A Mennonite Artist as a Young Man: The Letters of Johann P. Klassen to a Friend (1905-1913)

Harry Loewen *University of Winnipeg*

I.

At the turn of the 20th century Mennonite young men from the South-Russian colonies went to study in Russian and foreign universities. After completing their studies, most of them returned to the Mennonite colonies to become teachers and ministers in their home institutions. Among the universities and art schools frequented by these students were St. Petersburg, Moscow and other places in Tsarist Russia, and Berlin, Munich, Basel and other cities in Germany and Switzerland. Some of the young men who achieved prominence were Benjamin Unruh, P. M. Friesen, Abraham Fast, Peter G. Epp, Dietrich Neufeld, Arnold Dyck, Abram B. Enns, Johann P. Klassen and others.

Writers have spoken of an "intelligentsia" among the Russian Mennonites prior to World War I.[1] That there were educated Mennonites in Russia before the Mennonite world collapsed during and after the 1917 Revolution cannot be doubted. The historical and literary works which these "intellectuals" produced are evidence of this. From their works we know that these men were progressive in their thinking, knowledgeable in the areas of history, literature, art and philosophy, and most eager to advance learning and culture among the Mennonites in Russia.[2]

While we know that there was a degree of cultural and intellectual sophistication among Russian Mennonites, there is little documentary evidence concerning the intellectual, cultural and artistic impact upon the

young men who received their training abroad and upon the Mennonite communities to which they returned.[3] What, for example, were the experiences of these students when they encountered culture and learning in foreign institutions? Did they undergo a "culture shock" or were they able to cope with the "world," the new life, and the foreign Weltanschauung which confronted them? Did this encounter with culture, art and learning change them to the extent that they found it difficult upon their return to Russia to reintegrate in the more closed Mennonite society? How were they received by their communities and families who had enabled them to study abroad in the first place? These questions have not been fully answered, since the evidence was lacking.

Among the many young men who went to study abroad was Johann P. Klassen (1888–1975) of Ekaterinovka.[4] After completing his high school training in Chortitza, Ukraine, he intended to enter an art school in Moscow. However, unrest in the Russian capital and other Russian cities led his parents to allow their talented son to go to Switzerland, where his uncle, Peter Dyck, and other Russian-Mennonite young men were studying theology at the Freie Evangelische Predigerschule. For some four years Klassen studied classical and modern languages, logic, and philosophy in Basel. It soon became evident, however, that Klassen's heart was set not on theology, but art. He went to Berlin and Munich to study painting, carving and sculpture, thus disappointing his parents and his Mennonite community which had hoped to benefit from his theological training.

Johann Klassen was not the only young man who abandoned theology for another, more "secular," area of study. Abram B. Enns of Altonau, Molochnaya, born in 1887, and a close friend of Klassen, also went to Basel to study theology and then switched to languages, philosophy and history of art. Enns later became the art critic and historian of Lübeck while Johann Klassen, after his emigration to Canada in 1923, went to Bluffton College to become an art teacher. Klassen died in 1975 in Bluffton, Ohio; Abram Enns has just turned 100 (Apr. 23, 1987) and still lives in Lübeck, West Germany.

Of great interest for our purpose are the letters Johann P. Klassen wrote to his friend Abram Enns between 1905 and 1913.[5] Since the two friends were not always residing in the same place during those formative years, a lively correspondence developed between them which allows us insights into what these students experienced with regard to the many issues which confronted them: the new culture abroad, their studies and views, their developing Weltanschauung, love and marriage, theological doubts, and especially a desire to become artists.

Klassen's letters, written to Abram Enns, were preserved and deposited by Enns in the city archives of Lübeck. When I visited Abram Enns in January, 1987, he drew my attention to these letters and offered to

duplicate them for me. There are some forty letters written between 1905 and 1913, some a page long and some about ten pages in length. They are written in beautiful hand, some in the Latin German script and some in Fraktur ("Gothic").[6] Enns also sent me copies of letters written by Klassen to him after World War II and in the 1960s. However, since I wish to concentrate on the development of Johann Klassen as a young man and artist, I shall limit myself to his letters written prior to World War I, merely referring to these later letters in Section III.

The picture which emerges from Klassen's early letters to Abram Enns is that of a young man from the Russian steppes who matures through his studies in Switzerland and Germany into adulthood as an artist. In the process this Mennonite artist experiences the joys and sorrows that come with his encounter with different philosophical, theological and artistic views and experiences, and his attempt to become an artist in the Russian-Mennonite communities. According to Abram Enns,[7] Klassen's experiences and struggles, as revealed in his letters, were characteristic of the experiences and struggles of many other young Russian-Mennonite men who encountered a world that was traditionally alien to Mennonites.

II.

There is a sense of excitement and anticipation evident in Klassen's letters to his friend as he prepares for his trip to Switzerland. Klassen speaks of Switzerland as an "earthly paradise" and hopes to arrive there before spring so as not to miss that beautiful season (Jan. 13, 1906). A little more than a month later he writes: "I have packed my things and await with joy the day on which my life and happiness shall begin, as I believe it will" (Feb. 25, 1906).

Travelling via Vienna, Klassen arrived in Basel in early spring, 1906. In a letter from Basel, he gives Enns instructions with regard to how best to see the art museums of Vienna when he, Enns, arrives there on his way to Switzerland. Already in these early letters the reader senses that art is of greater interest to these young men than the subject of theology which they initially set out to study (March 22, 1906).

In a letter of April 10, 1906, Klassen writes: "I love it here [in Switzerland]." With his uncle he goes on excursions into the mountains where "beautiful nature" shows him "one splendour after another." "I have never imagined such beauty!" he exclaims. He sees ruins of old castles, high and rocky mountains, the Rhine River and the Black Forest to the north, and the Jura Alps. "I have never imagined paradise so beautiful . . . Beautiful!!! This then is Switzerland. . .!" And on April 24, 1906, Klassen writes about the waterfalls of the Rhine: "Had I been a poet, my richest fantasy and imagination would have found sufficient inspira-

tion. I sat there for hours, got my hat and face wet, and found myself so happy and blessed." While he longs for the Russian steppes and his friend at home, there is nothing so beautiful as Switzerland.[8]

On May 21, 1906, Klassen, who misses his friend very much, theologizes about God's intentions and inscrutable ways with his children. "This God whom we wished to seek together made it so that we cannot be together at this time. What does this mean my friend?. . . For me and especially for you this [separation] must appear cruel. . . But do we, insignificant human beings that we are, have a right to be dissatisfied with his ways? No!. . . All we can do is leave our affairs to him." Klassen also complains about his fellow students in this letter. They are superficial, arrogant, and laugh about the "Russian" in their midst whom they try to hurt in every way. His course of study is also difficult and the director of the school, Dr. Baumgartner, is too demanding and strict. Some time later, however, Klassen comes to see that he learned much under his strict teacher.

In June, Klassen looks forward to the end of the semester. In a letter of June 24, 1906, he writes that while the Swiss students will go home, he will be able to enjoy the mountains and nature. He describes his eager anticipation and what he will do during his vacation, referring to birds and animals in the Swiss mountains and the everlasting snow-covered mountaintops "caressed by the romantic clouds."

For the six-week vacation the director sent Klassen to one Herr Zeller in Männedorf at Lake Zürich. At this resort Klassen met many people, mostly theologians, ministers, and missionaries, persons "who will soon go to the heathen." "Oh what a beautiful calling," Klassen exclaims, "I too would love to go with them."

With regard to his own goal in life, Klassen writes: "First I have decided to study theology as well as possible. The more educated and knowledgeable I become in it, the more I will be able to offer later. [Theology] is a most difficult and dangerous field of study, yet with God, whose will we study, it is possible. Oh how often and easily one gets into the waves of destructive doubt. A beginner encounters stumbling blocks everywhere. My present company here in Männedorf consists entirely of pastors, ministers, evangelists, missionaries, etc., from whom I can learn much. Yet how surprised I was at the beginning when I saw that these gentlemen who are the bearers of religion often find themselves plagued with the same doubts. For this reason I intend to study scriptures thoroughly, so as to know what to believe" (Aug. 25, 1906).

In the same letter Klassen tells his friend that after his theological studies at the Predigerschule in Basel he will also attend university before returning home to Russia. "Oh, when I succeed in this, I will have gained much. When I then come to Russia I shall show them where I come from and what I am bringing with me." Klassen knows that he will have to

acquire a broad education, both academically and practically. He will have to get to know scholars of all kinds and study politics, including socialism and anarchism. "In a word, I am in free Switzerland and wish to learn everything," so as to be able to counsel those in need. "For how could I advise an anarchist if I don't know his mind and philosophy?" (Aug. 25, 1906).

At last Klassen's friend Abram Enns is also coming to Switzerland. All obstacles have been removed, the passport and the money are in place and soon Enns will join Klassen and Peter G. Epp, another friend of theirs, in Switzerland. In a letter of Sept. 13, 1906, Klassen advises Enns concerning the journey, what it will cost him (40 rubles for the train ticket and some 400 rubles living expenses in Switzerland), and academic preparatory studies before one can be admitted to the Predigerschule.

Klassen also writes of studies at the university after their theological training, where the young men hope to acquire a doctorate. "Only one more year at the university and the doctor is made! Then these gentlemen doctors come home to Russia and demonstrate to the beloved homeland and the dear Mennonite folk that they don't bear their titles in vain, but that they have learned much and are prepared to devote their lives to [God's] service" (Sept. 13, 1906). In postscripts to this letter Klassen asks Enns to bring with him Russian tea and wonders whether he, Klassen, will in the end go to the heathen." Herr Zeller had told him that there were many heathen in poor Russia and that there was much work to be done there.

Abram Enns completed his preparatory studies before Johann Klassen did, thus allowing him to enroll in more advanced courses at the university. After completing his examinations, Enns felt like "taking a rest" from his hard work. In a letter of March 27, 1909, Klassen congratulates his friend on his achievement but then expresses the thought that young men cannot afford to rest when life everywhere is bursting with activity. The following passage from this letter expresses the "storm and stress" feelings of the young artist:

> A young person cannot rest. How can one settle down and rest when the world is so full of activity, hustle and bustle, when all else is alive and active, when spring is on the way and the sun will soon spread flowers and fruits everywhere, when the larks are singing their songs high in the sky, and all and everything announce a new and better life. . . . As long as we are young and strong we want to plunge into the stream of overflowing life and into the ocean of fragrant flowers. We want to be active (kämpfen) as long as we have the strength within us, and when our strength fails then we will reflect upon, and discover, those powers within us which will make our winter, which is sure to follow spring, as beautiful. . . . When we stand before a rosebush we don't want to complain about the thorns but rather delight in the roses and their fragrance. When we are able to do that, we are on the way to where we will understand and appreciate the thorns as well — and who knows whether we will then still call them thorns.

Johann Klassen did not remain in Switzerland but left for Berlin and then for Munich, to study painting and sculpture. In a letter of Sept. 2, 1910, written from Munich where he had arrived recently, he writes his friend Enns that the future will tell whether his decision to study art instead of theology was a right one or whether "*that* world was right which wanted to prevent me from it." Using a figure of speech uncharacteristic for a Mennonite, he writes: "Even though my hand trembles, I will swing my sword" to achieve my goal as an artist. He goes on to mention fellow students who are still studying theology. "Yes, they are still theologians who wish to be nothing else. . . . I can't understand that. I know they agonize about it much, and yet they lack the courage to throw the whole thing overboard."

In 1910 Johann Klassen left Germany for his home in the Old Colony to attend to his sick father. The two friends met in Berlin before Klassen's departure, accompanied by Enns' sister, Truda, who had come to visit her brother. Klassen and Truda travelled by train together, a journey which took them via Vienna again where they visited art museums and other places. Considering Truda his "first female friend," Klassen felt like a knight of old protecting his lady from the many dangers on the long way home.

Klassen's reception at home was not a happy one. It was not only the dark clouds of his father's condition which weighed heavily upon him. More than that, as an aspiring artist he was not understood by his parents nor by his Mennonite community. Writing on March 10, 1910, to Abram Enns, who had remained in Germany, Klassen reports:

> I now stand all alone in this world. I must be strong and courageous. At home I was received with tears. It is most difficult. My father is in Yalta [Crimea] all by himself and very sick. My art is a real devil for all my relatives. My mother tries to agree with me because of her deep love, but she too does not understand anything. Oh my friend, the people here are too pious to see the beautiful and the good in the world. I expect trouble upon trouble. My father will not understand me, that is impossible. . . . It is frightful. Everything and all are against me. I feel as if they don't wish that I continue to live. . . . My heart cries out toward them: Treat me as you will, but I will still love you! If only I were not so completely alone.

Klassen travelled that spring to Yalta to be with his father and mother there. In a significant letter of Apr. 15, 1910, to his friend in Germany, Klassen pours out this heart concerning three things: His alleged love for Truda, Enn's sister, his religious doubts and struggles, and his longing to become an artist.

What Klassen thought to be friendship between himself and Truda, friends in Basel had interpreted as love. The congratulatory cards which he had received from them confused him to the extent that he himself no longer knew whether he was in love or not. "Whether I was really in

love,'' he writes, ''I did not know and I still don't know. You allowed me to accompany Truda on the long trip home. I thought of myself as a young knight. . . I watched over her like a faithful dog. Then came the farewell, first from you and then from her. I cried, which I don't do often. I confided to Truda that for me the most beautiful time [in Berlin] had come to an end and that the future lay dark before me. Now judge for yourself whether I was in love.'' He does not wish to hurt anyone, he simply hopes that they can remain friends.

Klassen's father and mother in Yalta do not speak much with their son, certainly not about his aspirations as an artist. Klassen is resigned to the fact that his father will never understand him. His father, on the other hand, suffers because his son never talks about theology, the subject he had set out to study in Basel. ''There exists a chasm between us,'' Klassen writes to his friend, ''thus it will have to remain forever.'' Abroad Klassen could at least confide his thoughts and feelings to nature, but in Yalta even that is not possible. ''The most beautiful nature around me is unable to animate me as it did before. Only the sea seems to understand me. On its long shore I find a little place where I sit by myself and listen to its distant waves which take upon themselves my pain and sorrow for at least a little while. For hours I can sit there and think, and listen to the endless eternity whose sounds come to me.''

The religious doubts of the young artist-intellectual are expressed in words that are almost lyrical, certainly startling and significant. He writes:

> My parents are most pious people. One day my mother said to me with tears in her eyes: ''Why is it that our father does not get well? I'm praying so much about it. Often I feel that I'm not being heard nor answered.'' — I didn't say a word. Yet everything was clear to me. ''Poor little mother!'' my heart cried out, ''you can pray for a long time before someone up there will hear you. . . .'' I was beside myself. ''This joke must end,'' I cried aloud, and rushed out toward the sea. It was very windy. The sea raged. Dark clouds covered the immense sky and hung down black and thick. I was driven by the storm. The waves were high and beat powerfully against the shore. In an instant I found myself in the midst of one of the tallest waves. With great force it drove me higher and higher. I stood firm on it, however, and did not even tremble. The top of my head touched the edge of a cloud. I was terribly agitated. Enraged I began to tear down the clouds and to throw them into the turbulent sea. Then with all my strength I broke through heaven itself and bellowed into it as loud as I could: ''God, where are you! I want to see you!'' . . .There was no answer. . . With giant steps I crossed the wide and eternal expanse up there to all sides, but I found no trace [of God], nothing up there. . . no answer, only silence and quiet. . . I fled back and came to the place I had broken through. I was startled. . . Now I realized what I had done. My heart trembled, my hair stood on end, my eyes wanted to pop out of my head. In the depth there lay the clouds in disorderly heaps and around me there yawned the terrifying chasm. . . . ''Fool that I am! What have I done?!!!'' I, who wanted to become an artist,

> had destroyed the greatest of all works of art. . . For centuries and millenia humankind had worked laboriously and painfully on this beautiful work of fantasy until it was finally accomplished in all its splendour. They had placed a god and many angels into it. And now, impudent fool that I am, what have I done?!. . . All lies at my feet, destroyed and broken. . . And I wanted to become an artist. Instead of devoting my imagination and talents to the glorification and further development of this great monument, I have discarded everything. . . What shall humankind now worship? You fool, do you think that you can give humankind what you in your impudence have taken away from it? A work of art before which men and women bowed down and worshipped day and night? Where will you direct the hopes of those who suffer, and where shall the blessed abide? I had no answer. . . only a desire and drive (Lust), a powerful drive to create, create, create filled my heart. I went back to my parents. But they were still praying. Then nothing was destroyed and lost after all? Can one, still today, pray and hope? Yes, I said to myself, whoever can, can certainly do so. But what shall I do, I who wish to be an artist and now know everything? "Build heaven again," a voice within me whispered. "I don't need it nor do I wish to know anything about it," I answered. "Then you are not an artist," the voice growled and fell silent. . . . There I am again. My friend, this was only a walk through other lands of thinking.[9]

Klassen concludes this philosophical letter by advising his friend Enns, who finds himself in Munich at this time, to enjoy the city's works of art to the full, for it is art which builds "powerfully the inner person." Klassen longs to be with his friend and, what is more, he longs to be back in Munich, expressing the hope to get there soon — after his father's condition is decided one way or another.

When Klassen's father died the young man went home to Yekaterinovka where he helped his family on the farm. On July 1, 1910, Klassen writes to Enns that before his father died he became reconciled to his son's aspirations, granting him the permission to return to Munich to study art. However, the Mennonite community at home was less favourably disposed toward the young artist, "telling him the truth" in no uncertain terms. He writes: "It was a life and death struggle. All were against me. No relatives missed an opportunity to tell me the truth. . . . I did not defend myself. Dear friend, ever since I devoted myself to art, I find myself on a height where nothing can touch me. I don't even have to listen to what these dear people tell me. . . ."

In a way Klassen pities his people who are closed to all artistic beauty. "Art is something so foreign to our dear people," he writes in the July 1, 1910, letter, "that all their knowledge in this regard is equal to zero. To convince them in this area is absolutely impossible. I had to experience it — it could not be helped — that I was excluded from everything and put aside like a monster. However, how beautiful it is to stand so alone in the world! One is completely free. How one can breathe so easily! They told me the truth, the dear folk have acted according to their Christian duty, and now I will not have to hear anything about it anymore. Now I can live

as I please. A beautiful ending after all that confusion, don't you think?'' Klassen signs off with: ''Your friend who has become completely free.''

Klassen's older brother, who took over the family farm, encouraged him to return to Munich and promised to assist him financially. ''I shall support you with all material means,'' he had said to his brother, ''and you prove to the people that you are right'' (Oct. 2, 1910). In August, 1910, Klassen left for Munich where he hoped to meet his friend Enns and his sister Truda. On August 15 he writes on a postcard: ''I am on the way to Munich, approaching the Russian border. There is no space to describe the feelings which fill me. Something great and inexorable is driving me. With resolute steps I'm walking into the questionable future and I'm not afraid.''

In Munich Klassen was well received and his talents were recognized by his art teachers. He felt that his place in the world of art was secured. Whether he will achieve his goal as an artist, he is not certain. Nevertheless, his fate had been decided: ''I shall never go back, even if I don't succeed in reaching my desired goal.'' At least in Munich ''we are protected against all theology,'' he writes sarcastically (Oct. 2, 1910). Half a year later he writes: ''I'm afraid of theology and everything that smells of it'' (March 19, 1911).

Back in Munich, Klassen threw himself energetically into his studies. He progressed well, worked from models, established his private studio, was assigned as foreman over a group of artists, and even began selling his paintings. In a letter of March 19, 1911, Klassen reports to his friend, who is back in Basel, on all his various activities. In this letter he is also encouraging Enns to enjoy nature and not to neglect writing poetry. ''You fortunate man,'' he exclaims, ''to be able to describe nature and all that is beautiful. I'm so happy for you.''

In a letter of March 24, 1911, Klassen discusses the nature of art and what it takes to be an artist. Referring to his friend's poetry, Klassen feels that whatever the artistic expression — Naturalism, Impressionism, Idealism — the artist seeks to express the artistic ideal. To merely imitate nature is not art, according to Klassen, but it is a means, a way to art. To be an artist requires courage to pursue Mistress Art until she yields herself to the artist. The artistic activity, the act of creation, is the only way to achieving one's goal as an artist. This activitiy is assisted by nature's beauty, a beauty of which a country like Switzerland has an abundance. An artist in the Russian steppes, for example, is at a great disadvantage. Moreover, an artist must be completely free and uninhibited in his pursuit of art. Klassen encourages Enns the poet to let go, to give himself freely to art, to express his innermost feelings, and to use all means at his disposal to create poetry. ''Oh my friend, grasp that for which you have a desire,'' he writes, ''for desire is the messenger of the exalted Mistress [Art]. Oh, we could achieve so much if only we were not so terribly

cowardly! I too. I could have achieved so much by now. But instead, we dream our time away and forget that the violets along the way remain untouched. 'Up! Up! Up!' should be inscribed upon every post, tree and everywhere. Up! for the opportunity is great and we are richly endowed to do great things!. . . May this resound as far as Japan and beyond.''[10]

Klassen concludes by saying that throughout history and among diverse cultures and nations artists have tried to attain Mistress Art. ''And this [Mistress] has given herself to everyone and kissed all of them. . . I wish for you again a kiss from her.''

Klassen's encouragement and advice to Enns resulted in the latter's decision to send his friend several of his poems, with the request that he comment on their poetic value. In a letter of April 20, 1911, Klassen writes to Abram Enns: ''My dear boy, you are progressing so well. Switzerland seems to be the right place for you. Beautiful nature has taken hold of you. And how beautifully you are singing of nature! I am so pleased about how you are approaching nature: Like a young girl, slowly and nervously. And then all of a sudden your song breaks forth like that of a virtuous and pure angel who sees all, feels along, and reflects upon everything. . . You have the eye of an observer who is able to clothe that which you see in beautiful thoughts. In your poetry things are just intimated, suggested, with the result that the reader is led to contemplate, to reflect, upon what he reads.''

Klassen's art studies and work in Munich had their ups and downs. What he learned from one master was sometimes rejected by another, which led to disappointments and sometimes disgust about the validity of his studies. His technical skills as a sculptor and painter were admired, but his tendency to ''imitate nature'' was severely criticized. One of his masters, Schwägerle, told Klassen not to paint ''panoptically,'' that is, not to see and describe all, not to imitate nature. Since an artist cannot fully attain to nature, to imitate it is both impossible and wrong. Other teachers had said that while Klassen had talent, he had a strange imagination, had wrong tastes in art, and saw the world with strange eyes (May 11, 1911).

Klassen told his teachers that he had not come to them to learn what good taste was or what was beautiful, but only the technique to paint and to sculpt. ''They will not teach me what culture is,'' he writes to Enns on May 11, 1911, ''I live like any hare in the steppes. They can chase me away or destroy me, but they will not tame me nor rob me of my personal freedom to think and to create and change me into their pet dog. . . . I'm surprised how I as a German have been influenced by the endless steppe, so much so that I'm no longer a German. For to be a German is to be a schoolboy, a slave to laws and rules.''

In this May 11 letter Klassen also complains abou the ''loose living'' of the artist community in Munich. He just can't accept this bohemian

existence for himself, at least not yet. "Oh, I have been able to see life here. You will not believe how depraved (verkommen) the artists are! It's most loathsome!! (scheusslich). And these scoundrels (Lumpen), these whoremongers (Hurenböcke) etc. will tell me what art is all about? I have no confidence in them. I see the world with different eyes, lead a different life, and carry a different heart in my breast!"[11]

While Klassen disliked "modern" art, he found it easy to paint "modern" pictures. To "smear together" such a painting, he writes on May 29, 1911, does not take much time and people are willing to pay much money for it. Klassen sees the day coming when we will be free to paint and sculpt to his heart's content, become well-to-do, build a house for himself, take a wife, and live like a human being (Mensch). He looks forward to visiting Venice and later perhaps Rome. He is not drawn to Paris, for only those painters go to Paris who want "to live it up" there, not to learn painting. "And after Italy I shall go back to the steppes," he writes, "to the desolate, wide, endless steppe. And there where I shall possess nothing, I'll be able to give of myself fully and completely, and I shall be independent of those who take my money and drain me of my strength but do not allow me to create freely."

After these outbursts of disgust, rebellion, and expressions of independence, Klassen gradually came to see that art and artists existed in a world of their own and that he was becoming part of that world. In a letter of June 19, 1911, he writes from Munich: "Yes, art! I now know art and artists as well. What people they are! Good heavens! It's the ultimate! The world has no idea about it. They live the life of gods. There is no good or evil or things like that for them. There is just life, pleasure and work, work and pleasure and nothing else. One has to be an artist himself to understand it all."

On August 1, 1911, Klassen continues the subject of an artist's involvement in his art and life. In fact, according to Klassen, "art demands the involvement of the entire person," for the artist creates from life's experiences. This is apparently what Enns as a poet lacks. His language is poetic and the form of his poetry is very good, according to Klassen, but the content of his poems often lacks the spark of life. "You too must find your spring and drink from a stream which gives you life," he writes to his friend, "so that you will unfold like a flower in which the sun can reflect itself and which can promise fruit to the world."

This brings Klassen to speak about a love relationship between Enns and Lene about which his friend had written him. If he truly loves Lene, he should not hesitate to give himself freely and fully to her, Klassen advises. Love is part of life and must be lived to the full. Why so many questions and doubts about the relationship of two persons? These doubts, Klassen suggests, "are still the after-effects of our theological training. Each small detail acquires an all too great significance." Why

should we feel guilty about natural human experiences? "As a result [of our guilt feelings] our life becomes dull and dry. We are not allowed to do anything, and we don't trust ourselves nor others, for we are always afraid of the consequences, afraid to come too close to each other. And life passes us by. . . . Think of Rubens, think of the ancients! That's life and power!"

Klassen's own life is different from that of his friend Enns. "The artist simply follows life," Klassen concludes his letter. "He does not seek to better it or to make it worse, he just lives it like a child. He does not live for life itself but for the sake of art. He does not, like the mad theologian, stand above life, but in the midst of it. That's all. Do you understand me?. . . Act like a man!"

By the end of 1911 Klassen begins to see his goal of becoming an independent artist come closer. He enjoys a good reputation in the artistic community, young women love to sit for him and mothers offer their babies as models for him free of charge. He is so busy that he begins to wonder whether he can save whatever is left of his youth (Aug. 1, 1911).

In a letter, written on October 24, 1911, Klassen is no longer as certain about his knowledge of life and art as he was only a few months before. Nevertheless, he feels that he is approaching his goal of becoming a real artist. "I'm not through yet," he writes, "but I feel and see my goal already. I'm not afraid. My star shines brightly. Earlier I believed in my star, now I see it, and soon I shall possess it. If only my inner self had matured and developed fully. . . ." Klassen again comes back to his switch from theology to art. "I abandoned theology," he writes, "because I had my own world view (Weltanschauung). I went over to art about which I had definite views. But as soon as I began to work as an artist, I was no longer certain [about what art is]. . . . Today I don't know what art is. But I feel it, I sense its coming to me — the true and heavenly art. . . . That's the life of an artist. They say that this feeling (condition) lasts forever. If that's so, then its godlike and eternal."

In his last letter from Munich, December 23, 1911, Klassen writes that he loves to live in Munich and hopes to "build his nest there," to marry, and then work as an artist to his heart's content. He asks Enns to encourage other friends, including Peter Epp, who is still studying theology in Basel, to come to Munich to experience "life" in that city. "[Peter Epp], the poor boy," Klassen exclaims, "he has no idea what an artist's life is all about. Always in Basel and always among theologians! Dreadful! When I think of it I become sick!"

For about a year and a half there is a gap in Klassen's correspondence to Enns. The next letter was written from Sergeyevka, north of Chortitza, on March 31, 1913. Klassen had returned to his brothers in Russia while Abram Enns had remained in Germany. In this letter Klassen reports on what he has done since the two friends separated in

Germany. While life in Munich toward the end of his stay there had gone well, Klassen had to experience "the influence of the fair sex" upon himself. He writes: "I of course didn't know much about life nor about the world. The green leaves of theology soon wilted under the warm rays of the sun, life came as it was and I accepted it as it came."

A lack of means and commissions compelled Klassen to return to his brothers who had moved to Sergeyevka. Shortly after his return to Russia, he established his studio in Ekaterinoslav. He then went back to Munich for a short time to study at the university there and returned again to Sergeyevka where he "served the people" with carving tombstones and other works in stone. By winter Klassen hopes to move to Petersburg where he intends to benefit from connections he had established with some "higher circles in the proximity of the Tsar." "It's about time that I get a chance to produce a larger work and to display it," he writes. Klassen concludes his letter on a hopeful yet realistic note: "On all sides there are new possibilities. Life promises so much and beckons to me. But fortune is deceptive — the things I achieve, I achieve only through my own effort (mit der eigenen Faust)."

The last letter prior to World War I is dated May 2, 1913. Klassen writes his friend that he had travelled much in search of materials and rocks for his sculptures. He is in love with the vast Ukrainian steppes. "What silence! What greatness in all things!" he exclaims. "Also the people," he continues. "In this folk of the steppes there are still elemental powers (Urkräfte) hidden, and one can understand them so easily. All is so simple, so obvious, and clear as sunshine."

A wealthy Mennonite industrialist, Jacob Niebuhr, has commissioned Klassen to sculpt a monument to Taras Shevtchenko, a Ukrainian poet and nationalist. The sculpture is to be placed in a recreational area Niebuhr was developing along the shores of the Dnieper River opposite of the Island of Chortitza. A monument to Taras Bulba, a Russian hero, is already in place and presently they are working on a giant lion. "But the best work has been assigned to me," Klassen is happy to report, "namely to place the first monument to this poet on the most beautiful spot in the Ukraine. I consider this a great fortune indeed." The needed clay for this model and the beautiful granite from which he will sculpt the figure can be obtained from their own land. The main figure in this monument will be a sitting "Kobzar," a Ukrainian minstrel, about five times life size.[12]

Klassen concludes his letter to Enns with another piece of advice: "Don't return to Russia until you have completed your studies. As you know, we all depend on the people [for a position] and the people want to see stamped documents. You will no doubt find a suitable position and work somewhere. Life is so rich. Life is the best thing we have. Complete your studies and then plunge into life, whether in Germany, Russia, or elsewhere in the world doesn't matter. The whole world belongs to us, provided we are prepared to truly live!"

III.

Johann P. Klassen was prevented from completing his ambitious monument project. The Tsarist authorities did not grant Niebuhr permission to erect a monument to a Ukrainian nationalist, and World War I and the subsequent Revolution of 1917 brought the Mennonite world in Russia to an end.

As a Mennonite pacifist, Klassen served in the *Sanitätsdienst* (train ambulance service) during the War and the Revolution. When the Mennonites organized self-defense units (*Selbstschutz*) to protect their villages against anarchist bands, Klassen declined strong urgings to join and carry arms. Many of his plaques, statues and sketches created during those years were a protest against the inhumanity and futitily of violence and war.[13]

Seeing no future in a country that had been their homeland for 125 years, Klassen and many of his fellow Mennonites began to look for another country and new opportunities. Klassen was among the very first to emigrate to Canada in 1923.[14] The next year he left for Bluffton, Ohio, where he was appointed as an art teacher in Bluffton College, a Mennonite institution. At last Klassen was able to teach art and create works for which he had trained during his storm and stress years.

In 1931 Klassen and his wife applied for U.S. citizenship. Their applications were rejected "because of their conscientious objection to war service and their refusal to take the oath of allegiance without reservation."[15] Two years later citizenship was granted to Klassen despite his refusal to swear that he would bear arms in defense of the constitution.

During World War II Klassen also taught art in Civilian Public Service camps and sought to foster the spirit of peace. Shortly after the war he travelled in Canada "from Vancouver to Toronto" to tell "his people" of his experiences and the role of art in human affairs. When the war ended, Klassen was able to establish contact with his friend, Abram Enns, again, offering him financial help in war-torn Germany.[16]

After a silence of some twelve years, the correspondence between Klassen and Enns was resumed in the 1960s. The letters written in 1962 reveal plans for Enns to attend the Mennonite World Conference to be held in Kitchener, Ontario, and to visit the Klassens in Bluffton.[17] In addition to their desire to see each other again after a separation of some fifty years, the two friends intend to visit the art galleries in several American cities.[18] When the friends, both in their seventies, met at last, there was much to reminisce, tell, and communicate. Their youth was spent, but the ideals which the two men, now fathers and grandfathers, harboured in their hearts had not been diminished by time.

Abram Enns reached his 100th birthday on April 23, 1987, in Lübeck, Germany.[19] Johann Klassen had died in 1971 in Bluffton, also reaching a

ripe old age of 87. In 1933 when Klassen was granted U.S. citizenship, *The Christian Century* wrote of him: "The Russian immigrant who would rather sculpture beauty than carry a rifle, who would rather heal wounds then inflict them. . . has made his dream come true. . . . Perhaps the Russian artisan will never chisel beauty finer than the figure of his own rugged self as he stood there in the first moment of his American citizenship [and when he said], 'It takes courage to stand by one's convictions.'"[20]

Notes

[1]N. J. Klassen, "Mennonite Intelligentsia in Russia," *Mennonite Life*, Vol. 24 (Apr. 1969), No. 2, pp. 51–60.

[2]See, for example, Harry Loewen, "Candian-Mennonite Literature: Longing for a Lost Homeland," in *The Old World and the New: Literary Perspectives of German-Speaking Canadians*, ed. by Walter E. Riedel (Toronto/Buffalo/London: University of Toronto Press, 1984), pp. 73–93. See also Cornelius Krahn, "Literary Efforts Among the Mennonites of Russian Background," *Mennonite Life*, Vol. 24 (Oct. 1969), No. 4, pp. 166–168.

[3]See P. M. Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia (1789–1910)*. Trans. from the German (Fresno, California: Board of Christian Literature of M.B. Churches, 1978), pp. 689–841, for intimations of Mennonite education and culture prior to World War I.

[4]For a fine article on the work of Johann P. Klassen, see Larry Kehler, "The Artistic Pilgrimage of John P. Klassen," *Mennonite Life*, Vol. 28 (Dec. 1973), No. 4, pp. 114–118, 125–127. See also Kehler's earlier article, "John P. Klassen — Artist and Teacher," *Mennonite Life*, Vol. 24 (Oct. 1969), No. 4, pp. 147–150. On other young men who went to study in Switzerland, see A. B. Enns, "A Communication," *Mennonite Life*, Vol. 24 (Oct. 1969), No. 4, pp. 164–165.

[5]These letters are deposited in the city archives of Lübeck, West Germany. References to and quotations from these letters will be indicated in the text by dates only. All translations from these letters are my own. In translating portions from these letters I sought to render them in the English idiom rather than adhering slavishly to the German text.

[6]Mrs. Lena Ewert transcribed the "Gothic" letters into the Latin German script, for which I am grateful to her.

[7]Interview on Jan. 23, 1987.

[8]On Klassen's comments on the Ukrainian steppes, see also his letters of Aug. 9 and Aug. 25, 1906.

[9]This expression of Promethean rebellion and will to create is no doubt unique among the writings of Mennonites prior to World War I. Moreover, the fact that the writer is a 22-year-old Mennonite student from the steppes of the Ukraine adds significance to the outpourings of his heart.

[10]In his storm and stress mood Klassen rebels against all restrictions and seeks to leave "theology" behind him, but he never pours scorn upon his faith, belief in God, or his Christian upbringing. He seeks to integrate the freedom of an artist with his tradition.

[11]Other writers have also commented on the "negative" side of the artists' life styles in Munich, no lesser novelist than Thomas Mann among them.

[12]Kehler, "The artistic Pilgrimage of John P. Klassen," p. 116.

[13]See "Sketches from a Chortitza Boyhood," *Mennonite Life*, Vol. 28, (Dec. 1973), No. 4, pp. 104–113.

[14]Klassen was a leader in the early migration of Mennonites to Canada. See his unpublished "Bericht von Johann Klassen über die Auswanderung 1923," (dated Feb. 25, 1961, Bluffton, Ohio). A copy of his "report" is in my possession.

[15]Kehler, "The Artistic Pilgrimage of John P. Klassen," p. 118.

[16]See Johann Klassen's letter of Jan. 11, 1948, to his friend, Abram Enns.

[17]There are ten letters of that year altogether, five written by Enns and five by Klassen. They are filled with anticipation, plans of what they will do when they see each other again, and discussions about art.

[18]The cities they intend to visit are Philadelphia, Washington, Pittsburgh, Toledo, Chicago and Cleveland. See Klassen's letter of Apr. 23, 1962. It seems that the Mennonite World Conference is the occasion for Enns to visit his friend in America. However, Abram Enns reviewed the Mennonite art on display at the conference. See his critical article: "A Mennonite Art Display: An Evaluation," *Mennonite Life*, (Jan. 1963).

[19]On Abram Enn's life, philosophy and poetry, see my two articles: "Abram B. Enns: Einer der 'Generation im Aufbruch'," *Der Bote* (June 4, 1986), and "Ein mennonitischer Weltbürger: Abram B. Enns 100 Jahre alt," *Der Bote* (Apr. 22, 1987).

[20]Quoted in Kehler, "The Artisitc Pilgrimage of John P. Klassen," p. 127.