

Stories of Betrayal and Hope among ‘Horse and Buggy’ Mennonite Women in Bolivia

Martha Hiebert, *Santa Cruz, Bolivia*

In 1988 when I wrote a regular column in the *Mennonite Post* and my husband, Isbrand, was an editor for the same newspaper, supported by Mennonite Central Committee and based in Steinbach, Manitoba, we had an opportunity to visit readers in the Mennonite colonies in Bolivia. Over lunch one day we visited Franz and Anna Banman in Valle Esperanza Colony and Anna related experiences from her practice as a self-trained health care provider. I asked her whether she had written any of them down and when she replied that she hadn't and didn't know anyone who could, she encouraged me to come back, listen to her and write them for her. Time did not allow for it then, but the idea grew in my mind and became a retirement dream for me.

The dream was not only to write her stories but other narratives I encountered, ones that would give a bit of a voice to women who are seldom heard. A grant from the D.F. Plett Historical Research Foundation in 2010 and 2011 made this possible. My husband and I spent five weeks in Bolivia twice. We looked for contacts wherever we went, hoping to find someone willing to tell their story. Since I had been the editor of *Das Blatt* in the early 1990s, many people remembered me, even though we

had never met, and visited with me as a friend. Within the visit, stories were told; I asked to record them and the interviews began.

The following narratives are some of the results of those visits. I am most appreciative to each woman who let me into her life.

Hope Shattered¹

Maria, an Old Colony woman, had come to see Mrs. Schulz the local Mennonite health care provider, and unofficial 'doctor.' Maria came because she had little energy and was having "trouble with her nerves." She always felt tired. She had no desire to do the work she needed to do as a wife, mother and homemaker. She was not herself and wanted help. Mrs. Schulz listened to Maria's symptoms, asked her further questions about her family and her health history, recognizing signs of depression. The doctor discussed nutrition, self-care and prescribed some vitamins. She then asked Maria to make another appointment in the near future and insisted that her husband join her for the consultation. Mrs. Schulz knew that in such cases it was best if both marriage partners were involved in the discussions, in searching for the root of the problem and working on the solution as a team. She hoped that Jacob would be willing to participate.

Just as Mrs. Schulz had hoped, both Jacob and Maria showed up for the follow-up appointment. In the course of the conversation it became clear that Maria's strength had been overextended due to the workload at home with several small children and a fifth one on the way. She was always tired, felt taken for granted and was definitely showing signs of depression, longing for some verbal expressions of love and affirmation. Mrs. Schulz spoke with the couple, gave Maria some supplements to strengthen her body and explained their effects.

Mrs. Schulz then turned to Jacob, "Your wife has an enormous workload on your farm, as do you. In addition, she has to do the laundry, make the meals, care for the children twenty four hours a day and has another one developing inside her body. This is a lot for one person to do. Your job now is to share this load with her. Take a little extra time with the little ones, help her as you go, like picking up a few dishes to take to the sink when you get up from the table and get each child to do the same. That is not much and does not even take extra of your time. Then the most important thing that you need to do is to tell her something nice or thank her for something at least two times each day!" Mrs. Schulz knew that she had been very frank and straightforward with him and was not sure that he would follow her instructions. Maybe he would think; "I am certainly not going to let this Mrs. Schulz tell me what to do in my own home!"

After a month the couple returned for their next check-up. As they entered, Mrs. Schulz immediately saw a change in the way the couple interacted. There was more tenderness and more consideration for one another. Jacob promptly told the doctor, "I am getting back the wife I had at first."

In due time, Maria gave birth to their fifth child. Mrs. Schulz explained to them that it was important that they refrain from being sexual intimate for six weeks. She told them that the female body needs time to heal from the pregnancy and birth. She knew from past experience that this was not necessarily common knowledge, and carefully explained why, adding: "During this time you can still enjoy being with one another. Loving words, tender touches and kisses are important. Maria's body needs time to regain its strength again. It will be helpful to you both and to your family in the long run if you wait."

Maria and Jacob accepted her challenge to wait. Because of the new relationship they were building with words and little gestures of appreciation and love, they were increasingly happy together. Maria regained her strength more quickly than she had after the other children. At five weeks they talked about how they longed to express their love physically again. Waiting was a struggle. They tenderly looked over to the baby sleeping contently in the crib across the room. "We have waited for 5 weeks!" and as they held each other in their arms, they decided that they would wait one more week, as instructed. With that they fell asleep in loving anticipation.

The next morning the little ones came to their bed and shook them awake. This had never happened before. Alarmed Jacob looked at the time. It was late - eight thirty! Never had they slept so long before. The baby was still fast asleep and had not been fed since the night before. What was this! Maria pulled the blanket around her. She was alarmed to find herself naked! Horrified, she noted that her sheet was wet underneath her! As she got up blood trickled down her legs and she burst into desperate tears. They sank back onto the bed together. The "sprayers" had been there at night!

Frantically Jacob called Mrs. Schulz. "The sprayers were here last night! We were waiting for 6 weeks as you said we should. Five weeks were up and everything was so good. Now they have ruined us!"

Mrs. Schulz was able to calm him down and told him to quickly hitch up the buggy, take the children to relatives, get a taxi in the nearby town and go to Santa Cruz to see Dr. Karina right away. "Dr. Karina is my friend. You need to see her at this time; she can help you better than I can with this. I will call her to make sure that she will expect you. She will help you!"

Mrs. Schulz called Dr. Karina immediately to explain the situation, saying that she suspected that some sexual pervert had sprayed

anesthetizing spray into the windows of the house so that all would be fast asleep. He had then entered, stripped Maria and raped her in her own marriage bed beside her sleeping husband!

Dr. Karina did not hesitate to accept this emergency. Mrs. Schulz knew she could count on her in any urgent situation. She was so grateful that she had developed such a close relationship with Dr. Karina, a medical doctor who helped her learn more in her health care practice and was willing to treat her patients when they needed professional help.

Later in the day Dr. Karina called Mrs. Schulz to report on the case. She had examined and treated Maria. She had sent samples into the laboratory for testing and the results confirmed semen from three men and possibly from a fourth. How devastating and horrifying!

Mrs. Schulz buried her face in her hands as she cried for this precious couple who had just begun to find healing, hope, and love in their marriage. She cried to God to help her find ways to lead them on the path to wholeness again, in spite of this incredible crisis, and prayed that they would be willing to let her walk this path with them.

Three Babies in one Night²

“What a day!” thought Greta as she closed the door of her clinic in La Sierra colony and walked across the wide driveway to the house for supper. She was thankful that the girls, ages 12 and 14, were able to take care of the meals on their own by now. She never concerned herself with cooking and housework when she was seeing patients.

Greta was tired from a long day. Many clients had come; some with colds or children with diarrhea, others came to have an injection as prescribed and a couple of pregnant women had come for their check up or for some reassurance. She knew it would be refreshing to sit down for supper and spend a quiet evening, sitting outside in the front yard under the stars with her family.

Greta entered the large, one room, adobe brick house that was her home and joined her family at the supper table. Anna, her youngest, brought the freshly cut bread to the table, and they all bowed their heads in silent prayer. It was not custom to talk much during mealtime, but she asked about the progress on the mattresses that Abram and their son were making for sale. They had begun this new trade during the last year. Two pre-school children of relatives were staying over for a few days and needed special help with their meal. Greta relaxed as she enjoyed her supper surrounded by her loved ones.

Greta had just put away the leftovers when she heard a horse and buggy slow down and turn onto their yard. Soon she heard the visitors

greet Abram and ask for her. Tying her kerchief securely under her chin, she glanced out the window, recognizing a familiar, expectant mother. A new child would be born before the morning. Hopefully she would still get some sleep tonight.

Greta led the couple to the small, wooden building and prepared them for the work that lay ahead. She was so thankful that the girls knew to keep the fire going and to have hot water on hand at all times. She told her patient's husband that she would call on him to fetch kettles of hot water from the kitchen, as needed. Each time he went, he was also to refill the boiler on the stove and add wood to the fire. Good thing that the water tank on the wagon had been filled at the village well during the day!

The door of the clinic was at the end of the twelve by sixteen foot room. The two windows on each side were actually just holes cut into the plywood walls. One of the windows had screen tacked over it. The others were closed with the shutters, made from the wood that had been cut out to create the window. There was no ceiling, only the tin roof. A tiny breeze found its way up the cracks of the smooth, clean floor boards, as well as through the cracks between the plywood sheets on the walls.

The small room was furnished with a desk, a small table, several chairs and two beds, both covered neatly with colorful blankets. A sheet was strung beside the bed opposite the door to serve as a curtain for a little privacy. There was just a little space to stand at the end of each of the beds. Abram had made shelves between the joists of the walls in a few places so she had more storage space. More supplies were stored underneath them.

Greta showed the young woman to the bed at the end of the room and went out to fasten the shutter over the screened window. It was a cool June evening and would become colder during this wintry night. They would need plenty of blankets to keep warm during the night. Greta lit the kerosene lantern that hung from the ceiling.

The labour progressed well and before midnight the welcome cries of a newborn filled the little room. The exhausted mother was soon asleep. Greta cleaned up, showed the tired father to the other bed, and picked up the new baby to take him with her to the house. She would care for him tonight, allowing the new mother to get some much needed sleep.

Just as she was ready to leave, the silence of the night was interrupted by the sounds of an approaching buggy. "I guess there will be no sleep for me yet!" she thought. As she went out to check, she knew immediately that there would be another little one born within hours.

She laid the newborn she was holding onto the bed and told the new father to pull the curtain at his wife's bed and go to the house. As she

ushered the newly arrived couple into the clinic, she changed her mind. She turned to the new arrivals: "As soon as we are out of here, you can get settled in this bed."

With that she took the new mother, her husband and the newborn into the house. Abram woke up and she asked him to give this couple their bed. He could sleep in his son's bed, which was on the kitchen side of the curtain that divided the one room house. Their son went out to get some of the mattress materials and made up a bed on the kitchen floor.

Greta returned to the clinic, where the expectant mother waited for her. Her husband went out to unhitch the horses. She reassured her patient that the baby would be born soon. In due time, the welcome cries of a newborn filled the little clinic for a second time that night. A healthy baby was born. As she finished cleaning up, she showed the new father to the second bed.

Greta wondered where she would find a place to sleep, her tiredness returning again. Yes, she would move one of the girls out of the double bed that they shared, and have her sleep on the floor. That would do for tonight.

With that, the sounds of an approaching horse and buggy disturbed the silence of the night again. Once more, when she went to check, she knew that a third baby would be born within hours. Greta returned to the clinic and told the new father to go to the kitchen for the rest of the night. She drew the curtain at the bed of the new mother, who objected: "The other couple went to sleep in the house when we came. Please may I go over to there, too? I don't want to be here for a delivery!"

Thinking fast, Greta came up with a plan. She led the new arrivals into the clinic; "You take this bed and I'll be back right away." She took the young family to the house, laid some quilts on the floor, woke up her daughters, and moved them to the floor, giving their bed to the new parents.

Crossing the yard back to the clinic she saw that it was almost dawn. Shivering in the cold night air as she crossed the yard, she no longer felt the tiredness that had overcome her earlier. The labour and delivery went well and by morning the welcome cries of a third newborn filled the clinic. She left the little family to sleep as she picked up the pile of laundry she had created over the course of that night. Her heart was full of gratitude for three good deliveries and three healthy babies!

Greta knew she would not go to sleep now. There was no bed for her anywhere and no blankets left anyway. She would also not be able to relax enough to sleep; her mind would just replay all the events of the night. She would go in, sit at the stove in the warm kitchen and have a cup of coffee.

Opening the door she was surprised to see her husband, son and the two couples sitting at the breakfast table, visiting. "What! I thought you

were all sleeping! You ladies should be in bed!" she scolded. She went to check on the two newborns and found them sleeping contently.

Greta joined the others at the table, but before she had her second cup of coffee, clients began to arrive. Abram went out to tell them that Greta would be out to see them in a while. Her workday was beginning again.

A Very Full Life³

Lena thought back on her very full life. By now most of the children were on their own, struggling to make a good living for themselves and their families. Their struggle to get established was so much different than it had been for her and Abram. The children were starting their farms here, where villages were already established and new ones were started as needed. Their children remembered life in Durango Colony in Paraguay, but she and Abram had experienced so much more than that. They had both been born and grew up in Mexico and had made the move to Paraguay as a young couple in their twenties. They had been a part of pioneering in the hilly jungle of East Paraguay. By now they were established in Bolivia, after having pioneered a second time.

Lena remembered the move to Bolivia in 1996 or was it perhaps in 1997. She was unsure; the years all seemed to blur together, but she knew she had been in her late forties. As a family they had decided to join the group that was looking for a new settlement in Bolivia. The electric power lines had been built through the colony in East Paraguay and some of the Mennonites had begun to use electricity. Lena and her husband had chosen to cling to the old way of life and were so relieved that their two married children had also decided to leave with them for Bolivia. At least their family had remained together. Her own mother had not been so fortunate. Some of her children, Lena's siblings, had remained in Mexico and sadly, her mother died in Paraguay without ever seeing them again. Lena was so thankful that she did not have to go through the pain of family separation.

Lena's thoughts were taken back to the move: loading what they could, including their beds, furniture and even their buggy onto trucks and traveling through East Paraguay to Asuncion and then into the Chaco. They had not been able to take everything with them. Because so many were moving, they had to sell their farm equipment and land for relatively low prices. But they had made the decision to move and so they went with whatever they could get. They stopped in the Mennonite Colonies in the Chaco for several days to prepare for the last part of the journey. Several of their seven children got sick there. The climate was

so hot and dry. They drank too much water and then did not want to eat properly. Fortunately, the children had been strong enough to fight the diarrhea and vomiting, so that they were well enough to continue on when the trucks were ready to leave.

The land in Bolivia, also named Durango Colony 1, had been bought and surveyed, but the villages were not developed yet. The Hildebrand family, along with about five other families, was able to camp out at a nearby Bolivian ranch. Everything was so different here than it had been in East Paraguay. There was no fruitful, red soil and no jungle with the tall trees, vines, and thick underbrush. Here, in Bolivia, it was more like the Chaco in Paraguay, with crippled, thorny bush instead of real forest. The soil was light and sandy, so that when it was windy, it blew around relentlessly. They had brought metal sheeting, for the roof of the house they would build, along from Paraguay, and set the sheets up to make a temporary shelter until they could get to their new place.

Daily the men went out to clear the land on the yards that were to make up the village. The women and children stayed back at the ranch, occupied with the everyday chores. All the cooking was done outdoors on the gas stove they had brought with them. A smile crept over Lena's face as she thought of the day when she had the bread dough rising on the pans. The wind was particularly strong and blew the pans over. Immediately all the dogs rushed over to devour her dough. She reacted just as quickly and was able to rescue most of her precious dough. Now, she chuckled about it, but at the time she had not found humour in it at all.

Finally, after four months, enough of their yard was cleared and a village well had been dug for water. At last, they could dismantle their shelter, load all their belongings onto wagons, and head to their new home. Their new home was just a small patch of cleared land, but before nightfall their metal-sheeting shelter was reassembled and they had a place to sleep, even if the children all had to sleep on their mattresses on the sandy ground.

A storm came up that first night and it poured as it can only in the tropics. The roof of the shelter withstood the storm well, and not a drop came through. However, the puddles around the shelter kept growing until the entire clearing was covered with water, including the inside of the little, make-shift home. The mattresses and blankets were completely soaked. It rained eight inches that night and all of nature was refreshed. Fortunately, as is also typical in the tropics, the following day was warm and sunny. The bedding was completely dry and ready for use by evening.

When asked, years later, whether she had been discouraged or lonely, longing for the home they had left behind, Lena had just laughed at the idea. "What!" she said, "Lonely or discouraged? Not at all, there

was simply no time for feelings like that! There was so much to do. Like on that day, we had to get all the bedding and blankets hung over the shrubs and bushes so they could dry in the hot sunshine. As the sun moved across the sky, we turned and moved the bedding so that it would never be in the shade. We just did what we had to do. We had made the decision to move and took the challenges of each day as they came.”

Notes

- ¹ The names of the people in this narrative have been changed in order to protect their identity. Based on interviews with a health care provider who requested that her name and the names of her clients and their location be withheld. March 6, 2010 and January 27, 2011.
- ² Based on an interview with Greta Klassen, La Sierra Colony, February 18, 2010
- ³ Based on an interview with Lena Hildebrandt, Colony Durango, Bolivia, February 18, 2010.