

In Memoriam

Harry Loewen (1930-2015)



Harry Loewen, the founding Chair in Mennonite Studies, author of numerous books, a beloved colleague to many of us, the loving husband to Gertrude, and a father and grandfather, died on September 15, 2015. His many friends and former colleagues will miss him. Harry accomplished a great deal in his life, but more importantly he was an inspiration to many young scholars, as teacher, publisher and writer for many decades. His ability to reach both popular and academic audiences has been remarkable. His writings touch on a wide range of topics, including a comparison of sixteenth century Anabaptism and Lutheranism, early-twentieth century work on Mennonites in the Soviet Union, and his own story of coming to Canada with his widowed mother. He has also addressed more contemporary topics such as Mennonite literature and Mennonite identity with his collection *Why I Am a Mennonite*. Harry showed a commitment to scholarship in many other ways: as

the founding Chair in Mennonite Studies (1978-1995) he pioneered the idea of teaching Mennonite history in public spaces and as the founding editor of the *Journal of Mennonite Studies* (1983-1995) he also pioneered a platform for Mennonite scholars in Canada to engage in valuable academic discourse.

His many friends will have their favourite memories of Harry. His memorial service in Kelowna, B.C. in October 2015 featured lovely stories from his grandson, a niece, his three sons, and his pastor. I recall his grandson saying that he found comfort in simply reading paragraphs from *On the Road to Freedom*, a son recalling strolls in the outdoors with Harry reciting German poetry, and a niece remembering a memorable day-long outing in Toronto with Uncle Harry who opened up her world to urban wonders. Dr. Al Reimer, a close friend of Harry's whose own memorial appears in this issue, offered a tribute to Harry upon his retirement in 1995. Appropriately it graced that year's issue of the *Journal of Mennonite Studies*. In it Al had this to say of Harry's risky midlife career switch from tenured professor of German Literature at Wilfrid Laurier University in 1978 to the Chair in Mennonite Studies at the University of Winnipeg: "The risk was that neither he nor anyone else knew what could be made of a new post in the relatively limited and undefined field of Anabaptist-Mennonite history and literature. He would have to devise a programme of study without any model to follow; he would have to create a viable presence within the largest urban Mennonite community anywhere; and he would have to convince both the founder of the Chair, Dr. David Friesen, and the University of Winnipeg that what he was doing was academically respectable while at the same time benefitting the Mennonite community." But as Al put it, it was a challenge which Harry, this "ever confident optimist," took on with enthusiasm and grace.

I have my own memories of dropping by Harry's crowded scholarly office at the old Menno Simons quarters and how his enthusiastic greeting, and then inquisitive nature, offered such encouragement to my life as a young academic. But Harry was also quite capable of taking umbrage at historical issues, especially if he sensed a parochial, ethno-centric bent to them: he often told the story of how his mother, among many of the so-called *Flüchtlingen*, or '48er migrants, was received coldly by patriarchal leaders of Canadian churches disturbed that female-headed householders might have offered too much leadership on their 'road to freedom.' I recall how Harry told the story of his father being arrested and executed on false charges by Stalin's NKVD henchmen in the mid-1930s, and yet he always insisted that within a multicultural popu-

lation in the Soviet Union, among Jews, Muslims and other people, Mennonites were not unique in their suffering.

On the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the founding of the Chair in Mennonite Studies, in 2003, Harry offered his own reflection and vision for his calling as the founding occupant of this position. He recalled his excitement at being told about it, a position allowing him “to create something entirely new and important, a chance that might never come my way again.” He adds, “I had my doubts about all this, but with the encouragement of many friends, and especially my wife Gertrude, I decided to accept the invitation.” Along the way he spoke of challenges: of the need to support research and writing, of embracing the tools of the academy to interpret both the good and the bad in Mennonite history, and to have the Chair firmly rooted as “part of the University’s arts and science programme” of study. It is our gain that Harry did accept this invitation.

Harry was always a friendly and engaging scholar. Perhaps most importantly, he always was an inspiration to the generation that followed him. It is with profound sense of gratitude that we remember him. He will be missed by his many friends and colleagues.

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