

Life as a Sum of Shattered Hopes: Arnold Dyck's Letters to Gerhard J. Friesen (Fritz Senn)

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I

From 1955 until the year he died, Arnold Dyck (1889–1970) and Gerhard Johann Friesen (1894–1983) maintained continual contacts through personal meetings and a fairly regular correspondence. The 45 extant German letters by Dyck (itemized in Part III of this paper) are probably all he wrote to Friesen and constitute a valuable record of the discourse between the two foremost Mennonite authors of their generation. For the time being, practical reasons unfortunately preclude the complete publication of these letters. This paper will therefore present a chronological sequence of excerpts¹ on two important aspects: Dyck's view of himself as a writer and of his lifelong subject, Mennonitism. My selection of Dyck's statements pertaining to these two topics will be preceded by a brief introduction.

Arnold Dyck's autobiographical sketch *Aus meinem Leben*, concluded on November 21, 1966, naturally provides no information on his Canadian activities after that date and also omits any mention of his German sojourns since 1953.² A fuller picture of his life and thought since 1955 emerges from his letters to Friesen. That this is not a complete picture is partly due to Dyck's characteristically sparse, often taciturn epistolary style, akin to his subdued narrative prose. To be sure, he did not consider his letters an extension of his literary work but rather makeshift links to bridge the gaps between face-to-face talks (Nos. 17, 21).

From 1953 to 1956, Dyck lived with his eldest daughter, Hedwig Dyck Knoop, in Darlaten (near Uchte in the southernmost region of Lower Sax-

ony, ca. 70 km south of Bremen) and, since June 1956, in Cuxhaven on the North Sea. During these years, he travelled (usually on a bicycle) through most of West Germany as well as parts of Switzerland and Austria. Upon his return to Canada in November 1957, he was shocked to find Mennonite life there much changed. Six months after his arrival in Winnipeg he confided that he would hurry back to Germany as soon as he had terminated the affairs of his Echo-Verlag and its book club (No. 18). This took longer than expected, and Dyck became more and more despondent over the rapid "Americanization" (No. 20) of Canadian Mennonites. After an extended silence between his letters of May 6, 1960, and April 22, 1963, he informed Friesen that he was back in Darlaten since December 1961, but found the "new" Germany so disquieting that he was considering returning to Canada, even though he viewed the current trend of Mennonitism in America as disheartening for his work as a writer (No. 24). Dyck's last visit to Canada was delayed by medical problems and an eventual liver operation, both of which probably helped to exacerbate the disappointment and disillusionment he expressed in his letters (Nos. 25-33). His stay in Canada until he departed again for Germany in October 1968 did not alleviate his gloomy outlook. His original plan to leave for Canada after one year in Darlaten was thwarted by frail health and his death. Of his last fifteen years, Dyck thus spent a total of seven in Canada, and eight in Germany.

One of the most striking facets during these years is Dyck's frequent change of residence,³ at an age when most other people have permanently settled down. That Dyck was visiting his three children living in Canada and his daughter in Germany does not entirely explain his peregrinations, as documented by the letters. The real reason, which painfully preoccupied him in his advancing age, was an ever intensifying feeling of homelessness compounded by a sense of frustration and personal failure in light of the rapidly progressing assimilation of Mennonites into the North American mainstream.

Mennonites, in Dyck's view, were first and foremost a *Volk*, an ethnic group with a unique heritage and tradition crucial to maintaining their true identity. This tradition, according to Dyck, was being eroded in North America by urbanization, commercialism, loss of the German language, and the displacement of a healthy degree of earthly realism by the dominance of religious matters in the few surviving Mennonite periodicals that still appeared in German. Religion, in Dyck's other writings, plays at best a marginal role. In his letters, the references to ministers, missionaries, and church conferences are always couched in irony. It is conspicuous that Dyck never discusses theological questions or his own religious beliefs, and only once mentions his active participation in church life (No. 15). For his personal needs, it would seem, he instinctively preferred communion with nature and art to articles of faith and formal religious worship, and thus found solitary daily walks and bicycle trips of greater value than church attendance. Hence the keen attention devoted in the letters to his experience of the weather and

the landscape. It is safe to say, I think, that Dyck saw the Mennonite way of life and his own writing as rooted primarily in *Blut und Boden*, without the pejorative connotation this historically justifiable concept⁴ has acquired since the Nazis exploited it. And he was undoubtedly familiar with its most famous exponent, Hans Grimm (1875–1959), whose novel *Volk ohne Raum* (1926)⁵ must have influenced Dyck in contemplating a possible Mennonite exodus to South Africa and the establishment of a secular dominion there (Nos. 24, 25).

In his correspondence with Friesen, Dyck could candidly express his misgivings and discomfiture at a time when he came to consider himself increasingly isolated and unheeded by a new Mennonite generation in Canada. Their initial contact had occurred when Friesen (under his pen name Fritz Senn) published a number of poems in Dyck's *Mennonitische Warte* (1935–38). But a personal meeting did not take place until August 1955, when Dyck looked up Friesen at his home in Wilhelmshaven (ca. 130 km north of Darlaten). Dyck regretted that they had not met long ago (No. 2), and during his stays in Germany he became a frequent visitor in Wilhelmshaven. An exchange of letters cemented their intellectual affinity and friendship, although it remained on a formally reserved *Sie* basis. Both were aware that they had a good deal in common in their uprooted lives and as Mennonite authors. But despite the problems inherent in what they shared, both remained committed to the cause of Mennonitism as they perceived it (Nr. 30). Both relied on their friendship for understanding, sympathy, and mutual encouragement in their waning years.⁶ While Friesen continued to stimulate the aging Dyck's flagging intellectual appetite with gifts and loans of German and Russian books, his friend insisted that Friesen (in spite of his deteriorating eyesight) devote the years after his retirement from government service (1959) to writing about the fading memories of the Mennonite experience in Southern Russia. That Friesen eventually used *Plautdietsch* as an original voice for his poetry is almost certainly due to the fact Dyck introduced him to Gerhard Wiens, a professor at the University of Oklahoma and lively champion of the German–Russian Mennonite's genuine vernacular (Nos. 42, 43). It is a sad irony, one of many fate bestowed on Arnold Dyck, that among the very first such poems by Friesen was a threnody⁷ occasioned by Dyck's death on July 10, 1970.

II

Darlaten, Nov. 24, 1955

[Upon reading Mikhail Zoshchenko] Heavens, what has become of the artistically so gifted Russian people? But, for us, those among us that still cannot part with our Russian past, it is really better this way. That goes along with our destroyed, collectivized, and filth-ridden villages by the Dniepr and the Molochnaya, and thus all our longing for what was once ours loses its substance and must slowly die. It must — and if it does not? Our generation

was born too early, we were too old to completely renounce Russia, too old to become Americanized, too old to identify with the new Germany that does not even know what to do with a Goethe. And what does fate offer us in return? The awareness to have experienced and withstood forty most turbulent years of world history! To what avail is that in one's old age? And if one could at least get all that off one's mind by writing about it. But who would want to read that? (No. 4)

Cuxhaven, March 18, 1957

"Alter Mauerschrank." [A poem by Fritz Senn; ed. Doerksen, p. 106] . . . I do not think the *Bote* will publish the poem. Just like "Einmal möcht' ich wieder," [ed. Doerksen, p. 96] it seems to contain things that do not suit this official organ of the Mennonite General Conference . . . if you have ever read one issue from beginning to end — I dutifully do this then and now — you will notice that all its subject matter is selected so that everything can be reconciled in form, content, and style with the Conference's credo. (No. 12)

Cuxhaven, Oct. 24, 1957

I would like to visit you once more before my departure [for Canada] . . . Evidently I have a real home country [*Heimat*] even less than you and cannot gain a proper footing either here or there. But that seems to be the price our generation had to pay for the privilege to have witnessed two world wars. (No. 16)

Winnipeg, Apr. 4, 1957

[The modern world is undergoing rapid changes, epitomized by Sputnik.] Our Mennonites are changing as well. The really genuine species probably survives only in the [Gran] Chaco [of Paraguay] . . . [Mennonites children, who have moved from there to Kildonan, near Winnipeg, are more disciplined, conscientious, and intelligent pupils than the indigenous ones]. Thus it has been and thus it is where Mennonites build their own homes. Where others do it for them, as in North America, we slowly cease to be Mennonites. And there is hardly anyone with whom I could discuss this. (No. 17)

Winnipeg, July 17, 1958

Besides, locally, probably especially here in North America, there is no contemplative living left. And least of all in a big city like Winnipeg. For lack of my own car, I take the bus every day to the outskirts of the city, where I look for a quiet place to take a walk. I have scoured the entire periphery in vain. (No. 19)

Winnipeg, July 2, 1959

Concerning myself, I must emphatically state (repeat?) that I am fed up with my hereabouts. You will scarcely believe how much everything has changed here during my four-year absence and now continues to change

under my very eyes. I mean especially in Mennonite society. Americanization [*Veramerikanerung*]. But you would only have to read the *Bote*. (No. 20)

Winnipeg, Jan. 22, 1960

How I am faring? — Poorly, actually, because I am much too busy. I am in the process of liquidating my entire publication venture (Echo-Verlag, Book Club) and everything connected with it in order to become a free man. So I have to find replacement(s) for myself. But that seems like a pretty hopeless prospect! Everything here has totally changed (you only need to read the *Bote*) into a world in which I no longer want to participate. (No. 21)

Winnipeg, March 29, 1960

. . . at times I have accursed what I have got into with the publication of books and all that entails. And I would dearly like to achieve what you have attained: to be rid of all duties towards others, and to be able to work just for oneself in solitude and tranquility. (No. 22)

Darlaten, Apr. 22, 1963

[Friesen had written from Johannesburg, where he spent several months in 1963.] South Africa — exactly that spot on the globe where I would have liked to go with our Mennonites and to establish our own state in proximity to our ethnic cousins, the Boers, in order to make it manifest — especially to ourselves — that we are truly capable of the utmost accomplishments . . .

I have been back in Germany since December 1961, am living here quite withdrawn and had intended to complete various writing projects. But the whole trend of our Mennonitism in both Americas (I read all Mennonite periodicals published in German) is not apt to encourage me to continue. (No. 24)

Darlaten, July 7, 1963

Your letter [from South Africa] is liable to conjure up memories of and, by God, to make me pursue again my former imaginary designs of a Mennonite haven — not for staging our ascent to Heaven, but Heaven brought down to earth. Nowadays, when we have to experience that everything is and thus has been in vain — just read our press — we old-timers have nothing but our erstwhile beautiful fantasies left to savour vicariously again and again. If only one could do this in the company of another person with the same orientation and sensitivity. But are there still any people like that? And when there exists, perchance, one such congenial contemporary, geography is, unfortunately, separating us.

You, to be sure, do not seem as resigned. You still feel compelled to write. To write time and again about matters that our people [*Volk*] needs to be aware of. As a matter of fact, I would also like to write, to do nothing but write in serenity. But only that, not to be forced to act as publisher for the writings, my own and others', as well. After all, I have had to do this for

almost 40 years, and thus I stand “pered rasbitym korytom.”⁸ For if among Mennonites an author is likely to soon concede his ultimate defeat, what then must be the fate of one presumptuous enough to play the part of a publisher? He is rewarded with nothing but the “renown” to have been the first and last of his kind.

And now the *Bote*. It is now definitely a [General] Conference paper. It was one under [Dietrich H.] Epp [editor 1924–55], gradually intensified that character under [Walter] Quiring [editor 1959–63], but at a speed the Conference brethren found much too slow. Now it is to become exclusively that. But since a preacher still has not been found to assume the editorship, another year has been added to the transition phase, and for that period P[eter] B. Wiens, a farmer, will function as interim editor. (His articles in the *Bote* opened almost always with the phrase “If a farmer . . .”) If under Qu[iring] we had already reached the stage where neither you nor G[erhard] Toews nor Victor Peters nor A[braham] Friesen nor I was inclined or allowed to appear in the *Bote* — how much more stringently will this be so once a real Conference creature is at the helm! And only such a one is eligible — no more Quirings. And absolutely no Arnold Dyck. (No. 25)

Darlaten, Oct. 2, 1964

[In response to a dejected letter by Friesen] . . . a mood that will not leave me either. A mood born from the perception that one is growing old — has grown old, and that too much in one’s life was a failure. It is possible that the latter may not apply to you. However, do you have a home country [*Heimat*], a home people [*Heimatvolk*]? Are you not separated from your children as well! Do you not have growing grandchildren, who in their infancy have already “made the best of” their grandparents and all that burdens them? Indeed, dear companion in fate, we are the generation whose destiny in a new country is death. By no means physical death resulting from material want — that is hardly conceivable these days — no, spiritual death, whence our intellects are slowly wasting away while our bodies are still alive. That is our lot. Add to this that we cannot, even in our hours of distress, at least seek mental refuge in the sanctuary of our youth. Let someone go and visit our villages — they are no longer there, but did they ever really exist? No, we have always been without a true home [*Heimat*]. Our only home was the fellowship of our companions in fate and our intercourse in our own, our unique language. And this home has been taken away from us. Look at the *Bote* of 1963, and look at all of today’s Mennonite journals . . .

Yes, I am back again in my hermitage [*Einsiedlerhäuschen*] in the woods, which is now on my children’s property. I am not well: all sorts of digestive ailments that should be rectified by an operation. But that does not prevent me from daily moving about on my bicycle for three or four hours (20–40, even up to 90 km). Thus I enjoy the most beautiful aspect contemporary Germany has to offer: its landscape. And in so doing, I become absorbed in

memories of my childhood.⁹ Yes, my thoughts no longer reach into the future but go back to the past. (No. 28)

Darlaten, Dec. 18, 1964

So I was correct in assuming that you, like me, in the twilight of your life are standing quasi “pered rasbitym korytom.” [Cf. excerpt from No. 25.] Our generation had to submit to unbelievable historical events! And to crown it all, the decline of our Mennonitism. For nothing less is now happening in Canada . . .

I would rather walk, but unfortunately my broken leg does not permit me [to cycle] more than four or five kilometers . . .

The whole considerable remains of what I have published and edited in book form are presently rotting (?) in some basement corner in Winnipeg. They still belong to me. (No. 29)

Darlaten, June 12, 1965

I take it that you, like me, absolutely cannot and will never be able to divorce yourself from our Mennonite people, no matter how little we may approve of the directions their leaders [in the *Bote*] and now in Canada have chosen to pursue. (No. 30)

Darlaten, Aug. 21, 1965

[About reminiscences of and yearning for the Ukrainian steppe of their youth.] But if one probes more deeply, this is wrong, for in the alien (Russian) steppe we could not truly feel at home. We simply are among all people [*Völkern*] the most homeless . . . “I can’t return home, I no longer have one [*Heimat*],” laments the wanderer. But he once *had* it, this home. We, however, only *thought* that we had one. Today we know how very homeless [*heimatlos*] we have always been, and that even our longing for that home [*Heimat*] is in vain. Only the nostalgia for our people [*Volk*] might persist; it might, but what have our [North] Americans made of this people! What is left for us is darkest Africa [*der Kongo*]. — This long lamentation is just between the two of us. (No. 32)

Darlaten, Sept. 22, 1965

If I fathom it precisely, it is something else that renders me so completely inactive. All my efforts since 1918 were for my people [*Volk*], and these people are no more. Our young Mennonites in Canada — not to mention those in the U.S. — who are aspiring less to a real education [*Bildung*] than to academic degrees, are barely able to read any German, and even if they still can, this is totally inadequate [for identifying with and espousing their tradition]. They are not sufficiently educated, in spite of their B.A.’s and M.A.’s and similar adornments. And this new elite does not inquire about their fathers and forefathers or about their brethren in Central and South America. Those are actually just a convenient pretexts for missionary excursions into other

countries. Indeed, we not only have had to forgo our homeland [*Heimat*] but also our people [*Volk*].

I would not like to repeat myself too often, and thus I had better break off my lamentations. But such thoughts and the moods they evoke are what compels me to leave the confinement of my cabin and to look for different ideas out in open nature. One of them is the question: what would have to be done in order that these magnificent sights of nature (*Naturbilder*) might become a means for making mankind better and a little more reasonable? (Compare the events in the world at large. How did you vote on Sunday?) (No. 33)

Winnipeg, Feb. 17, 1966

I, however, feel isolated and completely superfluous [among Mennonites in Winnipeg]. Something like the *Mennonitische Warte* today would be unthinkable! And yet, in light of what is happening to our people [*Volk*] today, one would have something to say; and believes one would be able to say it so that it certainly would be readable — but once one has looked over the possibly appropriate periodicals — [one has to conclude that] one cannot conform to them. (No. 34)

Winnipeg, May 21, 1966

For five months I have now been back in Canada, and still I am not really here. Haven't found the proper contact. Don't know how to get back into circulation. And that, I suppose, because only a few people of my age are left, and they have usually been sidelined, dismissed. And the new ones, the young — they are simply a new and differently disposed generation. Some of them, to be sure, were still "born in the steppe," [an allusion to Friesen's poem "Alle, die in der Steppe geboren sind," ed. Doerksen, p. 128] but were too young to absorb what it imparted to us. They, and even more those born here, completely lack a sense of Mennonite ethnic awareness (*Volksbewußtsein*). Either they succumb to missionary activities and take leave of mundane reality (*lösen sich los von der Erde*), or they submerge among Canadians. The latter route is evidently the one followed almost without fail by the many hundreds of our university and college students. How our people [*Volk*] have changed in the four years of my absence! One might have got an inkling of this by reading the *Bote*, but I could no longer take this paper seriously after it became American. But what I am now witnessing makes me believe that *beatification* is now a serious purpose, or that its semblance [or halo — *Schein*] is to be taken seriously. I am actually looking over my shoulder in fear, when I am about to light a cigarette. Even in my own room I first ask a strange visitor whether I may do so. (No. 35)

Darlaten, Aug. 22, 1969

Do you subscribe to *Mennonite Life*? Its April issue deals with the Russian Mennonites and is further proof that there is a lack of truly historical

material. By the way, if one peruses our current Mennonite publications — where do they still demonstrate any interest in our history? (No. 41)

Darlaten, Jan. 30, 1970

Meanwhile you will have received your book by Bauer [Walter Bauer, *Ein Jahr, Kanadisches Tagebuch* (Hamburg, 1967), a copy of which Friesen had loaned Dyck]. I did not read all of it, only various passages, by an author with whom I had hitherto not been acquainted. You mentioned that you might want me to keep the book as a gift. Please do not insist. I do not want any more books and have difficulties anyhow in storing all the ones I own . . .

The books I prefer to read these days are of recent vintage and deal with the events of world history that have come to pass since 1914. (No. 44)

III

In listing Arnold Dyck's letters to Gerhard J. Friesen below, the following abbreviations are used:

HO for handwritten original
 TO for typewritten original
 TC for typewritten carbon copy.

Letters designated HO and TO are in my possession. For providing me with TC duplicates I am grateful to Hedwig Dyck Knoop, and to Harry Loewen for conveying them to me.

No.	Place	Date	Source
1	Darlaten	Aug. 10, 1955	TO
2	Darlaten	Aug. 26, 1955	TC
3	Darlaten	Sept. 26, 1955	TO
4	Darlaten	Nov. 24, 1955	TC
5	Darlaten	Feb. 24, 1956	TC
6	Darlaten	May 2, 1956	TC
7	Darlaten	June 2, 1956	HO
8	Darlaten	June 29, 1956	HO
9	Darlaten	Sept. 4, 1956	TO
10	Darlaten	Oct. 5, 1956	TO
11	Cuxhaven	Nov. 15, 1956	TO
12	Cuxhaven	March 18, 1957	TO
13	Cuxhaven	May 7, 1957	TO
14	Mainz	June 18, 1957	HO
15	Cuxhaven	Aug. 6, 1957	TC
16	Cuxhaven	Oct. 24, 1957	TC
17	Winnipeg	April 4, 1957	TO
18	Winnipeg	May 4, 1958	TC
19	Winnipeg	July 17, 1958	TO
20	Winnipeg	July 2, 1959	TC
21	Winnipeg	Jan. 22, 1960	TC
22	Winnipeg	March 29, 1960	TC
23	Winnipeg	May 6, 1960	TC
24	Darlaten	April 22, 1963	TC

25	Darlaten	July 7, 1963	TC
26	Darlaten	March 3, 1964	TC
27	Darlaten	Aug. 18, 1964	TC
28	Darlaten	Oct. 2, 1964	TC
29	Darlaten	Dec. 18, 1964	TC
30	Darlaten	June 12, 1965	TC
31	Darlaten	July 20, 1965	TC
32	Darlaten	Aug. 21, 1965	TC
33	Darlaten	Sept. 22, 1965	TC
34	Winnipeg	Feb. 17, 1966	HO
35	Winnipeg	May 21, 1966	HO
36	Winnipeg	June 24, 1966	TO
37	Penticton	Sept. 5, 1966	TO
38	Winnipeg	Jan. 1, 1967	TO
39	Darlaten	June 23, 1969	HO
40	Darlaten	July 19, 1969	HO
41	Darlaten	Aug. 22, 1969	HO
42	Darlaten	Nov. 6, 1969	HO
43	Darlaten	Dec. [recte:Jan.] 6, 1970	HO
44	Darlaten	[Jan. 30, 1970]	HO
45	Darlaten	May 13, 1970	HO

Notes

¹Where it is required for proper understanding, I have indicated the context in square brackets. All translations are mine. The numbers given in parentheses refer to the letters as listed in Part III.

²Arnold Dyck, *Collected Works*, ed. Victor G. Doerksen et al. (Manitoba, 1985 ff.), I, 463–513.

³Arnold Dyck's full addresses provided in the letters were: (23) Darlaten, Post Uchte (as of No. 24) 3079 Darlaten; (23) Cuxhaven, Strichweg 122; 358 Riverton Ave., Winnipeg 5, Man.; (as of No. 34) 291 McLeod Ave., Winnipeg 15, Man.; (as of No. 38) 48 Queenston St., Winnipeg 9, Man.; (in No. 37 only) Valley View Road, R.R. 2, Penticton, B.C.

⁴Heinrich Meyer, *Was bleibt, Bemerkungen über Literatur und Leben, Schein und Wirklichkeit* (Stuttgart, 1966), pp. 35, 55, 167.

⁵Inspired by a reading of Grimm's novel, Friesen's poem "Heimat" was published 1938 in Dyck's *Mennonitische Warte*. Cf. Fritz Senn, *Gesammelte Gedichte und Prosa*, ed. Victor G. Doerksen (Manitoba, 1987), p. 292. Hereafter referred to as ed. Doerksen. In the mid 1950's, Friesen took courses in Dutch, in preparation for his stay in South Africa.

⁶A separate study could analyse their friendship and intellectual symbiosis in more detail.

⁷ed. Doerksen, p. 116.

⁸A Russian phrase meaning "before the broken trough," idiomatically used to signify defeat and shattered hopes.

⁹Dyck's German original statement, "Dabei denke ich dann 'als Kind mich zurücke'," contains an allusion to "Das Schloß Boncourt" by Adelbert von Chamisso (1781–1838), a poem depicting a dream in which he returns to his native castle in France from which the French Revolution had forced him and his family to emigrate to Germany.