

Al Reimer
(1927-2015)



Al Reimer of Winnipeg, a long time Professor of English and a close associate of Harry Loewen and the Mennonite Studies program at the University of Winnipeg, died on December 22, 2015.

Born in southern Manitoba but trained at Yale University, Al was a master of the English and Low German languages and wrote fluently in both. His knowledge of Low German involved him in the editing of the collected works of Arnold Dyck; he was one of the

general editors with Harry and others and was solely responsible for Volumes II and III, which contain Dyck's major Low German stories. He also assisted Jack Thiessen with the editing of Jack's definitive *Mennonite Low German Dictionary*. Al often said he enjoyed editing more than writing. His contributions as an editor are often invisible, in the *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, the *Mennonite Mirror* and as a reader and editor of numerous works written by others. He greatly enhanced his academic colleagues' careers and texts by rendering them into an elegant English. Through teaching creative writing, he also fostered the literary careers of a number of students who are today recognised as important writers in their own right.

Always immaculately attired, Al was an immensely generous and warm-hearted individual, always a fine host at his favourite Greek restaurant situated close to the University. While Al liked an audience and was a great raconteur, in English and Low German, at heart he was a rather shy and humble character.

Al and I had an especially close relationship as we jointly lead two Mennonite tour groups to the Soviet Union. During this time we shared a room and the task of dealing with Soviet officialdom, a diverse bunch of sometimes-eccentric Mennonite tourists and the travails of travel. Al so enjoyed our first trip together that he foolishly agreed to a second. This time, however, we journeyed not just through Russia and Ukraine but also through history as the Soviet Union ceased to exist while we were there. But that is another story that needs to be told elsewhere.

From my perspective it is impossible to see Al apart from his close friend and associate Harry Loewen, two of the leading figures who helped create and develop the *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, who died within months of each other. With their passing the old order truly has changed.

Al and Harry came from very different backgrounds and experiences. Harry was born in the Soviet Union, lived through Stalin's Terror, survived Hitler's invasion and the trek to Germany, he eventually found refuge and a new life in Canada. Al was a descendant of 1870s immigrants to Manitoba, of mixed *Kleine Gemeinde* and *Chortitzer* parents, who grew up in Steinbach during the Depression. He trained as an opera singer in Vancouver before taking-up the study of English literature, receiving a doctorate from Yale University and obtaining an academic position at United College (later the University of Winnipeg). It was here that Harry and Al met after Harry took up the Chair of Mennonite Studies.

Both Al and Harry wrote on literary and historical subjects, a number of their essays appeared together in collected volumes of essays and journals and they co-authored one essay. Al's *Mennonite Literary Voices: Past and Present*, based on his Menno Simons Lectures at Bethel College, Kansas in 1991, is a tour de force. Al's magnum opus, however, is a novel set during the Russian Revolution and Civil War, *My Harp has Turned to Mourning*. Although many hoped he would write a sequel, he never did, although a collection of stories, *When War Came to Kleindarp: And More Kleindarp Stories*, are centred on the Manitoba world he knew best. He also translated works from German into English, most importantly Dietrich Neufeld's *A Russian Dance of Death* and Hans Harder's *No Strangers in Exile*.

I am proud to have counted both Al and Harry as close personal friends, academic colleagues and co-workers in the development of Mennonite scholarship. We read each other's manuscripts, helped with sources and read and refereed submissions to this Journal. We cooperated in the organisation of symposia and spent many hours in each other's company discussing ideas. I will miss them both deeply

James Urry, Wellington, New Zealand