

‘I wanted a life of my own’: Creating a Singlewoman Mennonite Identity in Mexico

Doreen Helen Klassen, *Sir Wilfred Grenfell College*

When I returned to Canada in August 1994 after a summer in northern Mexico, I brought back personal photographs given to me by four Mennonite women, ages 28-41, who worked at a Mennonite seniors' home. In the photographs, each woman is pictured alone: Helena (the four names used in the essay are all pseudonyms)¹, wears a light-colored, belted shirtwaist dress with three-quarter length sleeves and is shown watering a lawn; Sara, wearing a peach-colored, short-sleeved dress with a floral design and sporting a light blue golf cap placed jauntily over her short dark hair, is pictured in the dining room of the seniors' home, ready to bite into a fresh strawberry; Aganetha, dressed in a pale yellow short-sleeved dress with a floral design and wearing white stockings and black sandals, has her hair pulled back in a knot, and is standing in her home near stereo equipment placed on a tall wooden cupboard; and Anna, wearing a long-sleeved, dark velvet dress, nylons, and black shoes, also stands in the corner of a room, her long dark hair parted in the middle and flowing down her back.

By comparison with mainstream North American women their age, these women would be considered conservative. Their modest

necklines and hemlines, moderate sleeve lengths, muted dress colors, simple hairstyles, unpretentious poses, and absence of make-up could easily be construed as exemplifying what sociologist Fred Davis calls “anti-fashion” apparel, a mode of dress intended to make an ideological counter-culture statement.² Yet, by comparison with their female Mennonite age-mates in Mexico, these women would appear to be non-conformist in a culture that emphasizes respecting one’s tradition. Their relatively short-sleeved, light-colored dresses and Aganetha’s white stockings differ from the attire of those Mennonite women whose church affiliation is discernible by their dark clothing,³ and the absence of kerchiefs, and, in particular, posing for photographs at a place of employment,⁴ distinguish these women from their married counterparts. These four women are single women who rarely, if ever, appear in the predominantly family and community-oriented narratives of their ethno-religious group,⁵ although their lives intersect and overlap with, yet are differentiated from, those of other Mennonite women in Mexico.

My interest in these single Mennonite women in Mexico was circumstantial. I met them during weekly evening meals available to the community at the *Altenheim*,⁶ an interdenominational Mennonite seniors’ home located alongside a four-lane highway in a small settlement called Strassburg, just 14 kilometers north of the city of Cuauhtémoc in the state of Chihuahua. At the time, I was conducting oral history interviews for the Mennonite Central Committee Canada’s Kanadier Concerns division in anticipation of the 75th anniversary of Mennonite settlement in Mexico. Because older potential interviewees for the oral history project, having grown up with anti-technology sentiments and a reluctance to express personal opinions for a potentially public audience,⁷ were often hesitant to agree to tape-recorded interviews, I resorted to interviewing younger people, including four female *Altenheim* employees whose lifestyle intrigued me. Three of the women were in their early 40s and one was only 28, but all fell into the childless and never-married category, a category for which I borrow the term ‘singlewomen’,⁸ to avoid the deficit identity suggested by the term ‘never-married’ and the pejorative connotations of the term ‘spinster,’ prevalent even in contemporary scholarship.⁹ In a culture which considered children adults at 21 for insurance purposes,¹⁰ but disapproved of young women over age 23 ‘walking the streets’, as the Sunday afternoon courting ritual was called, these Mennonite singlewomen were unofficially considered single well before the age of 35 suggested as the bench-mark in other studies.¹¹

The four singlewomen are descendents of Mennonites who left Canada in the 1920s to settle in the state of Chihuahua in northern Mexico after the institution of the Manitoba School Attendance Act

of 1916. The Mennonite migrants, who affirmed the integration of religious content in their vernacular languages into their educational system, feared legislation that mandated public school education in the English language would erode their core communal and religious values. Consequently, they embraced a move to a political jurisdiction which, through generous privileges agreed to by President Alvaro Obregón, permitted a freer practice of their values. The move to Mexico entailed block settlement, continuation of their agrarian lifestyle, establishment of their own churches and schools, adherence to a community-centered lifestyle, and avoidance of technology, dress styles, and ideologies at variance with these ideals. The singlewomen in this study were born into families of Old Colony Mennonite Church background,¹² a communal context that affirmed these values, although several of them have become involved with other Mennonite denominations. In addition to their varied religious affiliations, the singlewomen also originated in differing block settlement groups, three from the vicinity of the Manitoba Colony, the earliest and largest Mennonite settlements in Mexico, located near Cuauhtémoc, and another from the Neuvo Ideal Colony in the state of Durango, about five hours south of the Manitoba Colony.

Interviews with the singlewomen did not address the circumstances of their singleness directly, although informal conversations explored occupational and lifestyle options for Mennonite singlewomen in Mexico. Instead, in anticipation of the 10th anniversary of the *Altenheim*, interviews with the women focused on the history of their involvement with the seniors' home, using their housing patterns and the narratives of their coming to the *Altenheim* as a means of examining their identity and place within the community. Although the women came to the *Altenheim* to serve Mennonite seniors, they often defined this move as "an opportunity to have a life of my own," illustrated in part by their unique housing patterns: two of the single women shared a house they designed and had built for themselves, and the other two owned small adjacent houses joined by a common hallway. While each of these conjoined houses had its own bedroom and washroom, one house contained a shared kitchen and the other a shared living or sitting room. As first generation fulltime female wage earners and house owners, they were negotiating an alternative settlement pattern for singlewomen within a society with nuclear family-based housing patterns.

The theme of singleness is implicit, rather than explicit, in the women's tape-recorded narratives, yet its reality and implications thread themselves throughout their stories of everyday lived experiences.¹³ While singleness was not explicitly addressed, each woman intimated where she placed herself along the temporarily to

permanently single continuum. Sara, a 41-year-old with a lively sense of humor, quipped that she planned to continue living in her house and working at the *Altenheim* until she herself was told to rent a room in the *Altenheim*. Aganetha, aged 40, expressed a desire to travel and to experience a change from her repetitive domestic responsibilities at the *Altenheim*, much as coming to the *Altenheim* had earlier been an escape from the monotony of childcare for her younger, married sisters. Anna, the 28-year old, however, used the somewhat ambiguous expression, “there’s still time,” when she spoke about her future, and noted that her half of the house she shared with Helena would be easily movable if or when she chose to relocate. And Helena, aged 41 and quite content with her life, indicated that it would have to be just the right relationship if she were to change her marital status. When they did hint at the eventual possibility of marriage, they indicated that, being ‘older women’, they would likely marry widowers, possibly with younger children.

Through on-going informal conversations and eventual tape-recorded interviews in Low German, the mother-tongue of both the interviewer and interviewees, these Mennonite singlewomen expressed how they construct a sense of self as integrated into, yet distinguished from, their Mennonite community, but also how they achieve an adult identity in a society which has conventionally equated marriage and child-bearing with a woman’s status as an adult. Paralleling the “feminist discursive analysis of singleness” of social psychologists Jill Reynolds and Margaret Wetherell, this study examines the construction of a ‘singleness identity’ in the Mennonite singlewomen’s personal narratives,¹⁴ noting at times how their narratives overlap with, yet diverge from, narrative themes in other studies on singleness, particularly themes such as: personal deficit, social exclusion, independence and choice, self-actualization and achievement,¹⁵ commitment, and family support.¹⁶ The lifestyle-based themes that permeated the Mennonite singlewomen’s narratives, by comparison, included: determining adulthood in a lifestyle without conventionally-recognized rites of passage; achieving singlewoman house ownership in the context of family and community; balancing a family-centered work ethic with community service; and, practicing female leadership in a patriarchal society.

Becoming a Single Adult

Reynolds and Wetherell note that in the context of a community which views marriage as an almost inevitable norm, singleness is often viewed either as a temporary state or, after the culturally-specific

appropriate age for marriage has passed, as a long-term “deficit identity”.¹⁷ Seeing singleness as an identity which is lacking may well be an extension of what poet Adrienne Rich has called the “compulsory heterosexuality” project.¹⁸ Rich suggests that regarding heterosexuality as normative often extends well beyond simply clarifying sexual orientation, so this normativity also implies involvement in some form of long-term partnership. Within this context, Reynolds and Wetherell suggest, singleness is considered non-normative and requiring an explanation for its lack of ‘an other’ to define one’s self.

The notion that marriage is still considered to be the ideal transition to adulthood among Mennonites in Mexico is exemplified by the concerns of a female resident at the Mennonite *Altenheim*. The woman had Alzheimer’s, but appreciating the services of the young women workers at the home, she repeatedly enquired as to whether or not the women were already of marriageable age. Receiving confirmation of their singleness, the woman proceeded to detail how she would make her five sons aware of their availability, adding that she would, of course, not tell her sons that they *had* to marry these singlewomen. The woman no longer remembered that her sons were already married, many with grandchildren, but despite her memory loss, she continued to express a deep-seated personal and communal concern and assumption among these Mennonites: that one’s children ought to be married.

Expectations that women will marry are also built into the Old Colony educational system. Boys spend seven years in school and girls only six years in a six-month annual educational system built around the agricultural cycle of planting and harvest. According to Kelly Hedges’ sources, the additional year of schooling for boys accommodates the fact that “boys just don’t learn as easily as girls do.”¹⁹ Another perspective is advanced by a former teacher who explained that schooling for women was adequate for the demands of household duties, while boys needed more education to run the *Wirtschaft*, literally a ‘family business’, generally agriculturally-based.²⁰ Again, there is an assumption that women will be funneled into a domestic sphere, presumably as wives and mothers.

Within the context of marriage and family ideals, singleness, whether temporary or lifelong, is still a reality for many women, both in society at large as well as within Mennonite communities. Writing on Mennonite singleness in 1989, Mary Bargaen noted that the percentage of single Mennonite females has traditionally been lower than the national average, yet that a proportionately high number of single Mennonite women have historically been involved in community-oriented services such as missionary work.²¹ Similarly, single Mennonite women in northern Mexico often choose to leave

their parental home to serve the larger Mennonite community in venues such as the *Altenheim*.

Life stories of singles do not provide a conventional marriage-children “coupledom narrative”, yet, as social psychologists Jill Reynolds and Stephanie Taylor observe, single people nevertheless “structure their life stories in stages.”²² In a context that assumes marriage and bearing children as not only the desirable, but also the inevitable marker of adulthood, Mennonite singlewomen too create and articulate lifestyle transitions, particularly to mark their entrance into adulthood. The articulation of this stage is expressed both through the overt refusal to participate in activities considered characteristic of childhood as well as through the creation of markers of separation from one’s natal home.

Equating the onset of adulthood with leaving behind activities associated with childhood is most evident in Helena’s life story. In her narrative, she creates a distinction between childhood as a time of learning and adulthood as a time of applying one’s knowledge and common sense to everyday challenges. Her awareness of these challenges was heightened when she, as a young woman, participated in her family’s struggle to care for her grandfather during his eight-year decline with Alzheimer’s. The arduous task of caring for the grandfather and the untimely death of her father just two days before her grandfather’s passing, left her with questions concerning who would take care of the needy, whom she had identified as elderly Mennonites and homeless Mexicans. Helena concluded – on the basis of the scriptures stating, “What you have done to the least of these, you have done for me” – that it was her responsibility to respond to these needs. However, when she volunteered to assist staff at a clinic some 13 km from her home, she was surprised to discover that her services would be accepted only on condition of studying with the head nurse. The idea of an adult taking classes was incomprehensible to her because, as she says,

. . . *daut wia mie nijch goodjenuach. Ekj wia je aul groot en dan noch waut leare? Ekj wiss je aul aules, soos et Mood wia* (laughs) *em Darp*. (“ . . . it wasn’t good enough/acceptable for me. I already was an adult, and then still had to learn something? I already knew everything, as was the fashion (laughs) in the village”).

Embarrassed that further formal education was required of her as an adult, she completed her homework evenings, after her younger siblings were in bed. She laughs as she reiterates: “*wajen etj wisst doch aules*” (“because I already knew everything”). It is only in retrospect

that she realizes the inadequacy of a mere three years of formal education, albeit with considerable experience working with cattle, as foundational for a career in nursing. Regarding herself as already a competent caregiver and caretaker, Helena assumed that formal learning as an adult was not a culturally-prescribed age-appropriate activity. On the one hand, her studies had to be hidden from younger siblings to preserve her self-perception of herself as being '*groot*' ('adult', literally 'big'), but on the other, she felt obligated to work diligently at studies and practicums to honor her commitment to alleviating communal needs.

Helena's ideal of being *groot*, however, is not just a simple refusal to participate in what she might call 'child-like' behaviour. Instead, it is encapsulated in a term used frequently by Anna: *selbstständigich* or self-sufficient, literally meaning 'being able to stand alone', a concept which could apply to anyone in the community regardless of their marital status, yet, for the singlewomen characterizes their ideal of the personal development, self-definition, and responsible connection with their community they consider essential to adult identity. Mennonite singlewomen who are *selbstständigich* regard themselves "as autonomous but connected to others in accordance with the woman's own values," an identity which sociologist Anne Byrne terms as "transformative self-identity." As Byrne explains, "self-identity for single women is not a matter of being defined in relationship to others (as wife, as mother, as daughter) but rather is defined by oneself in chosen relationships with others."²³

Leaving Home and Achieving Home Ownership

For some of the singlewomen interviewees, leaving home was a significant marker of adulthood. Readiness for this move was generally equated with attaining a particular chronological age or state of accountability for one's actions along with a proven record of handling domestic responsibility within the immediate or extended familial context, another example of being *selbstständigich*. Using their Low German vernacular, Mennonite singlewomen expressed the concept of attaining the age of adulthood as *ekj haud aul miene Joare* ("I was already of age"). Sara employed this argument with her mother when she decided to leave home for work at the *Altenheim*. When her mother expressed reluctance to lose Sara's assistance in caring for the youngest five children, Sara reminded her mother that had she gotten married, she would already have left home at a much earlier age. Aganetha not only noted her own age as proof of maturity, but also expressed frustration that as a single person remaining in her parental

home she had been obliged to assist her youngest sister, nine years her junior, whenever there was a new child in her household. For Anna, on the other hand, leaving home was an easier process, as, she says, "My parents allowed me a lot of freedom and must have respected my choices and always trusted me." Helena and Anna were recruited to work at the *Altenheim*, Aganetha came on the recommendation of a friend, and Sara, who had avidly read about plans to build the *Altenheim* in anticipation of working in the home, arrived on time to serve the first meal to its initial handful of residents in 1986. Helena arrived with previous experience in nursing and administration and Anna had had seasonal migrant farm worker experience in Canada, but for Aganetha and Sara work at the *Altenheim* was an initial experience with full-time paid employment.

Recognizing leaving home as a significant marker of adulthood did not necessarily ease the adjustment process. Several singlewomen mentioned the difficulty of leaving family and adjusting to life at the *Altenheim*, but throughout their narratives, they referred to the "commitment" they had made, arguing that the commitment factor overrode all other concerns. Aganetha, in fact, spoke of the alternate sense of relief and disappointment she experienced when the neighbours transporting her from the state of Durango to begin work at the *Altenheim* were late. When they eventually did appear, she accompanied them, deciding that her anxiety concerning this new experience had to remain subservient to her promise to work at the home. Helena and Sara, recognizing the disorientation and loneliness often experienced by workers leaving their familial home for the first time, assigned someone to serve as a 'big sister' to newcomers, and particularly, to spend the first 24 hours with them. Despite alluding to anxieties concerning their adjustment to a new living situation, the Mennonite singlewomen's narratives were characterized by hints at fictive kin and a sense of belonging to the *Altenheim* community, rather than the themes of marginalization or loneliness common in some studies of singlewomen.²⁴

Because the *Altenheim* was located some distance from their parental homes, leaving home for these singlewomen entailed finding new housing, a theme not generally addressed in scholarly literature on singleness, a literature which focuses more often on the emotional and psychological aspects of living alone than on the practicalities of finding housing.²⁵ While the women in this study eventually acquired their own homes, finding suitable housing at the outset of their tenure at the *Altenheim* was challenging. This difficulty may have been compounded because the Mennonite cultural concept of single females working outside of the parental home was subsumed under the category of *Kjaekjsche* (maid). Since the female workers, except for the head

nurse, were known as *Kjaekjsches*, it was easily assumed that these 'maids' would live in the *Altenheim*, their place of work. Some of the singlewomen initially shared workers' living quarters in the *Altenheim* itself, but often found themselves woken at night by wandering inhabitants with Alzheimer's. Others rented a room from a nearby family, but talked gingerly around the reasons for and inconvenience of moving from house to house, and sometimes even from room to room in unfinished houses. Facing these challenges, the four singlewomen decided to build their own houses, but chose to create co-resident rather than single-person dwellings, an unusual pattern in that previous research on singles generally suggests that singlewomen live alone,²⁶ while those in shared housing invariably live with kin.²⁷ While living with kin was impractical due to geographic constraints, the women did, however, pair up on the basis of occupational specialization: the two women working in health care and administration²⁸ shared a side-by-side home, while the two women working in support systems – cooking and cleaning – shared a single dwelling.

Leaving home and building their own homes, however, did not entail breaking family ties. Instead, several of the singlewomen relied on kin and communal relationships for finances and labour. Sara, who had long wanted to build her own home, already owned land near her parental home,²⁹ as well as furniture purchased with earnings from the cow she had milked at her natal home. Building a home near her place of work, therefore, involved a shift in location, but not in ultimate goals. Anna used earnings from several summers of farm work in Ontario and Alberta to purchase first a pick-up truck and then a small repossessed house. Helena relied on a combination of familial inheritance money,³⁰ loans from relatives and church members, and the good will of reasonably-priced house builders to purchase her lot and house. Both Anna and Helena began paying for their homes a year in advance of the possession date, using the interest from the pre-payments to lower the eventual price of their homes. In various ways the singlewomen, although working at achieving economic independence, benefited from the goodwill of families that provided income from milking cows, inheritance money, and free labour. As well, they received assistance from the larger Mennonite community, often through their church-related networks, which provided low-cost loans, labour, and the occasional gift of furniture. This aspect of leaving home thus affirmed the continued importance of family, community, and church ties.

Continuity with the community is also evident in the location of these homes. The women purchased lots on a newly-constructed street adjacent to the *Altenheim* in Strassburg, a settlement that vaguely resembles the block settlement pattern of their past in Mennonite

villages, although the houses and lots are substantially smaller in anticipation of accommodating fewer inhabitants. In part, this was a practical move, as only one of the singlewomen owned a vehicle and public transport to the seniors' home, located several kilometers from even the nearest Mennonite campo, as local villages are called, was not available, though it was customary to arrange for transport *opp jelaejnheit* ('as opportunities arose'). The singlewomen noted the convenience of having only a two-minute walk to work, but the issue of neighborhood safety, paramount in some studies of housing for singlewomen, particularly in urban centres,³¹ was a non-issue for them.

While home ownership offered the singlewomen a degree of independence, it was Anna who specifically linked this factor and the possibility of house ownership with her single status. To those who told her she should be married "*soo daut du en Dakj wudst haben*" ('so that you could have a roof'), she readily replied, "*Faele sen befriet en han kjeen Dack, oba ekj hab mien eajnet*" ('Many are married and have no roof, but I have my own'), and it is in this context that she asserted, "*En mien Hues ess soo jebuat daut wan ekj hea emol wajch trakj, kaun ekj daut met naemen*" ('And my house is built in such a way that if I move away, I could take it with me').³²

More often, the singlewomen emphasized that their newly-acquired home provided an opportunity for privacy, relaxation, and time alone. Anna highlights this aspect when she states that to community members who asked, "*Wurom jeist du doa soo schwoa schaufen. Wuarom blifts nijch leewa tues?*" (Why do you go there to work so hard? Why don't you rather remain at home?), she responded,

Daut ess hea goanijch soo schwoa mankj disse oole Menschen and wan ekj Sindajch nohues foa, bruck ekj nijch miene Kjinga met schlappen ooda nohues naemen. En dan kaun ekj en fraed no Hues foaren en en mien eaejnet Hues sen. (It really isn't that hard working here among these old people, and when I go [to my parents'] home on Sundays, I don't have to drag my children along or take them back home. And then I can return home in peace to my own house.)

Just as importantly, the singlewomen spoke of their homes as places which permitted hospitality. In this regard, acquisition of furniture was of significance. While Aganetha claimed to own only a few pieces of furniture given to her, Sara took pride in being able to move the furniture purchased with "milk money" into her new home. Helena, by comparison, acquired a valued piece of furniture by an unusual route. The daughter of an *Altenheim* resident, grateful for the care her late mother had received at the seniors' home, gave Helena her mother's

Glausschaup (a glass-encased china cupboard), which, as Helena explained, was considered to be the quintessential piece of furniture in a Mennonite sitting room. Having a *Glausschaup*, obviously, was considered to be as essential for the home of a singlewoman as for a couple or family, and while Helena was not given to pretentious display, she treasured the trust and affirmation this special piece of furniture represented. And so, while home ownership distinguished some singlewomen from young marrieds without resources 'to have a roof of their own', it once again tied the singlewomen into the life of the community – through memories of relationships with those providing gifts of furniture, through being able to offer hospitality, and also through having a place of privacy to renew their energies for the demands of work with residents at the *Altenheim*.

Community-Oriented Service in a Family-Oriented Community

Meaningful involvement in the community is frequently cited as a factor which provides a sense of fulfillment for singlewomen.³³ In fact, sociologist Yvonne Stolk argues that "satisfying careers . . . tend to provide them with a stable source of identity."³⁴ The Mennonite singlewomen, though modest about their own accomplishments, tend to express their sense of satisfaction through narratives revealing their delight in, and resourcefulness in relating to, *Altenheim* residents. Helena, the most talkative of the four, relates experience after experience of enjoying the uniqueness of, but also of dealing with the idiosyncrasies of, the residents in the various seniors' homes in which she has worked. She explains, for example, how she resolved a conflict in which two women residents were intent on preventing a third woman from joining them in a picture-taking session. Helena dealt with this situation quite easily. She suggested the photographer take an additional photograph. Another situation was more challenging. An angry man was attempting to choke a fellow-resident. His attempts were thwarted when Helena, realizing staff could not persuade the angry man to release his grasp of the man's shirt collar, ran for a pair of scissors, and cut open the back of the victim's shirt, leaving the angry man holding only the man's shirt. Dealing repeatedly with similar challenges, the singlewomen demonstrate their resolve to respond to the needs of the residents, and through appropriate solutions to create a harmonious community.

But the singlewomen also speak of the difficulty of creating a larger community spirit among residents with predominantly family-oriented values. While Helena and Sara express appreciation for those residents who volunteer in the kitchen, they indicate that it is these volunteers

too who are willing to sew 'for others' in sewing circle meetings, though most focus on sewing for their own familial circle. In fact, when Helena says those who participate in the sewing circle bring what they call *hauntoarbeit*, literally handiwork, she states that "They embroider *for themselves*, they crochet *for themselves*, and they knit *for themselves*." Helena explains the repetition of "for themselves" with the comment: "and if I tell them these bed covers will be given to the poor, they say, 'They could have worked before. We had to . . . I worked when I was young, so why should I be part of a sewing circle?'" Helena's comments and tone of voice reveal disbelief that others are unable to appreciate the playful aspect of work and the joy of giving, or, as historian Walter Schmiedehaus so aptly expresses it, "a life rich in labor."³⁵ The residents' focus on their families differs significantly from that of Helena, who expressed her coming to the *Altenheim* as "*fon miene Ellere ae Hof rauf to gohne en proowen aundre waijen too halpen*", or literally, "leaving my parental yard to go try to help in other ways."

Despite their integration into the life of the *Altenheim* and their broad-ranging economic networks, singlewomen who have 'left their parental yard' face a dilemma: how to forge relationships with their immediate surrounding community. Helena claims that despite their efforts to develop local friendships, they are discounted by neighbours who are critical of their 'less sophisticated ways', but she does not explain whether these attitudes are attributable to age, gender, marital status, church affiliation, educational background, socio-economic status, or other perceived or actual social and cultural factors. The lack of acceptance may not be surprising as 'the surrounding community' is atypical both in name and in character. By comparison with other villages which are frequently referred to as campo number so-and-so, but bear names associated with a historic past in Canada and Russia, Strassburg was named to reflect the location – Strasbourg, France – which hosted the 1984 Mennonite World Conference, a transnational, inter-Mennonite assembly held every six years. While the *Altenheim*, like the conference, is inter-Mennonite, the name, Strassburg, may also reflect the somewhat transient nature of the community and hence the challenge of forging long-term social networks in that context.

Despite their difficulty in building local communal relationships, several singlewomen indicated that their community-oriented service lay well beyond mere local social acceptance. Instead, as already intimated in Helena's rationale and motivation for working on behalf of the needy, their involvement was grounded in their religious commitment. In fact, both Anna and Helena spoke extensively about their faith journeys. Both came from nurturing Old Colony homes that encouraged both independent thinking and faith as a lifestyle choice, in contrast to the common perception amongst other groups of

Mennonites that Old Colony Mennonites blindly follow tradition. For Anna it was important to maintain what she calls the “belief in Jesus” she had learned as a child so that, as she explained, she “wouldn’t fall into sin and have to be converted,” an emphasis characteristic of some of the evangelical groups which have made inroads with disenchanting Old Colony Church members. On the matter of baptism, she said, “Some get baptized when they get married, but for me, there is still time.” In fact, she delayed baptism until her mid-twenties, when she acquired a means of transportation to pre-baptismal classes, but more importantly, until she felt assured she could bring a fuller understanding to the commitment she was making. She was baptized into the Old Colony Church, believing that all churches have “basically the same belief” and that this decision respected her parents’ wishes and the tradition into which she had been born. Her thirst for learning continued to be expressed in activities such as reading, participating in Wednesday evening Bible Studies, taking Spanish classes – to facilitate communication with Spanish-speaking doctors on behalf of *Altenheim* residents – and improving what she considered to be her embarrassingly low literacy level in standardized High German, the official language of her church.

For Helena, the faith journey took a different route. Like Anna, she grew up in the Old Colony religious tradition and had numerous questions concerning biblical teachings. Having grown up with the expression “*es steht geschrieben*” (“it is written”), she decided to study biblical writings for herself, but this often raised more questions than it answered. Consequently, Helena repeatedly queried the church elders, who, she noted, were patient in responding to her perpetual questioning. Eventually, however, she questioned the integrity of the religious leadership hierarchy itself,³⁶ and subsequently left the Old Colony Church for another Mennonite denomination. Yet, like Anna, she contends that no one church is completely right or wrong. Instead, both Helena and Anna affirm that although the church is a context for spiritual grounding and growth, it is not, for them, the ultimate authority, particularly when it appears to interpret biblical scriptures, as Helena claimed, “simply for its own benefit.” Nor do these singlewomen expect the church to be their primary social centre and so their perspective of the church differs from the conclusions of Mennonite sociologists Elizabeth Goering and Andrea Krause who claim that the focus on the family in Mennonite churches marginalizes singles.³⁷ Helena and Anna, as singlewomen who are *selbstständig*, with a ‘transformative self-identity’, have learned to build on and shape their linkage with this tradition without becoming entrapped by it.

Female Leadership in a Patriarchal Society

However, Helena discusses another issue which, while church-related, also highlights conventional gender-role expectations among Mennonites in Mexico. These gender-specific expectations are made visible in the use of space within the Old Colony Church: women have their own entrance and sit on backless benches on the left, and men use their own entrance and sit on the right, while *Vorsaenger* (song leaders, literally 'before singers') and ministers sit on a platform in front of 'the men's side' of the church. Within this spatialized representation of gendered ideals, it is assumed that men will speak and women will listen, although women are expected to join in hymn-singing and to kneel for silent prayer in public religious practice. These conventional expectations created a dilemma for Helena at the *Altenheim* during the summer of 1994, due to the lack of a male administrator who could lead similar religious services at the seniors' home. Approaching selected male board members to request assistance, Helena was told they themselves lacked skills in leading these services. At this point Helena and Anna began to lead Sunday services and daily morning meditations for residents. Their willingness to assume this non-conventional form of leadership was based both on their commitment to their work, as well as on their awareness that they were *selfständijch*. In this instance that resourcefulness was used for the benefit of the community despite its contradiction of conventional communal ideals. Beth Graybill also notes the irony of women from patriarchal backgrounds participating in cross-cultural church leadership. In an article titled, "Finding my place as a lady missionary," Graybill describes these women as "making independent decisions of considerable responsibility in areas over which they had control, while being sensitive to the gendered limitations of their assignments."³⁸ Helena and Anna, while aware of conventional gendered expectations, considered them to be subservient to the larger needs and expectations of seniors' home residents.

The 'necessity' of female leadership for culturally-specified male-led religious practices is only one example of the blurring of gender-specific boundaries for these singlewomen. An underlying issue is the level of responsibility necessitated for the operation of the *Altenheim*. Helena points out that although she was formerly head administrator of a state-operated seniors' home, her position at the *Altenheim* came without a clear job description. Although never appointed as such, she functioned as an administrator, since even at those times when a couple was delegated to serve as an administration unit, residents asked her to speak on their behalf to the appointed male administrator. Helena explains that at times when appointed administrators were on leave, the board might state that it was 'taken-

for-granted' that she would function as an administrator, but they would never formally appoint her. Was there some ambiguity about how to handle this situation since the *Altenheim* was in fact a home, the context in which women assumed culturally-approved leadership? Was the reference to responsibility without a formal appointment a way of avoiding community censure for publicly granting a woman responsibility within a realm culturally designated for males? Or, was it the case, as Helena suggested, that board members simply lacked either understanding of the nature of responsibilities involved in managing an institution or experience in formalizing institutional appointments within inter-Mennonite contexts? Nevertheless, the responsibilities undertaken by some singlewomen placed them in positions which blurred the boundaries of conventional gender-role expectations.

Concluding Comments on "a life of one's own"

The narratives of these four singlewomen offer insight into the means the women have employed to assert their adulthood, the manner in which they have achieved growing independence yet remained linked with their families and the larger Mennonite community, the ways in which they have attempted to express and build community within a family-oriented society, and lastly, the manner in which they have practiced female leadership within a patriarchal society. The themes of personal deficit and social exclusion present in some other studies of single identity formation have only minimally entered their narratives. Rather, examples of linkages with family and church networks have prevailed. However, notions of independence and choice have been present: in the decision to become first-generation fulltime wage earners, in the decision to build their own homes, and in the decisions to embark on faith journeys that overlap with, yet are differentiated from a strict adherence to the doctrines and practices of any one denomination. And the themes of self-actualization and achievement, when they have surfaced, have not been self-serving, but rather tempered by commitment to the perceived needs of the community.

While the narratives of these four singlewomen provide a window into the lives of first-generation full-time employee home owners, they also raise significant questions. First, how representative of Mennonite singlewomen in Mexico is the experience of those working within a Mennonite institution such as the *Altenheim*? How does their experience compare with that of singlewomen working for their immediate or extended families, for other Mennonite employers, or even for indigenous Mexican employers? What is the nature of the networking

that leads some women to work in the *Altenheim* and others to choose non-institutional employment? How does the move by singlewomen into paid employment away from their parental home affect familial relations and economic well-being, as well as village work and social patterns? How are employed, home-owning singlewomen perceived by their families, as well as by their local, familial, and church communities? What is the nature and role of singlewomen's social networks, friendships, and fictive kin relationships within a patriarchal family-oriented society? And lastly, how does the singlewomen's experience compare with that of Mennonite singlemen in Mexico?

In many ways, the Mennonite singlewomen exemplify what E. Kay Trimberger calls the "new type of single woman." Trimberger claims that the new type of singlewoman is content and happy with her life and the prospect of remaining single. She is satisfied with her accomplishments, relationships, and identity." She "has a home that nurtures her, whether she lives by herself or with other people . . . she has satisfying work that provides her with economic autonomy . . . is satisfied with her sexuality . . . enjoys some connection to the next generation . . . finds intimacy within a circle of family and friends . . . and maintains a community primarily through her friendship networks."³⁹

Helena expresses this sense of satisfaction in response to a question concerning the future. She responds, saying:

Ekj sie jlecklijch en miene Oabeit . . . Wann eena seenen kaun wua noot ess en noch en bejt halpen kaun, en aundre Mejalles meeja dee Jelaejnheit jehwen daut see tjennen waut halpen, daut jeit mie scheen; oba ekj doo nijch too wiet denken; ekj weet daut nijch. ('I am joyfully content in my work. When one can see where there is a problem, and then can help a little, and provide more opportunities for other singlewomen so that they can help, that gives me satisfaction. But I don't think too far ahead; I don't know about that (the future).')

For the four Mennonite singlewomen discussed in this paper, the satisfaction of having a life of one's own is invariably linked with being part of the community. While they express their individuality in unique ways, their commitment is to the community rather than to the individualism which some claim characterizes contemporary global culture. The sense of connection with the community may be expressed in numerous ways: through the community's assistance in house building, through the singlewomen's active participation in their church communities, and through their commitment to work at the *Altenheim*. But their integration into the community is also evident in Sara's observation that they are subject to shared communal expectations, as

she indicates, when she says, "I tell Aganetha we should turn out the lights early some nights so people don't think we're always up late." From this perspective, Sara affirms that all households, regardless of the marital status of their inhabitants, are beholden to the same set of communal rules. But more importantly for these singlewomen, a life of one's own is lived with the support of the church community, with close family ties, with a network of friends, and, at times, with variance from conventional gender expectations: lives lived within, for, and at times, in contradiction to the community.

Notes

- ¹ Although the interviewees did not request anonymity, I have assigned pseudonyms to all of the singlewomen in this study to provide them with relative confidentiality. Helena was interviewed in her home on August 1 (Cassettes 20A, 20B, and 21A), Anna in her home on August 4 (21B), and Sara and Aganetha together in their home on August 4, 1994 (22A and 22B). These cassette tapes remain in the possession of the Kanadier Concerns division of the Mennonite Central Committee Canada office in Winnipeg, Manitoba, although a copy was also left with the Mennonite *Geschichtsverein* (Historical Society) in Mexico.
- ² Beth Graybill, in "To remind us of who we are": Multiple meanings of conservative women's dress in Kimberly D. Schmidt, et al, eds. *Strangers at Home: Amish and Mennonite Women in History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 53-77, borrows sociologist Fred Davis's term "anti-fashion" to describe this dissonance with mainstream society, 62-63.
- ³ Historically, lighter-colored clothing and white kerchiefs indicated that women were single, as Walter Schmiedehaus notes in his 1947 article "Mennonite life in Mexico," reprinted in *Preservings* 23 (2003), 71-7 (See p. 73). By 1994, the lighter clothing of three of the women indicated that they had either joined, or were participating in, some of the evangelical Mennonite churches in the vicinity, while Anna's dark-colored dress, although it uses a velvet fabric not normally worn by Old Colony Church women, exemplified her continued membership in that denomination.
- ⁴ According to sociolinguist Kelly Hedges, "only when they are unmarried do Old Colony women take jobs outside the home." Kelly Hedges, "Plautdietsch and Huuchdietsch in Chihuahua: Language, Literacy, and Identity among the Old Colony Mennonites in Northern Mexico," PhD dissertation, Yale University, 1996, 241.
- ⁵ Just as Marlene Epp notes that when women are part of conventional historiography they are portrayed as "heroines or saints," (See p. 92 in "Women in Canadian Mennonite History: Uncovering the 'Underside'," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 5 (1987): 90-107, so narratives on Mennonite singlewomen, when they exist, feature women missionaries and pioneers. While scholarship on Mennonites within the past 20 years has given increasing voice to women's experience and narratives through publications like Frieda Esau Kilppenstein's "'Doing What We Could': Mennonite Domestic Servants in Winnipeg, 1920s to 1950s," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 7 (1989): 131-144, Royden Loewen's *Family, Church, and Market: A Mennonite Community in the Old and New Worlds, 1850-1930* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), Pamela Klassen's *Going by the Moon and the Stars: Stories of Two Russian Mennonite Women* (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1994), Katherine Martens and Heidi Harms' *In her own Voice: Childbirth*

Stories from Mennonite Women (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1997), Kimberly Schmidt, et al's *Strangers at Home* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), and Royden Loewen's *Diaspora in the Countryside: Two Mennonite Communities and Mid-twentieth-century Rural Disjuncture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), it is only in Loewen's study of Mennonite diaries, *From the Inside Out: The Rural Worlds of Mennonite Diarists, 1863 to 1929* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1999), that one hears the stories of singlewomen alongside those of their married counterparts. It should be noted, however, that the diarists – Margaretha Jansen (1847-1875) and Marie Schroeder (1907-1929) – were only 24 and 19 respectively in the era represented in their published diary excerpts and that both died within a year or so of these events. A rare exception to the exclusion of single women in scholarship on Mennonites is Marlene Epp's *Women without Men: Mennonite Refugees of the Second World War* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), which focuses on widows and their children, but includes single women. There is no known comparable work representing Mennonite women in Mexico, although Hedges includes the experiences of men, women, and children in her study of language, literacy, and identity among Mennonites in northern Mexico.

- 6 The *Altenheim* (literally, the old people's home), located at Kilometer 14, north of Cuauhtémoc in Chihuahua state of Mexico, was built and is overseen by a *Hilfskomitee* (literally, aid committee) consisting of representatives of various Mennonite denominations in Mexico. This committee was formed in 1983 to deal with various local and regional social issues. See Cornelius Krahn and Helen Ens, "Manitoba Colony, Mexico," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online* (1989). Accessed 04 January 2008 <http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/M36505ME.html>
- 7 Interviewees and potential interviewees for the oral history project repeatedly asked for assurance that their interviews would not be broadcast on 'Bram Siemus', as they called Abram Siemens' nightly talk radio show on which I had had been interviewed to familiarize local Mennonites with my research project.
- 8 "Singlewomen", a compound term first found in English documents in the 1400s, was used historically to differentiate never-married European women living in the community from those who entered religious orders. In addition to avoiding the connotations of the terms 'never-married' and 'spinster', 'singlewoman' moves beyond the ambiguities of present-day use of the term 'single', which often encompasses not only the never-married, but also the widowed or divorced, whether with or without partners. See: Judith Bennett and Amy M. Froide, "A singular past," in *Singlewomen in the European past, 1250-1800*, eds. Judith Bennett and Amy M. Froide (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 1-37.
- 9 The term 'spinster', historically based on the fact that single women in industrial Europe were frequently spinners of yarn, is found not only in literature on that historic era (See Maura Palazzi, "Female solitude and patrilineage: Unmarried women and widows during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries," *Journal of Family History* 15 (1990): 443-459), but also in late 20th century scholarship on single women (see e.g., Yvonne Stolk, "The spinster stereotype: A demographic refutation?" *Australian Journal of Social Issues* 16 (1981): 187-201; Laurel L. Cornell, "Why are there no spinsters in Japan?" *Journal of Family History* 9 (1984): 326-339) and even in early 21st century scholarly literature (Roona Simpson, "The intimate relationships of contemporary spinsters," *Sociological Research Online* 11 (2006). Accessed 04 October 2007 at <http://www.socresonline.org.uk.qe2a-proxy.mun.ca/11/2/simpson.html>).
- 10 See David Harder's discussion of social insurance in "Schule und Gemeinschaft" in *Preservings* 23 (2003), 21.
- 11 Cross-cultural scholarly literature contains a commonly-held notion that singleness is considered to be an affirmed fact by the age of 35, considerably later than the

Mennonite assumption of singleness as a social reality at 23. See, e.g., Susan Cotts Watkins' "Spinsters," *Journal of Family History* 9 (1984): 310-325; Sushma Sood's "Bachelors and Spinsters: A Comparative Study of the Two Genders in India," *International Sociological Association-Committee on Family Research* (1989); and Tymicki Krysztof's "Spinsterhood and bachelorhood. An analysis of the phenomenon," *Studia Socjologiczne* 4 (2001): 77-106.

¹² Although these immigrants were known as the *Reinländer Mennonitengemeinde* in Canada, in Mexico they are generally referred to as Old Colony Mennonites, based on their point of origin in Russia.

¹³ According to my journal, I framed my request to interview Helena with the comment that I wished to address questions like, "*Wuarom schaufst du hea em Altenheim ennestaed befriejen and Tues bliewen met 14 Kjinja?*" ("Why are you working here at the *Altenheim* instead of getting married and staying home with 14 children?"), so the women were well aware that I was asking them to explain their life choices as singles. Being single myself and understanding some of the pressures on these women to marry, I decided it was more culturally-sensitive and interesting to focus on *how* they constructed their lives as singlewomen, rather than on *why* they were single or how they felt about their singleness.

¹⁴ See pp. 492-494 in Jill Reynolds and Margaret Wetherell, "The discursive climate of singleness: The consequences for women's negotiation of a single identity," *Feminism & Psychology* 13 (2003): 489-510. Reynolds and Wetherell argue that as a socially-constructed identity, singleness is a recognizable social category, but that its nature is flexible and changeable over time. This identity, the authors contend, is discernible within narratives of the single women's "everyday ways" of "making sense of their lives and life choices," 493.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ See Pat Keith, "Resources, family ties, and well-being of never-married men and women," *Journal of Gerontological Social Work* 42 (2003): 51-75.

¹⁷ See Reynolds and Wetherell 2003. "Deficit identity" is regarded as "defined by lack and by the shared conception of a single woman as outside normal family life and ordinary intimate relationships" (198-199) in Jill Reynolds and Stephanie Taylor, "Narrating Singleness: Life Stories and Deficit Identities," *Narrative Inquiry* 15 (2005): 197-215.

¹⁸ Rich introduces this term in an article titled "Compulsory heterosexuality and the lesbian experience," first published in *Signs* 5/4 (1980): 631-660.

¹⁹ Quoted in Hedges, 115.

²⁰ Conversation with William Fehr at the *Altenheim*, 19 July, 1994.

²¹ See Mary Bargaen. "Singleness," *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*, 1989. Retrieved 16 February 2007 <http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/S5678ME.html>

²² Reynolds and Taylor, 205.

²³ See Anne Byrne, p. 459 in "Developing a Sociological Model for Researching Women's Self and Social Identities," *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 10 (2003): 443-464. Here Byrne defines "transformative self-identity" as "a movement from a passive, dependent, over-socialized, non-individualized subject with little control over the direction and activity of her life to womanhood as active agent."

²⁴ The literature which refers to these themes, involved interviews which explicitly addressed women's feelings about their singleness. Since this theme was not directly addressed in this research, one cannot assume that the absence of comments concerning loneliness implies that these Mennonite women did not at times share these feelings. However, none of them raised these issues over the course of the two months during which I had repeated conversations with them, in addition to the tape-recorded interviews.

²⁵ See, e.g., Anne Byrne's discussion on "care of the self", pp. 453-456 (2003). Susan de Vos, describing indigenous lifestyles among older singles, states this generally

entails living with kin, once again not an option for Mennonite singlewomen in Mexico. See "Kinship Ties and Solitary Living among Unmarried Elderly Women in Chile and Mexico, *Research on Aging* 22/3 (2000): 262-289.

²⁶ See, e.g., Amy L. Chasteen, "'The world around me': The Environment and Single Women, *Sex Roles* 31 (1994): 309-328.

²⁷ See: Pat Keith, 2003; Susan de Vos, 2000.

²⁸ Anna initially worked in the kitchen, but says that as she gained confidence in her abilities, she gradually began to assist Helena with client care and to enjoy working with the older people.

²⁹ The facts that Sara already owned land and Helena had purchased a lot indicate a change in land ownership practices from the early days of Mennonite settlement in Mexico when land was owned by communal corporations.

³⁰ Helena's use of inheritance money is indicative of the practice of partible inheritance, a system in which inheritance is distributed among all heirs, not just the first-born, and demonstrates that both males and females benefited from this practice.

³¹ Amy Chasteen (1994) cites neighborhood safety as a primary concern for the 25 single women she interviewed in Tennessee.

³² Anna made these comments on 15 July, 1994, over coffee, just after Helena, who had been part of an informal discussion on options for Mennonite singlewomen in Mexico, was called away to assist a resident.

³³ Judith Lawrence Bellafaire, "Public Service Role Models: The First Women of the Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services," *Armed Forces & Society* 32/3 (2006): 424-436.

³⁴ See Stolk.

³⁵ Schmidehaus, 75.

³⁶ Helena could not accept the fact that these religious leaders pardoned an alcoholic who committed suicide on the basis of finding a Bible in the room in which he had spent his last days. Hearing a funeral sermon that intimated the open Bible would give the deceased man entry into heaven, Helena felt, was at variance with her reading of the Bible.

³⁷ Elizabeth M. Goering and Andrea Krause. "Odd Wo/Man Out: The Systematic Marginalization of Mennonite Singles by the Church's Focus on Family," (2001), available at: H:\J\johndr\My Documents\MQRARCHI\april2001\goering.HTM Accessed 16 February 2007.

³⁸ See p. 153 in Beth E. Graybill, "Finding my Way as a Lady Missionary," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 17 (1999): 152-173.

³⁹ E. Kay Trimberger, *The New Single Woman* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005), xviii.