most consistent focus for families in both countries. Every discussion was peppered with comments such as when the other would come for a visit: "If you were here, then you would [do] this or that—you would love to come to the family gathering next week—everyone would love

to see you etc." In one of the most poignant moments, Helen's sister Annie says, " You know many of us are now gone—Mama, my husband, you need to come back before we all get too old and everyone is gone."⁵² On one of the last tapes we have, my great aunt Margaret (who is the only sister still alive) sent out another impassioned plea for her sister to come home. She said, "You know God lives here with us too, it's alright to come back."⁵³ Even after more than 30 years, the need to be together had not diminished. Some of this yearning was fulfilled when along with one of her daughters my grandmother Aganetha went to visit Helen in Paraguay in 1987. After more than forty years apart, these two sisters were finally reunited. Shortly afterwards Helen herself returned to Canada and remained there until her death. Most of her children have also returned and her last years were spent back among her children and remaining siblings.



While the 1948 migration from Canada to Paraguay consisted predominantly of intact nuclear and extended families, for the women the act of moving to and settling in Paraguay was an experience that was quite unique in that it was different from that of their spouses, fathers, and brothers. As Marlene Epp notes in her recent book *Women Without Men*, the immigrant experience has frequently been defined by male norms.⁵⁴ She points out that where families did accompany the adult male to a new country, women and children are often grouped together as "dependents" while the active decision making and bread winning roles are represented as the domain of the male head of the household. For Helen and her daughters, along with

the hundreds of other women, the immigration experience made their roles as mothers and wives unusually difficult. Aboard ship, the Mennonites discovered that the men and women were assigned separate sleeping quarters. For the many mothers with young children, the separation from their spouses in strange surroundings made their jobs particularly difficult. As Katherine Schroeder notes in her travel journal, this separation also proved to be a lonely time for a newly married young woman in her first pregnancy.⁵⁵ Not yet well acquainted with her in-law family, she spent many hours wandering the ship's decks pondering this new chapter in her life. Pregnancy was a common condition among the many young families and for queasy women in their first trimesters, the rolling of the ship made for many dashes to the rails. As another young immigrant laughingly remembered, she and another expectant mother would race to see who could get to the railing first.⁵⁶ Once in Paraguay, most families lived in tents for upwards of one year. Often newborns (two of which arrived on the ship itself) slept in empty suitcases in crowded living quarters. Women needed to be mindful of the effect of their babies' nighttime wails on close neighbors as well as some unwelcome visitors such as poisonous snakes crawling dangerously close to sleeping infants.⁵⁷ Using tile and mud ovens constructed outdoors, women continued to bake and cook traditional Russian-Mennonite foods.

The reproductive lives of women continued to be difficult even once they had settled onto their own land and built houses. The deaths of small children while unusually high during the first months, continued at a higher rate than in Canada. Due to a lack of medical care, any unusual pregnancy issues or illnesses often meant a loss of life. Katherine Schroeder's baby, born shortly after their arrival in Paraguay, died during her first year of life.⁵⁸ Another young immigrant experienced a severe pregnancy complication and needed to be taken to the capital city of Asuncion for a Caesarean section.⁵⁹ One of Helen's own grandsons died in his parent's arms as they were transporting him to Asuncion for further medical care. The risk of childbirth and the distance from advanced medical care continued to be an issue even after the colonies built local hospitals. Helen and Henry's oldest daughter Justina, who along with Margaret immigrated as a young girl, died in the early 1980s with her tenth child in her arms.

While women's reproductive lives were challenged by the Paraguayan context, traditional gender roles were also challenged and in some cases interrupted as the newcomers struggled to meet the formidable task of creating new agricultural communities. As Roy Loewen observes in his study of the Mennonite migration from

Russia to Canada in the 1870s, gender roles were disrupted in the first years of settlement as women were required to help clear the prairie for cultivation, a task usually reserved for male family members.⁶⁰ The establishment of Mennonite colonies in Paraguay created a similar temporary break from the traditional as all efforts were required to break ground and build shelters. Upon arrival on their land, the Froese family constructed a twelve by sixteen foot house with a wood stove, a dirt floor and no electricity. The family had received ten hectares or 15 acres of land. Since Helen and Henry's only son was ten-month-old infant Abraham, the daughters who were twelve and thirteen were required to help their father remove trees from the land.⁶¹ Both young women deemed this difficult task to be a punishment and did not interpret it as a welcome new role within their family.⁶² While the surviving daughter Margaret would not view that experience as instrumental in her life, but rather as a drudgery, her outspoken manner, a desire for further education, and an ability to question her own experiences and those of others may be reflective of the opportunity to exist outside of traditional gender roles, even if only momentarily. Ironically, Henry Froese also broke from traditional gender roles in their struggle for survival. Needing sturdy pants for farm work, he sewed a pair of pants from flour sacks and dyed them brown.⁶³ While the Froese women returned to much of the gender traditional work on their farm, Helen's personal situation required more untraditional work due to an illness Henry experienced soon after their arrival in Paraguay. He eventually became bedridden which left Helen with agricultural tasks usually demanded of both spouses.

For Helen and her daughters, gender roles were also positively reinforced through their immigration experience. The fragility of life and the physical demands of developing new agricultural lands affirmed their position within the family as child bearers and economic contributors. Helen continued to identify herself primarily through her relationships to others, specifically that of her husband, children and extended family. This familial entity created a cultural and religious continuity despite the psycho-social changes of the immigration to Paraguay. Her identity was also largely influenced and expressed through her participation in a Mennonite community. In fact, I would argue that being Mennonite remained her primary identity above that of being Canadian or Paraguayan, a continuity which allowed her to return forty years later. The gender roles for Helen and the Mennonite women in Paraguay remained more consistent than for their families back in Canada where members of the extended family pursued education, had smaller families and married non-Mennonites. Finally, the continuity of an agrarian

context reinforced gender roles historically well established in Canada and Russia. Food production became a role of paramount importance in the initial years of settlement in Paraguay and the need to be self-sufficient enhanced Helen's familial and community role. Its value in her life is evidenced by Helen's innumerable references to food and meal preparation in her communications with the Canadian sisters.

So what did these women think they were doing all of these years? Superficially, they were clearly maintaining relationships despite the difficulties of communication and time. However, I also believe that there were other motivating factors within their exchanges. Oral tradition for these women represented the basic construct of their communal and family identity. Stories of immigration had been passed down through the generations solidifying their identities as Mennonites struggling to maintain their religious and cultural integrity. Their father believed strongly in oral history and thus ensured that his own children would have a love of story and memory. They were therefore historically conscious of their actions and the significance of retaining the family story. This remaining record of their relationship ensured a legacy of memory and story for their own descendants.

The story of this family also challenges traditional notions of rural agrarian women cradled within a religiously bound community. As in larger society, patriarchy is an integral element within the construction of Mennonite culture. The primary spiritual element of the calling of the Spirit found within Anabaptist theology, however, provides a radically egalitarian foundation.⁶⁴ While women have never experienced true social equality within the Mennonite community, the religious conviction that every person has something to contribute perhaps endows women with an atypical sense of self. In addition, rural agrarian women very well understood their importance within the family farm setting. These women were neither subservient nor secondary in their economic contributions to the family's survival and frequently provided all of the food production. They understood the significance of their own labor which and this is why it figures so prominently within their recollections. As Kimberly Schmidt and Steven Reschly suggest, research on women within rural farm settings may challenge assumptions about their power within local communities.⁶⁵ This argument however must be tempered by their existence within a communal culture where individualism is not valued. They did not see themselves outside of their family or community. It was what identified them and gave them importance outside of broader society. Consequently, Anabaptist history must work to include the voices of women such as these who moved within

their own self-identities, confident of their significance and social contributions while never seeking to become anything else.

This story is finally a history told and re-told by women of rural agrarian life in a deeply religious community and of a family that remained poor despite a lifetime of hard work and struggle. While it is a story particular to one Mennonite immigrant family, it transcends both ethnic and cultural particularities. These conversations were only a few open to this family to remain connected throughout the years. It is clear that the primary identity remained Mennonite and family-oriented rather than Canadian or as Paraguayan and this story must be seen in this context. And perhaps, while the connection maintained between the family members through letters and tapes sustained them through years of separation, it may have also served as a means to come home. Helen and Henry's children knew that there was family waiting for them in Canada, people with names and voices they had listened to for years. In the words of Margaret Esau Wiebe, "Gott es hiea uck" and it was alright to come home.

Notes

- ¹ Kolonie Sommerfeld. *Geschichtsbildband zum 50jährigen Bestehen der Kolonie Sommerfeld, 1948-1998* (Asuncion: Imprenta Modelo, 1998). The precise number aboard was 1,620 individuals and 301 families. Of that number, only 82 people were from outside of Manitoba, in particular Bergthaler from Saskatchewan. 804 Sommerfelder came from the West Reserve and 734 Chortitzer came from the East Reserve.
- ² See Harry Leonard Sawatzky, *They Sought a Country: Mennonite Colonization in Mexico* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971); Calvin Redekop, *Strangers Become Neighbors: Mennonite and Indigenous Relations in Paraguayan Chaco* (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1980); and Marlene Epp, *Women without Men: Mennonite Refugees of the Second World War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000)
- ³ Personal Interview, Margaret Froese Schroeder, January 28, 2002. The first tapes were exchanged sometime during the mid-1960s. Margaret Froese Schroeder remembers hearing the first tape from Canada in 1967. Aganetha and William Reimer bought a tape recorder for Helen and Henry.
- ⁴ While only one letter survives, a number of these tapes have surfaced among various family members.
- ⁵ Kimberly D. Schmidt, Diane Zimmerman Umble and Steven D. Reschly, eds, *Strangers at Home: Amish and Mennonite Women in History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 32.
- ⁶ Peter Bergen, ed., *History of the Sommerfeld Mennonite Church: that is the Background and First Hundred Years of the Sommerfeld Mennonite Church* (Winnipeg: Mennonite Heritage Centre), 119.
- ⁷ See Sawatzky, *They Sought a Country*, 12-30.
- ⁸ Jacob Peters, "Mennonites in Mexico and Paraguay," *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, 6 (1988), 200.
- ⁹ J. Winfield Fretz, *Pilgrims in Paraguay: The Story of Mennonite Colonization in South America* (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1953), 49

- ¹⁰ Personal Interview, Margaret and Peter Schroeder, January 28, 2002.
- ¹¹ Personal Interview, Susan Hildebrand, May 27, 2002.
- ¹² Katherine Schroeder, ed., *Karl Hildebrand: Family Tree* (Winnipeg: D.W. Friesens, 1982), 110.
- ¹³ Personal Interview, Rev. Abram Wiebe, June 20, 2003.
- ¹⁴ Letter addressed to Mr. and Mrs. William Reimer from Helen P. Froese, June 2, 1985.
- ¹⁵ Personal Interview, Margaret and Peter Schroeder, January 28, 2002.
- ¹⁶ Katherine Schroeder, "Moving to South America," (Winnipeg: Canadian Mennonite Heritage Centre, Unpublished manuscript), 1.
- ¹⁷ Personal Interview, Margaret and Peter Schroeder, January 28, 2002.
- ¹⁸ Schroeder, "Moving to South America," 2-3.
- ¹⁹ No published account of this voyage exists to my knowledge. Memories of the three-week trip are recorded in family histories, personal diaries, and preserved within oral traditions.
- ²⁰ Personal Interview, Margaret Schroeder, January 28, 2002.
- ²¹ A group of fifty people had flown out ahead of the ship in order to make preparations for the group upon their arrival. For unknown reasons, this task was not accomplished.
- ²² Personal Interview, Margaret Schroeder, January 28, 2002.
- ²³ An event remembered by all those I interviewed and noted in all family histories and personal diaries used for this paper.
- ²⁴ Bergen, *Sommerfeld Mennonite Church*, 121
- ²⁵ *Altona Echo*, August 3, 1949.
- ²⁶ On September 29, 1948, the *Altona Echo* published word of the first family returning to Canada.
- ²⁷ A Mennonite Central Committee delegate determined that many families were experiencing physical hardship due to the inferior quality of their new land. *Altona Echo*, June 22, 1949.
- ²⁸ Bergen, *Sommerfeld Mennonite Church*, 119.
- ²⁹ Schroeder, *Karl Hildebrand*, 105.
- ³⁰ Redekop. *Strangers Become Neighbors*, 259.
- ³¹ Schroeder, *Karl Hildebrand*, 105.
- ³² Bergen, *Sommerfeld Mennonite Church*, 120.
- ³³ Personal Interview. Rev. Abraham Wiebe, June 20, 2003
- ³⁴ Joseph Winfield Fretz, *Pilgrims in Paraguay: The Story of Mennonite Colonization in South America* (Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1953) 49-50.
- ³⁵ Personal Interview, Margaret and Peter Schroeder, January 28, 2002.
- ³⁶ Personal Interview, Reverend Abraham Wiebe, June 20, 2003
- ³⁷ Two colonies were established upon arrival in Paraguay. "Colonia Sommerfeld was around 100 kilometers north-east of Independencia in the state of Caaguazu and mostly south of Campo Ocho and Campo Nueve on the trail that eventually formed part of an International east-west highway. Colonia Bergthal was adjacent to and north, northeast of Colonia Sommerfeld." 121
- ³⁸ Bergen, *Sommerfeld Mennonite Church*, 121.
- ³⁹ Unpublished diary of Katherine Schroeder (Mennonite Heritage Centre)
- ⁴⁰ Personal Interview. Margaret and Peter Schroeder, January 28, 2002. Margaret has no explanation for the family's move to the Bergthal Colony nor does anyone else in Helen Esau Froese's extended family.
- ⁴¹ Personal Interview, Margaret and Peter Schroeder, January 28, 2002 and the *Altona Echo* 1949.
- ⁴² Royden Loewen, ed., *From the Inside Out: The Rural Worlds of Mennonite Diarists, 1863 to 1929* (Winnipeg: The University of Manitoba Press and the Manitoba Record Society, 1999), 1.

- 43 Helen's sisters Aganetha Esau Reimer and Margaret Esau Wiebe along with her daughter Margaret Froese Schroeder saved many of these cassette tapes upon which this paper is based. The conversations are conducted completely in a dialect of German known as Low-German. It has been preserved primarily as an oral language with few written sources or phonetic rules. It is only recently that there have been efforts to formalize the phonetics of this dialect. I am solely responsible for the translations in this paper.
- 44 Esther Epp-Tiessen, "Gains and Losses: The Experience of Mennonite Women Immigrants of Late Nineteenth Century," *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, 18 (2000), 146-156: 147.
- 45 Loewen, *From the Inside Out*, 1.
- 46 Several of the interviews conducted for this project took place in a similar manner as members of my extended family gathered to remember the immigration events and conversations with their Paraguayan family.
- 47 Cassette Tape #4. From Margaret Esau Wiebe to Helen Esau Froese. There is no exact date but it is probably during the early 1980s.
- 48 Cassette Tape #5. From Helen Esau Froese to Nettie Esau Reimer. No exact date but probably late 1970s.
- 49 Letter addressed to Mr. and Mrs. William Reimer from Mrs. Helen P. Froese, June 2, 1985.
- 50 Katherine Schroeder, "Moving to South America," et al, p 1.
- 51 Personal Interview, Margaret Schroeder, June 22, 2003. In this second interview, Margaret revealed more of her painful memories of her mother's apparent depression and unhappiness while living in Paraguay. This remains for Margaret a very difficult aspect of her life and her interview with me brought back troubling emotions of anger towards her mother.
- 52 Cassette Tape #4. From Margaret Esau Wiebe to Helen Esau Froese.
- 53 Ibid.
- 54 Epp, *Women without Men*, 5.
- 55 Margaret Hildebrand was in the first trimester of her pregnancy and felt alone and vulnerable separated from her husband of less than a year. Katherine Schroeder also recalls feeling lonely in her third trimester of a first pregnancy, often wondering aimlessly through the ship.
- 56 Personal Interview, Susan Hildebrand, May 24, 2002.
- 57 Ibid.
- 58 Schroeder. "Moving to South America," 24.
- 59 Personal Interview, Susan Hildebrand, May 24, 2002.
- 60 Royden Loewen, *Family, Church, and Market: A Mennonite Community in the Old and the New Worlds, 1850-1930* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 101
- 61 Helen and Henry had three more children after Abraham, all born in Paraguay.
- 62 Personal Interview, Margaret and Peter Schroeder, January 28, 2002.
- 63 Ibid.
- 64 C. Arnold Synder & Linda A. Huebert Hecht, eds. *Profiles of Anabaptist Women: Sixteenth-Century Reforming Pioneers* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1996), 8.
- 65 Kimberly D. Schmidt and Steven D. Reschly, "A Women's History for Anabaptist Traditions: A Framework of Possibilities, Possibly Changing the Framework," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 18 (2000), 36.