

The Mennonite Girls' Homes of Winnipeg: A Home Away from Home

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The period of increased industrialization, urbanization, and immigration which occurred at the turn of the century gave rise to what one historian has described as "the girl problem" in the cities of Canada.¹ Beginning in the late nineteenth century and continuing through the first quarter of the twentieth, young women moved in large numbers from the country to the city, some sent by their parents, others going on their own initiative, to find work and hopefully better themselves and their families economically. Alongside the wave of female urbanization was the immigration of young women, initially from Britain, later from continental Europe, a large percentage of whom were responding to the high demand for domestic help in Canada.

Middle class reformers and church workers became concerned about the fate of young women in the city, about the potential downfall of naive and innocent girls alone and subject to the multitude of evils which were seen to be part of urban life. Part of their response to the problem of the young working girl was to establish hostels and boarding homes which served as receiving centers for immigrants, as employment bureaux, as temporary accommodation, as places of refuge from the loneliness and hardship of the city, and as centers of instruction where proper morality could be reinforced and in some cases, spiritual values could be nurtured. Essentially, they were to be a substitute for the homes the girls had left behind.

Among a variety of groups² who responded to the needs of young girls in this way were the Mennonites, who established two *Maedchenheime* (girls' homes) in Winnipeg in the mid-1920s. The two homes, founded independently by the Mennonite Brethren and General Conference Mennonites respectively, were an immediate response to the arrival of some 20,000 Mennonites from the Soviet Union in the 1920s.

For many of these new immigrant families, who arrived in Canada

destitute and owing a large transportation debt (*Reiseschuld*) to the CPR, the only way to make ends meet was to send their daughters to Winnipeg, where jobs, particularly as domestics, were in abundance. In the city girls could potentially earn enough to repay the debt and help the family get established.

The Mennonite girls were themselves pioneers in the urbanization process of their people. They went to work in the city, alone and in most cases quite young, at a time when most urban areas had only a handful of Mennonite residents. These hundreds of girls who helped their families become established in Canada were among the first of the western Canadian Mennonite population to overcome their fears of and conquer the practical obstacles of city living. For this reason, they deserve a prominent place in the historiography of Canadian Mennonite urbanization.

Parents did not send their daughters away easily, however, for the city was not a favoured place in the traditionally rural worldview of the Mennonites. They shared with turn of the century evangelicals the feeling that cities were "the decisive battleground between civilization and religion,"³ that they undermined morality and stable family life and were havens for every imaginable vice. The Mennonites' condemnation of the city was the natural reversal to their elevation of rural life to the point that it had become "an unofficial article of faith."⁴ It was an unspoken part of their doctrine of nonconformity and visible evidence that they were living separate from the world. One Mennonite observed that there was a time when an individual who moved to town was seen to have "given up the cherished and 'only' way of life considered worth living."⁵ It was assumed that a person who moved to the city "without preparation and concern by the brotherhood" would be swallowed up by urbanism and all the evils that went with it.⁶ For young girls, who traditionally stayed in their parental home until they married and then went to their husband's home, the potential difficulties and dangers were all the greater.

With this in mind, Mennonite church leaders and city mission workers quickly acted to make sure that their young women were not lost to the city. By establishing girls' homes as places of refuge, they could attempt to create an environment which would stave off the loneliness, where the girls could socialize and worship with others of their faith and where they would be under the close supervision of responsible adults specifically appointed by the church to look out for their emotional, spiritual, and physical well-being.

The events leading to the establishment of the Mennonite Brethren girls' home in Winnipeg revolved primarily around one individual. Anna Thiessen was only 23 when she left her home in Herbert, Saskatchewan in 1915 to go to Winnipeg to work as a city missionary for the Mennonite Brethren conference. Initially her work included door-to-door visitation, recruiting children for and teaching Sunday School, bringing food and clothing to the poor, and visiting the sick.⁷ Part of her outreach was a Thursday evening sewing class for young working girls which started around 1916.⁸ As immigrants from Russia started arriving in 1923, the number of girls coming to Anna's

two-room apartment increased so that she rented an additional two rooms in the same house. Between 1923 and 1927, 80–100 girls crowded into her quarters, and it wasn't long before Anna's home became a refugee hostel, employment agency, and counseling center.⁹ In 1925 Anna's mission to girls became formally known as the "Mary–Martha Home," after the biblical Mary, who listened, and Martha, who worked.

The General Conference girls home in Winnipeg came into being under many of the same circumstances, though perhaps without the kind of singular effort of an Anna Thiessen. The Ebenezer Girls' Home, as it was named, began in a rented house in October 1926 under the supervision of houseparents Rev. Gerhard and Helena Peters. According to Benjamin Ewert, one of the early city ministers, there was considerable opposition from older Mennonites resident in Winnipeg to the establishment of a girls' home,¹⁰ though why this was so is not clear. Perhaps the fears of the potential downfall of young girls alone in the city was strong enough to create a reaction against the home itself, which, once established, might actually encourage the flow of girls to Winnipeg. At the home's inception, there were 15 girls present. By the spring of 1927, the number had risen to 70, and the following winter, to 112.¹¹

In the initial decade or so of the Winnipeg homes, the clientele were almost all girls of the 1920s migration, working in the city to help repay their family's travel debt. Some found work immediately upon arrival in Winnipeg, as employers would come directly to the train station in search of cheap labour among newly-arrived immigrants.¹² Others would make the trip to the city only after their families were settled on the farm. Some girls initially provided home help at nearby farms of other Mennonites, but would eventually be attracted to the higher wages and lighter workload of jobs in the city. The homes tended to be fuller in winter when more girls were free to come to the city and emptier in the spring and summer when girls returned home to help on the family farm.¹³

During the years of the Depression, even the earlier Mennonite settlers, who had immigrated in the 1870s, sent their daughters to work in the city to supplement the family income.¹⁴ It was the girls that had the opportunity to earn and help more so than the boys. Sons were usually needed to help out on the farm, and in addition, there simply was not the abundance of jobs available in the city for non-English speaking boys as there were for girls.

The girls coming to the city were initially quite young, some only 13 years old,¹⁵ though most were in their late teens and early twenties. Parents with younger children would send their daughters to work as soon as they were old enough to leave school, a fact which caused no small amount of pain for both parent and child. One girl of 14 resented having to quit school because she loved it so well, but was resigned because she knew her family needed her help.¹⁶ Those girls who had recently immigrated were for the most part coming out of situations of severe trauma. Some had become separated from their families during the flight out of the Soviet Union or had been orphaned

during the years of revolution, civil war, and famine. Some were responsible for younger siblings while others were virtually alone when they immigrated, with perhaps only a distant relative in Canada. Anna Thiessen accurately described them as "sorely tested girls."¹⁷

Much of the character of the girls' homes derived from the individuals who ran them. For the most part they were single women who had devoted their lives to mission work and possessed leadership qualities, which, as women, they could not exercise in the context of the church. Strong-minded and at times severe, they nevertheless had the girls' best interests at heart and viewed their responsibility of watching over them as a God-given task.

They were at the same time parent and sister to the girls, who were so far removed from their own families. Rev. Alexander and Mrs. Fast, who replaced the Peters as houseparents of the Ebenezer home, were called "Papa and Mama" Fast. The Fastes were in turn replaced in 1933 by Helen Epp who remained as matron for 27 years. The conference felt that it would be better if a single person were in charge of the home, since a married couple with children took up too much room, in a house that had barely enough room to hold all the girls. Quite possibly, they also recognized that a single woman could better relate to the needs and problems of girls, and that the young women needed a sister and friend more than a parent.

Helen Epp was described as a woman "who had enough business acumen matched with an iron constitution, an astute yet ready tongue, and that heart-felt spirit of kindness needed to run such a home."¹⁸ Looking after the welfare of young people was not foreign to Helen, who at the age of 18 had assumed the care for nine of the 19 children in the family after both parents died. She was assisted in her work by one or more of three sisters, Aganetha Epp staying 26 years. Initially, Helen received a salary of \$25 per month, with her sister Aganetha earning \$15. Despite the small remuneration, she would often spend what little she had on clothing for the girls or extra frills at the Christmas meal. When the Ebenezer home closed in 1959, Helen had no money and it was only upon the urging of her sister that the conference gave her a pension of \$50 per month "like a regular missionary."

Helen was called "Mom" by the girls at Ebenezer and though one girl said her severity sometimes likened her to a policeman, "underneath was a heart of gold."¹⁹ Her reputation as a strict disciplinarian paled, however, in comparison to her colleague at the Mary-Martha home, Anna Thiessen.

Anna Thiessen had always dreamed of going to India as a missionary but when the Mennonite Brethren conference approached her about working in Winnipeg she went eagerly, for in her mind the city was just about as heathenish as a foreign country. Anna quickly developed a reputation among MB church leaders, as she became the first woman prior to 1945 to speak publicly at a church conference. At the 1937 Canadian Mennonite Brethren conference, she lectured delegates regarding those parents who allowed their daughters to work in the city "before they were prepared to withstand the temptations of city life."²⁰ She also developed a reputation for being sober,

humourless, severe, and perhaps overly protective of the girls, an image enhanced by her appearance and demeanor. One girl observed that she always wore dark clothes, tied her hair in a little bun, and didn't really go for loud talk or laughter — "it went against her."²¹ Because of her sacrificial nature and devout religious piety, Anna's family teased her that she would have made a good nun. Indeed, she was known for all her 26 years with the home as "Schwester Anna" (Sister Anna).

According to her sister Martha, the Mary-Martha home was Anna's "soul" and she attempted to make it fit her definition of a home as "a place where order, industry, and cleanliness is found, and where love abides."²³ The task could be overwhelming and Anna herself said she became depressed over the monthly rental payments and the responsibility for the "many, many girls."²⁴

Although hundreds of Mennonite girls used the services of the homes, a much smaller number actually lived in them for any length of time. It was quite impossible for any of the homes to supply accommodation for all the Mennonite working girls, but since initially most of them worked as live-in domestics, a long-term place to stay was not needed. The homes were used primarily as short-term accommodation for girls who were newly arrived in the city and searching for employment, and when girls were between positions.

Live-in domestics used the homes as a place to recover from sickness, since it was quite common for employers to send their help away when they were ill.²⁵ Sickness was not unusual, particularly for the newer immigrants. Anna Thiessen reported that in the beginning many of the girls suffered from a skin condition, probably caused by the strange lifestyle and climate.²⁶ Inadequate clothing and the severe prairie winter took its toll on girls who were already suffering from malnourishment and overall exhaustion from their last few years in Russia. One girl recalled that when she had a tonsillectomy in 1937, Helen Epp picked her up from the hospital with the streetcar, took her back to the Ebenezer home, gave her soup and cared for her until she was ready to return to work. She assumed that Helen had covered the cost of the streetcar and had somehow arranged for the hospital bill to be paid, since she was never asked for a cent. The homes seemed to have come through when the girls were at their most vulnerable state.

The day to day administration and even long term survival of the girls' homes lay pretty much in the ability of the home's matron to raise funds and budget economically. Both the Mary-Martha and Ebenezer homes were financed by monthly subsidies from their respective Mennonite conferences, by the rent paid by girls who lived at the home, and by private donations from Mennonites living in the city. The homes would do their own fund-raising as well, by holding auctions where girls sold handicrafts which they had made and by presenting mission programs in local Mennonite churches. Keeping the homes functioning and afloat was no small task for those in charge, but Anna in particular confronted hardships with devout religious faith. She

always bore difficulties with the belief that "the Lord would do battle for us, for it was he who was sending us the girls. He would continue to care for us, even if not right away. He just wanted us to learn to trust him more."²⁷

Though the homes were overseen by an appointed board or the mission committee of the appropriate Mennonite conference, there was little direct supervision or intervention from that end. One of Helen Epp's sisters recalled that the conference leaders had wanted to run the Ebenezer home and tell Helen how the money should be spent, but she stood up to them and demanded that she be allowed to make the decisions. "Those men didn't know anythings about girls' needs," she said.²⁸ With respect to the Mary-Martha home, Anna's sister Martha felt that board members should have visited more often than they did and seemed to resent the fact that all the responsibility lay with the women who were directly in charge.²⁹ The relationship between the girls' homes and the sponsoring church institutions seemed to be respectful but at times uneasy. The male conference leaders may well have felt ill-prepared to deal with some of the problems which arose at the homes, but at the same time somewhat ill at ease when seeing a capable woman like Helen Epp or Anna Thiessen develop a profile in the church and take responsibility which was not customary for a woman.

Probably the most vital role that the home played in the lives of Mennonite working girls was as a social center, where they could meet friends, receive news from home, and basically be in an environment where the language, customs, and people were familiar. As one girl poetically put it: "The fellowship hours we spent at the Home were roses in the thorny path of service."³⁰

Before the establishment of the homes, many girls had to spend their free time in bus and train stations, in waiting rooms and public lounges, or simply walking the streets. Once the homes had opened their doors, a regular pattern appeared on Thursday afternoons, which was "maid's day off" in Winnipeg. After cleaning up the lunch dishes, the domestics would walk or travel by streetcar downtown where they might do some shopping and join other Mennonite girls; the Eaton's store "under the clock" was a popular meeting place. They would then head for the girls' home, be it Ebenezer or Mary-Martha, where they would share their bag lunches and drink coffee prepared by the matron. The girls exchanged stories about their "ladies," and entertained themselves with singing, piano-playing, and handwork until the evening Bible study began. One girl, in a 1937 letter to a Mennonite periodical, apologized that on occasion the home became quite noisy but felt that such a release was necessary, after being quiet and working in solitude all week.³¹ The crowds of girls at the home on Thursday afternoon could become quite large, averaging about 100, but on occasion there would be as many as 200-300 sitting in every corner and standing on the stairway.

Recreational activities focused on Thursday afternoon socializing, however in 1956 one female Mennonite student in Winnipeg criticized the girls' homes for not developing their potential as recreational centers.

Why should girls in the teens, full of life and vigour, sit quietly in the living room or on the porch of a Girls' Home on a beautiful spring evening and twiddle their thumbs? . . . Why do our Girls' homes not have a tennis or Volley Ball court, why don't they have a ping-pong table, why doesn't the Girls' Home in Vancouver, for instance, even have a piano? And why can't this be a place where they could have a social and where the girls, who don't have a home in the city, could bring their boyfriends instead of walking the streets?³²

This writer pinpointed what must have been a concern for most of the young women, first how to meet young men, and second, when and how to see them. Helen Epp of the Ebenezer home allowed boys to come to the home and pick girls up, and even stay for Bible study though not for supper because there wasn't enough room. Anna Thiessen, on the other hand, had strong prohibitions against young men coming to the Mary-Martha home to court any of the girls, even if they were engaged, and reportedly did not even allow men, excepting church ministers, in the house without arranging it with her ahead of time. The story was told that in the late 1940s, when Anna's sister took charge of the Mary-Martha home, a married couple had stayed for a time at the home, but several girls refused to come to the dinner table because a man was present. If not completely true, the story was nevertheless illustrative of the reputation that the home had.

Despite whatever restrictions existed on visitation at the girls' home, becoming acquainted with members of the opposite sex was not a problem for most girls. The close-knit nature of the Mennonite community meant that contacts were easily made through brothers or cousins. Young men on the farm were said to scrutinize "the rows and rows of pretty girls to choose from" in the annual pictures taken of the girls at the home,³³ so that they were prepared when they went to the city to visit their sisters. Sunday evening church services, youth meetings, and particularly weddings were ideal settings for the sexes to interact.

Occasionally, a group of boys would rent a hall, the girls would bring food, and they would hold dances, an activity which wasn't entirely approved of, but wasn't exactly forbidden either, at least not for the General Conference Mennonites. Rev. J. H. Enns, the General Conference minister in Winnipeg, didn't speak out against such activities, as long as the young people "behaved decently" and didn't bring alcohol. Among the Mennonite Brethren, there was a stronger taboo against dancing. One girl knew that her parents disapproved of her participation in dances, but she felt that the waltzes were "very innocent and very nice" and that it "was not bad or done for sexual reasons or anything like that."³⁴ Circle games were also popular among the young.

The purpose of the girls' homes went beyond providing girls with a place to socialize. For Anna Thiessen, ministry to the soul was equally important: "If we want to keep them for heaven, if we want to prevent them from being lost in the turmoil of the big city, we must minister with dedication and love."³⁵ Protecting the girls from what were perceived as the evils of city living included reinforcement of their Christian and Mennonite values of

right living and separation from the world. For girls raised in a community where church doctrine and church life were at the center, a religious vacuum would have existed in many of their lives had they not received spiritual instruction at the girls' home. One girl commented that life in Winnipeg made her "so lonesome and so spiritually dry at times" that the Bible studies held at the home were much welcomed, particularly because she could be in the company of other girls who "felt the same way."

Bible studies were held regularly at the girls' homes on Thursday evenings, when live-in domestics were able to attend. While the matrons were supervisors of the homes, the Mennonite ministers who conducted Bible studies with the girls were considered their "spiritual leaders." Though most of the Bible studies were of a purely scriptural and inspirational nature, the ministers would also exhort the girls on proper Christian living. Their stress on living separately from the world included an emphasis on externals such as outward appearance and particularly Mennonite Brethren girls were encouraged to dress simply and modestly, avoid makeup and jewelry and be conservative in hairstyle. At one Thursday evening meeting, a girl inquired of her minister whether it was a sin to wear short sleeves. Apparently it was common for the domestics to wear short sleeves while working. When assured that they were wearing short sleeves, not because they were conscious of revealing their bodies, but because it was more comfortable and practical, the minister agreed that it was permissible.

For those girls who only had one day off per week, the Thursday evening worship was the only church they had all week. Those who were able would usually attend services at Mennonite city congregations on Sunday evenings. However, the relationship of the working girls with the city churches seemed tenuous; the girls were generally too busy to become very involved in church life while the churches themselves were frequently unaware of the numerous Mennonite girls in the city. It seems evident that without the girls' homes, many working girls would have been bereft of a community from which they could receive guidance, care and support in matters of the spirit.

Besides acting as social and spiritual centers, the girls' homes also served as employment agencies. As the number of girls in search of work increased and as the amount of employers in search of Mennonite help escalated, the girls' home worker took on a new role, that of employment counsellor and mediator. The matrons of the homes had above all the best interests of the Mennonite girl at heart when providing Winnipeggers with domestic help. As Mennonite girls gained a reputation as reliable and honest workers, the matron could become selective in choosing employers and apparently the homes kept blacklists of employers to whom they would not send help,³⁶ presumably after previous experience had shown them to be undesirable places to work.

One historian has suggested that "perhaps because they felt no ties to the employers, the Mennonite houseparents intervened more directly to protect the domestics" than did the hostels operated by upper class social reform-

ers,³⁷ who presumably had domestic help themselves. The matrons were concerned that the girls be hired out to respectable homes and censored situations where other domestics smoked, where sleeping quarters were in damp basements, where only room and board were offered as payment, and where girls might be compelled to serve liquor. They were quick to remove a girl from a situation if she was being mistreated.

Both Helen Epp and Anna Thiessen had themselves worked as domestics and therefore were familiar with the type of labour involved and knew what to watch out for. The matrons viewed their role in helping the girls find suitable employment as extremely important, not only for the sake of the girls, but also to protect the image of Mennonites in the city. Anna's sister Martha saw herself as "a mediator between society people and the working class"³⁸ and felt she owed something to both sides. She was obligated to provide the employer with a girl who was congenial and honest yet also obliged to protect the girls from being taken advantage of by their employer. Anna Thiessen saw a maternal aspect in that role:

When a girl has found a satisfactory place of work and is at the point where she can find her own way back to the home, then I literally feel like a mother who observes that her child is strong enough to walk.³⁹

Particularly during the 1920s and 1930s, most Mennonite girls worked as live-in domestics. The inability of most Mennonite girls to speak English, as well as their lack of education, posed difficulties for most other jobs. Household work did not require time or money for training⁴⁰ and was also most feasible economically because room and board, as well as uniforms for work, were provided. Since she had no daily expenses such as meals or transit fares, a girl could save almost her entire salary.

Wages for a city domestic were higher than for a girl working in the country but lower than for most other jobs in the city. The level of pay depended partly on the age of a girl, the amount of experience she had, and the kind of work she was expected to do. For instance, during the 1920s and 30s, a young girl of 14 or 15 might earn only \$3–5 per month, working as a nursemaid caring for young children, whereas an experienced all purpose housemaid and cook might earn \$30 per month. During the years of the Depression, when more women came to the city to work, wages tended to be lower, sometimes down to \$5 per month for general househelp, however by the late 1940s domestics could expect to receive about \$50 per month.

Because labour laws applying to domestics were virtually non-existent, Anna Thiessen became an advocate for the rights of girls working in homes. She argued that since wages were so low, employers should be obligated to give their girl a box lunch on her day off, and threatened that she wouldn't send them a girl at all if they didn't comply.⁴¹ Anna also became well-known in her efforts regarding the maid's day off. In 1925 she lobbied government officials in Winnipeg and succeeded in persuading them to implement a law allowing for a half day off per week for live-in domestics and before long

most girls were also receiving every Sunday or alternate Sunday afternoon and evening off as well.

Mennonite girls, new to the country and the customs of its people, were forced to go through a lot of adjustment when they began working in the homes of urban Canadians. Though accustomed to the heavier household tasks in rural homes, the manner in which housework was done in the city was difficult because it was unfamiliar. The 1920s saw an array of electrical appliances become cheaper, more reliable, and more commonly used in city homes,⁴² but all of these would have been new to the Mennonites. Doing laundry with electric washers and clothes dryers was new, as was the electric stove, electric iron, vacuum cleaner, and telephone. Some girls found the customs of their "English" employers quite unusual such as serving the lady of the house breakfast in bed just as though it were tea in the afternoon.

Cooking dishes which were unlike "Mennonite food" proved to be a real challenge, especially for those girls working for orthodox Jews who had to learn the intricacies of kosher cooking. One girl recalled that her upbringing had taught her never to leave any food over or wasted, so if she baked a cake which didn't turn out right, she would eat it and then bake another. Such situations, though amusing, undoubtedly created substantial anxiety and embarrassment for girls trying to adjust to the unfamiliar customs of their employers. Undoubtedly some of the cooking styles, and other homemaking techniques, learned during these years were later carried over by the Mennonite girls into their own homes.

Whatever their difficulties in learning some of the features of Canadian households, Mennonite domestics quickly developed a reputation for honesty and reliability and were in high demand among middle and upper class families. Genevieve Leslie has observed that a servant's character was her most important possession: "A good servant was clean, celibate, obedient, respectable, hardworking, and an early riser . . . submissiveness was considered an especially important quality in domestic servants."⁴³ All of these were qualities which the Mennonite girls had in abundance. They didn't complain and most important "they wouldn't talk back and they did what they were told."⁴⁴

Besides their honesty, Mennonite girls were also valued because instead of going to shows they stayed home in the evenings, they didn't smoke, and attended church regularly. One girl was actually sent away from the house when her employers served liquor at a party because they didn't want her to see what they were doing, suggesting that the girls were even viewed as moral examples to the households in which they served. One employer teased his Mennonite maid for her religious piety by telling her that on Thursdays, her day off, he really let go and got drunk. At any rate, Mennonite girls could be depended on not to cause problems for the employer or his family.

Some girls viewed their work as domestics as an opportunity to share their religious faith with members of the household. Though they were not aggressive proselytizers, girls would often teach the children in their care to

say prayers at meals and bedtime or would relate Bible stories in the hope that the children would repeat the stories to their parents. Anna Thiessen in particular saw it as providential that the Lord had sent Mennonite girls into the city to serve in homes that would otherwise not be reached by their Christian witness.

Our sisters are entering the homes of the wealthy, the influential, and the professional people of our country as servants. Their quiet, Christian diligence presents the message of the Cross in a powerful sermon.⁴⁵

The girls rarely developed close relationships with their employers, though in a few isolated cases contact was maintained long after the girl left her place of work. Their status as maid created class barriers which were not easily crossed, and both maid and employer seemed to prefer it that way. Relations tended to be better in middle class homes that had only one maid as opposed to wealthier homes where there were several domestics, because the lady of the house would often help with the cooking and other chores.

The men of the house were dealt with respectfully but warily. Cases of sexual abuse were not uncommon for young domestics who were more or less unprotected in the home of their employer. Such occurrences could rudely shatter the naivety of some young Mennonite girls as one recalled:

At one place the man wasn't very nice, touching you here and there. I didn't know exactly what was going on. Nobody had told me about these things.

She eventually summoned the courage to tell her sister and was immediately removed from her position by the matron of the girls' home.

Other experiences of mistreatment by the employer included not providing the domestics with adequate food to eat. Some girls were left only vegetables and no meat after the family had eaten their dinner, while another girl sneaked dry cereal between meals to supplement her inadequate diet, but didn't dare to eat any bread or milk, fearing her employer's retribution.

Though Mennonite domestics did have the girls' homes to fall back on when things got rough at work, many simply endured their situation with religious resignation, as one girl who said, "I took it as my lot that I was a maid." The sense of God's leading in their lives was very strong, and for many girls the trials and tribulations which they experienced were testings of their faith and each obstacle surmounted was a gift from God. Furthermore, *some of the difficulties experienced in Canada were softened by the memory of the dreadful life they had left behind in post-revolutionary Russia.*

Domestic service in general was not a highly preferred occupation because of the lack of freedom, the isolation and loneliness, and because household servants were at the lower end of the social scale. This was a shocking role reversal for Mennonite girls, many of whom came from families which had been very wealthy in Russia, and households which were staffed by Russian servants. One girl who expressed surprise at having to eat alone in the kitchen was told by her parents that in Russia "they had treated

their servants no better.” She concluded that “we were kind of getting back what my parents had done to others.”

The girls' homes served the important purpose of restoring dignity which the girls felt they had lost in their experience as maids. As one girl expressed it, at the home “every girl is a ‘personality’ and not merely a maid for all things. Here I may shake off my bonds and show myself as I am.”⁴⁶ One Mennonite minister reinforced the girls by telling them that their work was of God, that it was very important and not lowly, and that they were clearly performing a service. Mennonite girls, like most immigrant domestics, regarded household service as a temporary situation, which enabled them to bridge the gap between the old country and the new world. Once established, they expected to obtain other jobs or more likely, get married and start their own households.

One of the greatest difficulties faced by Mennonite girls in the city was separation from their families. Homesickness was a common affliction and in the early years visits were few and far between. Besides the pain of separation, parents feared for their daughters in the environment of the city, “where evil lurked in all corners.” In their minds, going to the city usually meant trouble and so they considered the girls' homes to be of utmost importance in protecting the innocence of their daughters.

The young Mennonite girl was seen as an easy target for the influence of shows, theatres, non-Christian people, and “English” men, meaning anyone who wasn't Mennonite. One mission worker observed that prior to the establishment of the girls' homes, Mennonite girls in the city “were in danger of losing their spiritual fervour and be carried away in the current of worldliness.”⁴⁷ Despite the homes, some girls did become “immodest” as Anna Thiessen put it. One Mennonite girl arrived at the Mary-Martha home one Sunday, her face “disfigured with lipstick and powder,”⁴⁸ and later was known to attend movie theatres. It seemed that for the likes of Anna Thiessen, one evil only led to another. One girl of 16 accepted a ride from a passing driver, was misled, and eventually developed “some sort of disease” and died young, while others kept company with non-Mennonite boys.

The majority of girls, however, were not drawn into the worldly ways of the city. The fact that they could accommodate to life in the city yet remain firmly in touch with their Mennonitism attests to the success of the homes in keeping the young girls close to the faith. In many cases, the experience of their daughters made it easier for families to move to Winnipeg later. The ability of their daughters to survive and adapt made the city a little less formidable. The experiences of the working girls demonstrated that the Mennonite identity could be maintained in the city and that urban Mennonites were not necessarily consumed by the society around them if the supports of the group remained strong.

During the later years of the girls' homes, the 1940s and 1950s, the Mennonite girls, their reasons for being in the city, and the homes themselves underwent subtle changes, changes which for the most part led to the decline

of the homes. After World War Two, most domestic work became strictly day work,⁴⁹ a welcome change for those who had been live-in help. Though day work tended to be heavier and more difficult, it was preferred because it gave girls evenings and Sundays off, saved them from having to work at late parties, and also allowed them to improve their education in the evening, some to complete the high school they never had. Though domestic labour continued to employ some Mennonite girls, many others worked as secretaries, salesclerks, and in factories. These girls would be living in their own apartments or possibly with their families who had also moved to the city. Besides working women, the girls' homes increasingly served young women who were in the city studying to be nurses or teachers or in other types of vocational training.⁵⁰

The social aspect of the homes diminished as girls found support from families and relatives moving to Winnipeg in increasing numbers. Furthermore, day workers had time to develop their own social networks and no longer needed to rely on the girls' homes to provide their weekly fellowship with other Mennonite girls. Mennonite churches in the city grew rapidly during this era and began to offer well-established programs for urban young people, replacing the importance of the Thursday evening Bible study at the girls' home. One individual observed that one of the reasons for the declining success of the Mary-Martha home was that "the matron is an elderly lady with no real understanding for young people and the gulf cannot be bridged between them."⁵¹ Though this may have been partially true, it is more likely that young women simply didn't need the kind of care and protection once provided by the homes' matrons and were perhaps a little less naive and vulnerable than the girls of 25 years earlier. They had adapted to the ways of Canada and had grown accustomed to city living.

The Mennonite working girls were pioneers, though not in the traditional Mennonite sense of settling a barren land, working the soil and establishing an existence out of nothing. However at a time when few Mennonites ventured into the city, and when the city was viewed as mostly an undesirable place to live, the movement of Mennonite girls into that fearsome environment was path-breaking for the Mennonite people and represented a significant break from the rural ideal. The girls were able to cope and adapt, with the support of an institution like the girls' home, and proved that in most cases Mennonite young people could move to the city without being lost to their families and church.

When the two Winnipeg girls' homes closed in 1959, there were hundreds of Mennonite women across Canada who had benefitted from their existence. Separated from their families and alone in a strange and foreign land, young Mennonite girls were better able to cope with their temporary lot in life because of the support mechanisms offered by the girls' homes. The homes acted as a buffer zone between the Mennonite girls and "the world" as represented by the city. The homes provided practical assistance for girls unfamiliar with the city and unaccustomed to seeking work outside their own

community. They gave the girls formal and informal nurture in their spiritual lives, strengthening their Christian and Mennonite values so that they might be at the same time protected from and a witness to the secular environment in which they worked and lived. The homes were an "oasis" in their lives, a home away from home which they could turn to in times of trouble, and where they could find friendship and familiarity in a sometimes friendless and alien environment.

Notes

¹Diana L. Pederson, "The Young Women's Christian Association in Canada, 1870-1920: 'A Movement to Meet a Spiritual, Civic and National Need'," Unpublished PhD dissertation, Carleton University, p. 106.

²Homes for girls were established by the Young Women's Christian Association, the Salvation Army, the Big Sisters organization, and various ethnic communities. A Girl's Home of Welcome was established in Winnipeg in 1897, funded by government grants and private donations and operated by social reformer, Octavia Fowler.

³Pederson, "The Young Women's Christian Association in Canada, 1870-1920," p. 106.

⁴Paul Peachey, "Some Theological Reflections On the City," *Mennonite Life* 19 1 (January 1964), p. 29.

⁵Waldemar Janzen, "The Mennonites and the City," *Mennonite Life* 23 4 (October 1968), p. 190.

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷Neoma Jantz, "Sister to Many: Anna Thiessen (1892-1977)," in *Women Among the Brethren: Stories of 15 Mennonite Brethren and Krimmer Mennonite Brethren Women*, Katie Funk Wiebe, ed. (Hillsboro, KS: General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1979), p. 120.

⁸Anna Thiessen, *The City Mission in Winnipeg*, translated by Ida Toews, (Winnipeg, c1957), p. 13.

⁹Jantz, *Women Among the Brethren*, p. 122.

¹⁰Benjamin Ewert, "The Ebenezer Girls' Home, Winnipeg, Manitoba," *The Mennonite* 66 48 (Dec. 4, 1951), p. 762.

¹¹Eric Rempel, "Eben-Ezer Girl's Home, Winnipeg (1926-59)," Unpublished paper, Mennonite Heritage Center, Winnipeg, 1977, p. 12.

¹²Anna Thiessen, "Entstehung und Entwicklung des Maria-Martha-Heims," *Yearbook of the Northern District Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church of North America* (1933-34), p. 31.

¹³Rempel, p. 7.

¹⁴J. J. and Katherine Thiessen, "Mennonite Girls' Home," *The Mennonite* 68 15 (April 14, 1953), p. 233.

¹⁵Frieda Esau, "The Mennonite Girls' Homes — New Research," *Mennonite Historian* 13 2 (June 1987), p. 3.

¹⁶Oral History Project, Mennonite Girls' Homes, Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies, Winnipeg, 1987. Included were 34 interviews done in 1987 by researcher Frieda Esau with women associated with either of the girls' homes in Winnipeg between 1925 and 1959. Much of the information contained in this paper is drawn from these interviews, including anecdotal material which in many cases is not footnoted. For reasons of confidentiality, names are withheld. References to this Oral History Project are identified in the Notes as "Interview."

¹⁷Thiessen, p. 50.

¹⁸Hilda Matsuo, "Helen Epp and the 'Maedchenheim'," *Mennonite Mirror* 3 6 (April 1974), p. 8.

¹⁹Oral History Project, Interview #28.

²⁰Peter Penner, *No Longer At Arms Length: Mennonite Brethren Church Planting in Canada* (Winnipeg: Kindred Press, 1987), p. 20.

²¹Interview #24.

²²Interview #1.

²³Jantz, *Women Among the Brethren*, p. 122.

²⁴Thiessen, p. 57.

²⁵Marilyn Barber, "The Women Ontario Welcomed: Immigrant Domestic for Ontario Homes, 1870-1930," *Ontario History* 72 3(Sept. 1980), p. 170.

²⁶Thiessen, p. 78.

²⁷Thiessen, p. 55.

²⁸Interview #11 and 12.

²⁹Interview #1.

³⁰Thiessen, p. 76.

³¹Liese Klassen, "What does the home mean to me?" *The Mennonite* 52 1(Jan. 5, 1937), p. 8.

³²Cornelia Lehn, "The Young People from our Churches Have Come to Work or Study in the City," Unpublished paper, Mennonite Heritage Center, Winnipeg, 1956, p. 16.

³³Matsuo, "Helen Epp," p. 9.

³⁴Interview #28.

³⁵Thiessen, p. 93.

³⁶Marilyn Barber, "The Servant Problem in Manitoba, 1896-1930," in *First Days, Fighting Days: Women in Manitoba History*, Mary Kinnear, ed. (Regina: Canadian Plains Research Center, 1987), p. 112.

³⁷*Ibid.*

³⁸Interview #1.

³⁹Jantz, p. 126.

⁴⁰Barber, "The Servant Problem in Manitoba," p. 109.

⁴¹Thiessen, p. 68.

⁴²Barber, "The Servant Problem in Manitoba," p. 116.

⁴³Genevieve Leslie, "Domestic Service in Canada, 1880-1920," in *Women at Work: Ontario, 1850-1930*, Janice Acton, ed. (Toronto: Women's Educational Press, 1974), p. 83.

⁴⁴Esau, p. 3.

⁴⁵Thiessen, p. 81.

⁴⁶Klassen, "What does the home mean to me?" p. 8.

⁴⁷W. S. Gottshall, "Saskatoon Girls' Home," *The Mennonite* 51 2(Jan. 14, 1936), p. 5.

⁴⁸Thiessen, p. 78.

⁴⁹Marry Kinnear, "Introduction," in *First Days, Fighting Days*, p. xiii.

⁵⁰Interview #1. Thiessen, "Mennonite Girls' Home," *The Mennonite*, p. 233.

⁵¹Ed Goerzen, "Mennonite Youth Coming to the City, Part B: Possible Steps Toward Solving the Problem," Unpublished paper, Mennonite Heritage Center, Winnipeg, 1959, p. 15.