

Economic Narratives Revisited: Female Contributions to Family Sustainability in Omsk

**Linda Earl, *Morden, Manitoba* and
Kathleen Wiens, *University of Los Angeles, California***

This article discusses the family of Peter J. Wiens (1848-1927) and Justina Janzen (1850-1926), a family cited as the first Mennonites to settle in the Siberian city of Omsk (Friesen and Friesen 80). The discussion pays particular attention to motivations for female family members to participate in economic activity. Before the early twentieth century, economic activity is remembered as a primarily male domain within the family; men acted as business owners and primary breadwinners. We discuss circumstances in Siberia and Canada to which family members responded by challenging gendered expectations of economic activity. In this discussion, we hope to contribute to understandings of female roles in economic activity.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw migration of landless farmers from western regions of the Russian Empire into Siberia. Upon hearing of business potential in Siberia, Peter J. Wiens and his wife Justina Janzen, along with several dependant children, relocated from the Molotchna (Molchna) colony (in present day Ukraine) to Omsk in 1897. There they opened an agricultural imple-

ments dealership. In the following years, they were joined by their adult children from Molotchna who wanted to participate in family business ventures. Several sons were involved in family owned businesses in Omsk and in nearby towns. Among them was Johann P. Wiens (1872-1931) and his wife Helena Fast (1875-1963). When Peter J. and Justina relocated to Omsk, Johann P. and Helena stayed in Molotchna. Following the birth of their first child, they moved to Tokmak (Ukraine) to pursue business opportunities. After several years in Tokmak where three more children were born, the family moved to Omsk in 1905. In Omsk Johann P. ran an outlet for the International Harvester Company, and for a brief period operated an outlet in Minusinsk. The Wiens family residence in Omsk (1913-16) on the Om River included three houses. From 1916-26 Johann P. and Helena lived in Slavgorod, a town southeast of Omsk. Their Slavgorod property included a house and farm buildings.¹ Political and economic reasons motivated the couple and their daughters to move from Siberia to Canada in 1926 (minus their son who was conscripted by the White Army and disappeared). They settled in Charleswood, Manitoba.

Public and Private

Mennonite history is often presented in terms of institutional life, relying on documented public activity in businesses and church life. In *Mennonite Women in Canada*, Marlene Epp notes that female contributions to community life, if mentioned, are “defined by their marital relationship” (2008, 4) or closely identified with male ancestors. Activities of women were not well documented thus their contributions are marginalized. For example, based on family records, we know that Wiens family members relocated from Molotchna to Siberia so that male members of the family could open new businesses. We also know that the move from Siberia to Canada was discussed and decided by male members of the family. What were the actions of women through times of stability and change, and how did their actions engage with a broader narrative of economic activity?

Marginalized and often over-looked resources help inform our discussion of domains in which females thrived. Our research draws from family histories and unpublished memoirs.² This methodology is in keeping with contemporary Mennonite scholarship that is interested in enriching narrowly conceived understandings of Mennonite history (see Epp 2000 and 2008; Loewen 2001; Redekop 1996; Toews 1998). Understandings and interpretations are informed by our positions as female members of the Wiens family.³

We understand “economic activity” as the accumulation of capital or resources.⁴ The women we discuss often engaged in “non-market” or “informal economy” activities. Economic transactions involved barter, exchange, and undocumented cash income. They did not operate in spaces associated with a formal economy (stores or offices), and it was only after the 1920s that women moved into formal wage work. In histories that evaluate and reconstruct economic narratives through monetary activity, these contributions are difficult to engage with and tend to be overlooked (Cohen 1988, 287). Without considering these contributions, women appear to operate passively within economic narratives in which “‘public’ men were subject to historical changes over time, while ‘private’ women were not change agents” (Helly and Reverby 1992, 5).

The discussion employs the categories “public domain” and “private domain.” We understand “domains” as patterns of behavior and organizational practice, “fundamental principles for organizing social relations” (Ridgeway and Correll 2004, 521). “Domains” may also refer to physical spaces (homes, farms, stores). Maintaining gendered domains implied “normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one’s sex category” (West and Zimmerman 1987, 127). The female domain was “private,” female family members functioned in the home and garden, and interactions were focused on family-related issues. The male domain was “public,” taking place in spaces outside the home, dealing with business affairs and the public. Male members were active in public domains of business ownership, property ownership, and dealing with customers or suppliers.

The public/private dichotomy is most notably discussed in regards to political engagement (Anderson 2000; Elshtain 1981, Habermas 1991; Prokhovnik 1998; Siltanen and Stanworth 1984). The boundaries and content of each category are subjective and at times contradictory, and we acknowledge these problematic aspects of categorization (see Backscheider and Dykstal 1996; Fairfield 2005; Helly and Reverby 1992; Landes 1998; Ridgeway and Correll 2004; Scott and Keates 2005; Weintraub 1997). Though problematic or arguably even “imagined” categories, they are useful for us in that they describe categories that members of our family valued and attempted to maintain. Men in the family were primary income earners; this was an expected and valued behavior. Activity resulting in monetary transaction took place in public spaces. Economic activity was gendered, and until the early twentieth century the gender division was valued. Contesting boundaries and contents of the domains was contingent on regional social and political circumstances; we could say that the domains were socially constructed according to gender, but not fully determined by it.⁵ A few anecdotes presented in this paper could support that the

public/male and private/female domains were deeply embedded in the social fabric of the family. For example, a father figure quashing a daughter's desire for education and relegating her to kitchen work, or a husband demanding the closure of his wife's business as not to disturb his domestic peace. From our perspective in the present looking back on the past, we perceive that the gendered domains were validated, in addition to being challenged, and at times reworked entirely. Looking closely at how domains are idealized and then reworked, we reveal a relationship between expected behavior within a category, and the people working within categories to change them. This underscores William Sewell's concept of agency (1992). By employing categories of public and private, we see how imagined boundaries and contents of categories change through tension between categories (Schuurmann and Spierenburg 1996, 8). Women are revealed as reactive and proactive, not portrayed as subjects or passive characters within broader narratives.

Omsk

The primary person of interest in our story is Helena Fast Wiens (born Helena Fast, 1875-1963). The marriage of Johann P. Wiens to Helena Fast Wiens brought an unorthodox attitude into the Wiens family. The entrepreneurial attitude introduced by Helena into the Wiens family served as a starting point in challenging gendered behavior.

Helena's headstrong independence was a result of her upbringing. Her mother died when Helena was eleven years old. At that time, she and her sisters began work as farm labourers near Halbstadt, Molotchna. Her father was a horse trainer, and he taught her these skills to open up employment opportunities. With some money she earned from farm labour, she paid for sewing courses so that she could "earn her living in a more dignified manner" (according to genealogist Justina Peters). She made household visits as a seamstress and her work was in high demand in Halbstadt. From an early age, she was determined not to depend on another person in order to survive. She married at age twenty three, which at the time was considered a late age for marriage. Helena was baptized in 1893 in Orloff, and rebaptized Mennonite Brethren in Siberia.

Her training as a seamstress served as a basis for her first business endeavor in Omsk. Helena was asked by people from German-speaking families in the region to open a sewing school.⁶ The Wiens family dining room became a sewing school by day, and the students left at night to board elsewhere. By bringing business activity into domestic space

(the sewing room and the dining room used for the sewing school) private and public domains mixed. Helena's income supplemented family income. However, male authority was exercised when Johann P. decided that the sewing school would be terminated. Although Helena was "completely absorbed" in her business, Johann P. decided that she "had enough work with [her own] family" (Neufeld *More Memories*).

The Wiens families operated stores in Omsk, one German-language bookstore and a dry goods store. We have little information regarding female presence in commercial spaces. We know that female family members acted as store assistants as well as what might be called "plain clothes security" to catch thieves. While working as a bookstore assistant, Johann P. and Helena's oldest daughter Helena J. developed an interest in reading. However, her desires for higher education were left unfulfilled when her father Johann P. insisted that her help in the kitchen was of better use to the family. Throughout her life, she expressed regret at not being permitted to pursue further education.

The outbreak of the First World War in 1914 had serious consequences for the family including "hate campaigns against the German minority," threats of property liquidation and forbidding German language in public or the press (Toews 1973, 94). Wiens family businesses suffered discrimination and they were forced to remove their German-language signs. This placed the family in a precarious position.

To avoid attention, Johann P. and Helena moved to Slavgorod in 1916 and took up farming. The tense political situation led to Johann P.'s financial insecurity, causing personal anxiety. Johann attempted to make some business deals for which payment was not received; he felt he could not trust anyone. It has been noted that by 1925 Mennonites in Slavgorod had come to be "totally dependant" on aid from abroad.⁷ However, when examining women's activities, we see that the story is more complicated. Helena's entrepreneurial activity allowed the family to survive despite the absence of their only son (conscripted) and a disenfranchised husband.

Helena's farm labour experience became vital as her husband was a businessman and had never known farming. One anecdote tells us that Johann P. brought home a riding horse thinking it was suitable to plow the field. Helena relied on her horse training experience and retrained the horse for pulling. Midwifery and healing became essential methods of securing income. Helena trained herself as a midwife and healer by reading several large medical books. She carefully followed the given instructions, and successfully treated a range of illnesses. The years of a typhus epidemic were exceptional; she was needed to fumigate homes and attend to the sick. She also prepared bodies for burial. As a part of her work as a healer, she grew and sold herbal remedies. Forms

of payment depended on wider economic conditions; hard currency was accepted when times were financially favourable, or goods when crises hit. Work as a midwife and healer meant that domestic space was used for public activity with customers and patients entering her home, and Helena entering the homes of the public. Likewise, household space was used for preparation of remedies and a portion of the garden was dedicated to Helena's herbal remedies venture. These examples illustrate additional intersections of private space with a public commercial activity.

As with many households across Russian and Soviet territory, the Wiens home fell victim to frequent raids by soldiers looking to appropriate money, food and material objects.⁸ Helena's deviance against tightening political authority helped assert power over domestic space which was essential to her various business ventures. The house contained a small room from which they sold goods. Interior entrances from the house to the shop room were concealed. Authorities were steered away from the exterior shop door and led from outdoors towards a different exterior door into the house when they came looking for money or material goods. Signals understood by Helena and her daughters warned one another to hide valuable items at the bottom of filled wash bins before authorities would enter; the women hoped that men would not be inclined to search the bottom of a washing tub. At one point, authorities appropriated half of the Wiens house, and the doors between soldiers and family quarters were sealed with brick. During a brief absence of the unwelcome "visitors," Helena knocked down the brick seal, re-appropriated one room, and cemented the far door. Knowing that her husband would suffer serious consequences if found guilty of such an act, Helena took it upon herself to assert power against authority by regaining domestic space.

Canada

The family left Siberia in June 1926, arriving in Winnipeg, Canada in August 1926. They settled in Charleswood, now a suburb of Winnipeg. Helena had engrained house-holding skills and a business-minded attitude in her daughters. They carried their private domain skills into the workforce within their first week of arriving in Winnipeg. Their situation was not unique. Many single females from migrant families worked in domestic service in order to contribute to family stability (Barber 2005; Frances et al. 1996), including Mennonite women (Epp 2000, Chapter 5; Epp 2008, 42-51).

The women operated in private domain spaces, but as wage earners were behaving in a male domain by taking on roles previously reserved

for men. Health problems prevented Johann P. from working outside the home, and when he passed away in 1931 the Wiens family became matrifocal. Income was accrued by women and distributed according to the wishes of the female head of the household. The collective income of four of the Wiens daughters purchased their first house and chicken farm in Charleswood, Winnipeg.

Several daughters found themselves acting as single parents and at times primary income earners. In her unpublished memoirs, daughter Agnes Peters (born in Minusinsk in 1907) tells of several situations in which ladies she worked for were entirely unequipped for domestic tasks. Her skills and resourcefulness became essential for these women, and her work was highly valued. Agnes was hired as the head domestic for the wealthy Ashdown family in Winnipeg. When Agnes's husband suffered from serious illness, her position at the Ashdown mansion allowed her to act as primary wage earner in her family (see Peters 1995).

Helena J., the oldest daughter of the family, acted as a single parent during periods of the 1930s when her husband suffered from tuberculosis. With little formal education and learning a new language, Helena struggled between home-based projects, dependence of income from her teenaged children, and help from the community. While Helena J. had been denied a higher education in her youth, she was intent on seeing her daughters educated in order to avoid dependence on other people, echoing her mother's attitude of independence. Several daughters pursued higher education and by the 1950s were engaged in the workforce. These women acted as essential income earners within their own families.

Because her daughters were financially independent, Helena Fast Wiens decided to move to Yarrow, British Columbia in 1936 where she and one unmarried daughter purchased a house and worked in hops farming. She continued to work various jobs until the age of seventy. Her life story seems typical of transplanted Mennonite women who worked out of the home until retirement age (Epp 2000, 117).

Events we present took place between 1905 and the 1950s, during which we note two significant shifts. First, we see a shift from "survival activities" (Beneria 2001, 34) in Slavgorod to "professionalization" (Stage et al. 1997) of private domain-oriented skills in Winnipeg. The daughters of Helena Fast Wiens developed "public occupational identit[ies]" (Foley 2005, 183). Secondly, we note a transition from public oriented activity conducted in private space, or "family economy," to "family wage economy" in which private domain skills were engaged with public spaces for the purpose of earning wages (see Tilly and Scott 1987).

We regret that in this paper we did not address cases of men participating in "women's work." In researching this topic, we noticed

that challenging domains was not unidirectional, and that men also operated in private domains by helping obtain or construct devices needed for home-based business, and help in producing goods for sale.

Additionally, we have very little information regarding how community or co-religionists responded to the activities of Helena Fast Wiens and her offspring. Social pressure (related to acceptable gendered behavior) required negotiation, sometimes with unhappy outcomes, as noted throughout Epp's *Women Without Men* and *Mennonite Women in Canada*. Epp invokes terms including "conformity" and "community." We are not certain of the extent to which these notions confronted Wiens women. Nor can we determine the extent to which gendered authority was informed by religious belief. These dimensions are worthy of further investigating.

Conclusion

From their arrival in Omsk in 1897, the Wiens family prospered until confronted by the Russian Revolution, the First World War and the establishment of a Soviet state. These events led to new ways of thinking about "primary income earner," a position that until then was held by male members of the Wiens family. After leaving Siberia for Canada, the family moved into roles of newly arrived immigrant workers. Again, gendered domains were re-worked.

The actions of Helena Fast Wiens illustrate how women "exercised influence and agency" (Epp 2008, 5) through entrepreneurial activities within private domain. For example, a sewing school, a small shop, and a herbal remedies business operated in private space. When running home-based businesses, "the public" and financial transactions were invited into the home. Activities within homes of other people were important; Helena acting as a midwife and healer, and her daughters employed as domestic workers in Canada.

Female contributions to financial security were reworked when the family faced disjuncture: illness, death, or political changes. Our research supports a conclusion that although women attempted to engage with public, male domain behavior, the family valued and aimed to maintain gendered domains when times were good. Gender roles were reworked when warranted by necessity. Female economic activity was a temporary strategy in the early twentieth century, and became accepted as regular female behavior by mid-century.

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Notes

- ¹ Two figures were constructed based on recollections of Johann P. and Helena's daughters. They can be obtained by contacting the authors.
- ² Narratives and documents collected and written by Justina Peters and Irene Friesen, as well as interviews conducted by Linda Earl.
- ³ This is not a feminist analysis. We acknowledge, but do not critique, power dynamics that influenced gendered activity, inequality or discrimination. They are important dimensions of this story, but are beyond the scope of this paper.
- ⁴ In discussing "economic activity," we aim neither to privilege monetary transaction over other forms of transaction (Siltanen and Stanworth), nor assert connections between wage earning and empowerment, hierarchy or liberation (Tilly and Scott 1987, 2). Rather, we interpret various forms of economic activity as steps towards self-determination.
- ⁵ Marlene Epp (2008, 227) also asserts that dualities and gendered separation of domains existed, along with nuances, dependence, and relations between domains.
- ⁶ Our primary sources do not specify if the "German speakers" were Lutheran, Baptist or Mennonite. It is noted that they came from "across the Irtysh River," and since the students boarded in the city, they likely came from rural areas.

- ⁷ Toews (1973, 101) describes several factors of financial crises in Slavgorod, including crop failure, appropriation of food by authorities and conscription of male labourers into military service.
- ⁸ From unpublished memoirs that served as primary sources, it is difficult to ascertain if “authorities” were Red Army officers, Bolsheviks, White Army officers, or Soviet state officials. Since the family lived in Slavgorod from 1916 until 1926, it is also unclear which situations took place under pre-Soviet or Soviet statehood. We think that the over-riding sentiment held by family members was concern for safety against any intruder. Toews (1998, 50-51) notes a similar style of narrative shared by his female Mennonite informants in which the particulars of politics and threatening groups were not emphasized. Rather, the consequences and reactions were a primary concern.