

Madness in One Family's Journey: From Ukraine to Germany to Canada

Elsie K. Neufeld, *University of the Fraser Valley*

There is much pain that is quite noiseless... seen in no writing except that made on the face by the slow months of suppressed anguish and early morning tears. Many an inherited sorrow that has marred a life has been breathed into no human ear. (Mary Ann Evans, aka George Eliot)

The following account bears witness to such pain. It speaks of six generations of a Mennonite family whose medical history is, as psychiatrists say, "loaded." The silence is lifting as those who have witnessed their loved ones' suffering begin to speak aloud of what one family member has named *Die Familie Krankheit*. This is our story.

April 25, 1926.

In the southern Ukraine, in the district of Zaporozhye, colony Chortiza, in the village of Neuendorf, Tina comes running with news for

her sister, Susanna, who lives there, in the clay-and-straw-brick house on the second last yard along the dirt road.

Tina is screaming. She is screaming and screaming, saying over and over, in Low German, "*Daut's oba schracklich. Daut's oba schracklich!*" It's terrible. It's terrible! Her cries are about their Uncle Isaak Derksen's sudden death. Their mother's brother.

Stop the camera. Turn back the clock and calendar several months.

On the other village street, in another yard, on a bench set against the barn's firewall, sits Isaak Derksen with his three-year-old grandson Gerhard. Gerhard fiddles with a twig. Acacia, perhaps. Isaak is rolling a cigarette. He folds and unfolds the paper, then sprinkles *Tabak* into the crevice. He rolls the paper back and forth until the cradled brown stuff resembles a tiny sausage. It's tricky. Gently he lifts one edge so the other curls underneath the tobacco. There. It catches. His thumbs guide the other side up and over. He lifts the cigarette and licks the horizon of "white skin." Then he "baptizes" the cigarette. A damp cigarette burns longer. He places one end into his mouth and, glancing down, sees his grandson also slip the twig between his lips. Isaak smirks. Picks up a match, touches flame to tip and inhales. Slowly exhales. Smoke rises, leaving a trail the way a shadow follows a man.

Seventy-five years later Gerhard will recall and write that memory and another – a recollection of Isaak under the arbour, cupping his work-worn hands around a drink of cool water.

It takes two hands to roll a cigarette just so. It takes two hands to measure a rope, tie a knot, fix one end to a beam and cinch the other around the neck. Then let it drop.

These are the words Gerhard records in the family book: "*Am 25 April fand man Grossvater tot im Stahl. Er sah dunkel für die Zukunft.*" (Grandfather was found dead in the barn. He saw the future as dark.) He was 61 years, 9 months and two days old.

What did Isaak Derksen think as he stepped into the air? What was the darkness? The loss of 32 family members who had emigrated the previous year? The imminent departure of the remaining 14? Or was it some chemical misfiring? He will not be the last in the family to suffer madness. Years later the son of Isaak's sister (his nephew, Isaak Hildebrandt) also commits suicide, in a Saskatchewan nursing home. The second generation. And in the 1990s, in the fourth generation, Isaak's great-great-grandson is diagnosed with schizophrenia. He often lives on the streets.

But stop the clock again. Move back to the line of names in the generation following Isaak's. Look where the finger now rests.

Susanna, the woman in the opening scene, is Isaak Derksen's niece. My mother's mother. Oma, born in 1899, was the youngest daughter of

a well-to-do landowner. She had thick, dark, waist-long hair. She skated to school on the river, played *Schlüsselbund* with the Youth and fell in love. At age 17 and five months pregnant she married Heinrich, the son of a minister: a doubly shameful situation. In photos of that time her eyes hint at emotional struggle, that beyond-sad look.

Heinrich wanted to emigrate in the early 1920s, but Susanna cried and cried at the thought of leaving her family and so he relented. They would stay. Susanna changed her mind but it was too late. Heinrich lost his *Stimmrecht*, was denied work. He left home to work in Zentral. From there he sent home the *Kasten* intended to transport belongings to Canada, filled with apples he'd gleaned from a field. The family barely survived; their threadbare clothing was patched. Heinrich returned a year later.

February 3, 1938. The Black Raven appears at night; Heinrich is *verschleppt*. Susanna is alone with 8 children, the youngest not yet two. For three days and nights she is immobilized. Subsequent trips to the prison are futile. According to records released years later, Heinrich is executed soon after arrest.

Who can say how that trauma and its aftermath altered the brain circuitry of Oma and each of her children? Their story was central to my upbringing.

Then, the trek.

Next come separation, displacement, and reunion with some family members in Northern Germany. Son Dietrich is reported as *gefallen*, killed in combat. Hein, the eldest son, a German soldier, is captured by the Russians and repatriated, while his wife and three children manage to resettle in Canada.

Another rending: my parents and eldest brother arrive in the Fraser Valley in June 1948. Tina, Oma's eldest daughter, settles in Manitoba. Oma and her youngest four immigrate to Paraguay. There, in the Chaco's "green hell," Maria, Oma's youngest daughter, becomes pregnant at 16. Maria is forced to wear a black dress to her wedding. The groom's brother who is a minister blames Oma. Oma has her first "official" breakdown.

In the mid-50s, Oma and her children immigrate to Canada. All but Harry have married. Oma and Harry buy a small farm, but the stress of debt and starting over again trigger another breakdown. The seller is gracious and rescinds the deal. Oma briefly lives with my parents, who have four children: mother is pregnant with my twin brother and me. Then Oma and Harry move into the house next to my parents' on our farm. Oma can't take care of herself or her son. Sometimes she hammers on the wall of her house and Mom rushes over. "She couldn't even cook a pot of potatoes," Dad later recalled. But one day Oma's activity accelerates. She is busy, busy. She hurries from house

to barn and back, a butcher knife in hand. Mom worries that Oma will harm herself, but doesn't think to remove the knife. She and Dad feel helpless.

And then Oma crashes again. She can't be alone. She circulates between her children's homes. In Manitoba she is taken to the *Nervenanstalt* in Winkler. What happened? "They gave her pills."

A package arrives in the mail. Inside is a small blue dress that Oma has sewn for me. It is a good sign. She is getting better again. Upon her return to our farm, Oma insists her sons bring her a truckload of dirt and manure; she wants to plant a garden.

Was there a diagnosis? People didn't talk about her type of condition back then; they considered it *Seelenkrankheit*, a result of some unconfessed sin. Whatever it was, the lows and highs appeared suddenly. Cyclically.

I remember Oma's catatonia. How Mom steered her before the mirror, placed a comb into her hand and nudged it towards her hair. "Ma," she said. "*Ma. Du motzt.*" You have to. At a birthday *Faspa* for Oma, her friends, all immigrant women without men, sat at the table, drank coffee, and talked about Oma in the third person. Oma stared straight ahead. She might have said yes or no.

She recovers and resumes life. Cooks, bakes and eats rich Mennonite foods. She plants beans and potatoes, begonias and dahlias, and hangs laundry on a line above. Evenings she reads *Die Rundschau*, *Der Bote*, and *Deutsche Romanen* from the church library and writes letters again. She listens to *New Life*, a German radio program, and hums along with "*Gehe nicht vorbei, O Heiland...*" as she sews aprons and embroiders tea towels for her granddaughters. She tries to teach me how to thread a needle and knot the long yarn. While she eats dinner alone her blue budgie, Freddie, perches on her head and pecks crumbs off the table afterwards. Sometimes she laughs so hard her belly moves like squished air inside a balloon.

The willow near her kitchen window grows wider; the acacia behind the living room groans eerily in winter.

Then, long-awaited news. Hein, Oma's eldest son, finally has permission to emigrate from Riga to Germany. He arrives in early February, 1978. In March, my parents fly to Germany with Oma. What a shock! Hein, at 60, is a broken man. Worst of all, he is guilt-plagued at having remarried without being divorced. Such are the consequences of war. It can't be undone. He has three children with his second wife, now in their late teens.

On the second day of the visit, Oma sits in a chair, her head bowed and hands folded in her lap. "I want to go home," she declares. "Now." "It was terrible; I had to almost carry her onto the plane," Mom recalls. In photos, Oma's eyes are glassy. She is there, and yet not.

Five months later, on August 9, 1978, a phone call. *Hein ist tot. Selbstmord.*

A month later my husband and I visit Hein's family in Germany. There are sorrows for which there is no language. "What more did he want?" they ask repeatedly. "All these years, all the rejected exit visas and then, finally, we arrive in Germany, and...."

Anna, the eldest, recalls she was home ironing when her father went into the basement storage room. She wondered why. He came up and said he was going for a walk. She had a terrible premonition; he had attempted suicide before. It grew dark. Her mother, sister and brother came home but her father did not. The police found him hanging in the nearby forest. The rope was one the family had used to secure their suitcases. She shows us photos of him in the casket. He does not look as if he "just fell asleep." We visit his grave. German cemeteries are immaculate parks. Verdant and floral.

In October 2010, Susanne, his second daughter, reflects by email what her father was like and how his illness affected the family:

My father? We grew up with that... You know, he was the dearest father: wise, insightful, funny. He worked a lot (hard). Was beloved and entertaining (chatty)...and then, from one day to the next (literally, overnight), he remained lying in bed, and if he got up, he simply sat there: didn't want to speak, just stared... Or pretended he was reading a book, the same page all day long. Or he became very aggressive... And then time passed and he was fine, and he didn't want to sleep, and he stayed awake all night and was completely euphoric...

It happened often; he was fine for 2-3 months and then again very bad for six months. And constantly changing. Seldom, very seldom, was there a good time. We were used to it. We children didn't know any different. Yes, and then, when I was 15, he attempted his first suicide. Then, approximately two years later, the second attempt. And then, here in Germany, the third, which he completed.

What is required of a man to die by his own hands? Hands that have worked the earth, folded in prayer, fondled a breast and cradled his children's newborn heads. Hands that shook other men's hands in greeting. Or were lifted to wave: Goodbye. *Aufwiedersehen.*

Was it cowardice? Courage? Did he look into the horribly dark sky one night and, like the character in Dostoevsky's novel *Dream of a Ridiculous Man*, notice a star intently...because "that star had given me an idea: I decided to kill myself...."?

Imagine the neural chaos preceding the calm, the relief that, surely – dear God, let it be so – is born in that moment.

“I think he could no longer bear it himself,” writes Susanne. “He only wanted rest. And from then on his soul had rest. It is no sin...I knew that then already. I was just so sorry for Father that no one would understand it.” Susanne answers my questions in her letter:

Does anyone here have it? I am not certain. My siblings cause me concern. Sister Anni is often despondent, is fearful of the future. And then she is aggressive again and then depressive. Emotionally very unstable and mostly unhappy. She has not yet taken the step to consult the doctor. She does not want it to be true. She is a very intelligent woman and wants everything to be perfect... Brother Thomas has a hard time. Works a lot. Many worries. Whether he is heading in the direction of the illness is difficult for me to assess.... Anni's eldest son, in my opinion, is leaning in the direction of depression and aggression. And he is often unhappy.

Is it coincidence that Hein's eldest daughter by his first wife also suffers depression? And that three of his four sisters have all benefitted from anti-depressants?

And then there is Oma's youngest son Harry. He's in his mid-70s now. I remember his hand on my back as I walked before him at his wedding, his flower girl, and he whispered, “Walk faster.” Uncle Harry worked very hard. He acquired farms, built a successful business, drove Cadillacs and Mercedes, lived in a house with a view and a swimming pool. He sang in an octet at church and gave generously. He was erratic and arrogant. Stubborn as hell. In the mid 90s, after clear-cutting a mountainside illegally and experiencing a debilitating depression (not the first), he was diagnosed with manic-depression. He thinks now that he's had it all his life. He is medication-compliant, but drugs make the highs only a little less high. ECT failed. He is a rapid cyler – every three weeks, almost to the day. He has been restrained in the locked ward. It enraged him. His family has endured a madness too.

Not all families stay intact; the volatility is like standing on a floor covered in marbles. Harry's remains devoted and his wife has designed a life around his illness. Such love is another kind of insanity: those who practice it wonder, sometimes, in secret: when will it end? Then comes the guilt, the sense of betrayal.... Fresh waves of grief. The vortex of caring.

Stop the camera again. Go back a few years. For the record, my Oma didn't recover. She died in '82 of stomach cancer. Her last words were, “*Es brennt, es brennt. Wasser.*” An apt metaphor for madness, how it

burns the person from the inside. For some, nothing extinguishes the flame.

My generation, the fourth, is not exempt. Lines from "Al Caminante," a poem by Pablo Neruda, resonate:

This I know at great cost:
all life is not outward,
nor is all death from within.

I take my daily pill, as do others, and give thanks for life, the possibility of restoration. I have been to the Dark Place. Writing contains my melancholy, remembers me to beauty and laughter. My compulsion is words, and I know it could be far, far worse, although those who have been recipients of my graphomania might argue otherwise. If you see me writing on walls, as did my first cousin for a while, believing she was the new Mary and her son, Jesus Christ, please do intervene. She insists she's *not* bipolar, just "weird." There are many realities.

There are, as yet, no realized suicides on our line.

Now comes the fifth generation with its drug and alcohol addiction, panic and anxiety disorder and more. Karl, grandson of Hein, is among the afflicted. Dark-haired, sharp-looking, intelligent, talented Karl. He kept his delusions and suicidal thoughts to himself until his mid-20s, when his wife divorced him. His sister writes,

Depression and constant suicidal thoughts were replaced almost overnight with mania and psychosis. He changed from one person into another. Even his voice changed. He ate only greens and seeds. Turned against family, inappropriately quoted scripture...gave away all his personal belongings. He believed he was a disciple of Jesus Christ and then that he *was* Jesus Christ. He had power to control the universe; he had the answers to world hunger, to all problems. In 2007, he believed there was a blue planet and that a mother space ship awaited him at the bottom of the Ottawa River.

Schizo-affective disorder was added to the diagnosis of bipolar. He wanted to live, but living was death. Medication helped somewhat.

In all, there were three suicide attempts.

He just wanted to go home.

In June 2010, Karl was diagnosed with terminal lymphoma. He has opted for no treatment. Amazingly, he has not been this "well" in years. The family has received his restored mental health as grace. An Ottawa art gallery showed Karl's paintings, which fetched \$3-4000 each. They "are dark and big," says his mom, "because his pain is so big." "I am

a child of God," he wrote on one. Painting and the unwavering, oh-so-profound love of family and friends has not cured him, but it dignifies his humanity. And theirs. He is at peace, unafraid of death.

"You will grow and change and learn from this in ways you can't imagine," his sister Paula wrote when I told her my son Daniel has a mental illness.

Yes. He has bipolar I with psychosis.

How true Yogi Berra's saying, "The future ain't what it used to be." Certainly not for the perfect, chocolate-eyed baby I first held on May 8, 1981. He was imaginative, smart and sensitive, could kick a soccer ball from one goalpost to the other and followed world politics from the age of 12. He backpacked through Europe at 19 and attended university to become a journalist.

It takes an average of eight years to diagnose bipolar illness. It took six with Daniel from the onset of his significant symptoms. Harrowing years, during which we watched our son's beautiful mind unravel. Appeals for intervention were met with "He is an adult. If he is a danger to self or others, call the police or take him to Emergency." Danger meant, exclusively, "life-threatening" – not social, emotional, financial or relational collapse. In spring 2008, when I began to fear my son and chaos was the norm no matter what we did, my friend joked, "Family gone mad." And we had.

Daniel was first hospitalized this year. On April Fools' Day. A visiting psychiatrist from Boston admitted and certified him. The story is still too raw to share; it is a cruel disease. Daniel says he feels like Sisyphus. He is not convinced he has bipolar, and would prefer not to take meds. His sweetness now is heart-wrenching. We hold hope in one hand and reality in the other. They are unequally balanced. There is no "rescue capsule" to extract our son from the hole of bipolar.

It sounds a mess, does it not? And yet shake the branches of any family tree and things fall out. Perhaps not nuts, but something. Life breaks all of us.

It is one thing to speak clinically about mental illness. But attached to every diagnosis is a human face, a name and a family. The story must be spoken. Obsessive compulsive disorder, anxiety and depression have already been diagnosed in six generations of my family.

This being human is not easy. We are not "spared" or "chosen". Not punished for disobeying God as implied in Deuteronomy. So much has changed since my great-great-uncle Isaak Derksen took his own life in 1926. So much has not. In 2010, when my cousin tells me her young adult son was suicidal and hospitalized, she adds, "*Shhh. He could lose his job.*"

I think of this as I sit in a café on a busy Vancouver street. The purple wake of the sunset has been erased by dark. On the opposite

side of the street, the “walk” and “don’t walk” flash on and off. A young man hurries across the crosswalk. After a quick drag, he drops his half-smoked cigarette. It rolls onto the line. The Mennonite in me considers rescuing it. Had my son been following him, he would have. His disability cheque will run out before month’s end. Car after car and feet pass by and shift the faint wisp of smoke sideways. Then wham! An ellipses of sparks hovers and falls under an oncoming tire.

One in five Canadians will suffer a mental illness. Mennonites are not exempt. The stories must be told.