

Arnold Dyck's Only Poem

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Arnold Dyck (1889-1970) never considered himself a poet, but one occasion moved him to write the following poem about a subject which moved him very deeply. The text and its introduction will appear in the forthcoming Volume IV of the Arnold Dyck edition.

“Keine Heimat — No Homeland”

Like many other Mennonite emigrants from the Soviet Union, Arnold Dyck with his wife and daughter passed through the Kiel Canal in the north of Germany on their way to the New World. For many this was as close as they would come to Germany. As a student Dyck had spent time in the south of Germany at art academies in Munich and Stuttgart, and like many other educated Russian Mennonites he considered Germany as a kind of cultural Mecca. It is important to bear in mind that Mennonite students attended schools and universities in Russia as well, in Odessa, Moscow and Petersburg, and that their cultural education derived to a great degree from that world. This applies to Arnold Dyck as well, who testifies in his own “Aus meinem Leben” to the impact upon him of the Russian classics in literature and art. Especially after the Russian laws changed around 1870/1 there was much more exposure to the Russian language and culture in the Mennonite communities. But through all of those “hundred years,” as Dyck refers to them in this poem, there was a persistence not only of the German language itself, but also of a special way of thinking about that language and its attendant culture. Of course, this was due in the first instance to its religious connotations. The Bible and the basic religious literature, books like *Die wandelnde Seele*, *Der Weg nach Friedensstadt*, *Das Heimweh*, were canonized in the German language and in this religious sense German was the “mother tongue” of the Russian Mennonites. Political life might function in better or worse Russian (or Ukrainian), agriculture in *Plautdietsch*, but the truest culture of the group, the religious culture, was firmly rooted in the German Bible.

It is not easy to determine to what degree German nationalistic culture

took root among Russian Mennonites. Since the Anabaptist movement had originated on German soil, broadly speaking, there was always an attachment of a certain kind, which if anything was strengthened by later immigrants to Russia from Prussia. During and after the First World War there were many reasons for identifying (or not) with the German army personnel and with the "homeland" they represented. Since the "journey to a better land" was a central part of their shared story, it was not surprising that many dislocated Mennonites would think fondly of a German motherland to which they could "return." Although in fact a number of Mennonites from Russia, mainly academics, did relocate and remain in Germany, for most Germany was nothing more than a way-station en route to North or South America.

This is the situation that Arnold Dyck describes in his poem, appropriately named *Keine Heimat*. Much like Fritz Senn (Gerhard Friesen) in his poem cycle: "*Hinterm Pflug/Stimmungen*," Dyck looks back to the new reality of the Soviet Union in sorrow and anger and tells his version of the story about the loss of the Mennonite world in Russia. We did not know in all those years, he says, that the only way of really acquiring land, land of one's own, was by the sword, by force, by murder. We always believed, he maintains, that the land was there for all, like the air. Instead, war and revolutions had taught them that theirs were ill-gotten gains and that their true homeland was the hated nation of Germany. That country, emerging from the War into the Weimar era, was faced by the opprobrium of all the surrounding nations and this low standing in the eyes of the world seems paradoxically to inspire a new love and devotion on the part of these would-be immigrants. They do not, at that stage, have eyes for the New World, about which Dyck says merely that they must wander on again, *in die Irre*, into the wilderness, so to speak.

Arnold Dyck's only known poem is more rhetorical than lyrical. Its form harkens back to eighteenth century models like Lessing and Schiller in its declamatory sentences and inverted syntax. There can be no doubt that Dyck was a better writer of fiction, which depended on situation and character, than a poet working with images and mood. At the same time this text demonstrates the strong feeling which characterized many Mennonites at that time: what Harry Loewen has called the "longing for a lost homeland." That being the case it is not surprising that Arnold Dyck chose the poetic form to express this feeling.

According to the subtitle this poem may have been written as early as 1923, although Arnold Dyck only published it in the *Mennonitische Warte* in 1938. It appeared over his pen-name Fritz Walden.

Keine Heimat . . .

(Rußlanddeutsche Flüchtlinge beim Passieren des Kieler Kanals)

Es liegt nun hinter uns,
das Land der finsternen Gewalten,
das Land des Grauens,
das Land, das Vaterland uns sollte sein. —
Vaterland —
Für uns ein leerer Schall. —
Durch zähen Fleiß,
durch Sparsamkeit and harte Arbeit glaubten wir
ein Recht uns zu erwerben,
die Scholle, die wir urbar machten,
auch unser dann zu nennen.
Denn nicht mit Feu'r und Schwert
war sie von uns erobert worden;
nur Schweiß war unsre Waffe.
In Frieden waren wir gekommen,
in Frieden führten wir den Kampf
um den Besitz der Steppe,
um die sonst niemand warb.
Genügsam waren wir:
Laßt uns das Stückchen Erde,
laßt uns die Arbeit,
laßt uns uns selber helfen, —
das waren unsre Wünsche, unsre Bitten, —
dem Kaiser geben gerne wir
was auch des Kaisers ist. —
So sollt' die Steppe uns zur Heimat werden
als ein Geschenk vor Gott,
als ein Verdienst vor Menschenmacht. —
Und hundert Jahre standen wir im Wahne,
dort eine Heimat,
dort einen eignen Herd zu haben.
Wir wußten all die Jahre nicht,
daß nur durch Schwert, Gewalt, durch Morden
man "eigen" Land erwerben kann.
Wir glaubten immer noch,
der Boden sei wie Luft für alle Menschen da,
für alle Menschen
habe Gott der Schöpfer ihn geschaffen. —

No Homeland . . .

(Russian-German refugees in passage through the Kiel Canal)

Now it lies behind us,
the land of dark powers,
the land of terror,
the land that should have been our fatherland. —

Fatherland —
For us an empty sound.

Through our tenacious energy,
our thrift and hard work we believed
that we could earn the right
to call the clod of earth we cultivated
our very own.

For we had not conquered it
by fire or sword,
but by our only weapon — sweat.

We had come in peace
and in peace we fought the battle
for possession of the steppe
contested by no others.

We were contented:

Leave us this plot of earth,
leave us the work,
leave us to help ourselves —
those were our wishes, our requests;
to the Tsar we gladly give
what is the Tsar's.

So the steppe was to become our home,
as a gift before God,
as something earned before men. —
And for a hundred years we fancied
that there we had a home
a hearth of our own.

We did not know through all those years
that only by the sword, by force and murder
could land be taken in possession.

We still believed
the ground like air to be free for all,
created for all people
by the Creator, God.

Es kam ein schreckliches Erwachen.
Durch schwere Trübsalsjahre,
voll Krieg, voll Bürgermord,
voll Pest — und Hungersterben
ist jeden Tag,
ist jede Stunde
es unsrer müden Seele eingehämmert worden,
daß Fremdlinge,
daß Feinde wir im Lande sei'n,
die sich mit List ins fremde Haus geschlichen.
Wir wurden aufgeklärt,
daß unser Land nicht unser Land,
daß unser Gut nicht unser Gut,
daß es geraubte Güter sei'n.
Man tat uns kund,
daß ein verhaßtes fremdes Land,
daß Deutschland unsre Heimat sei;
das Land, das hundert Jahre schon
Wir nimmer wieder mehr gesehn,
des Volk uns längst vergessen hatte.
In jenem Land, verdammt von aller Welt,
weil stolz und selbstbewußt
es siegreich gegen eine Welt von Feinden kämpfte,
dort seien wir zu Hause. —

Gott sei's geklagt,
daß wir so lang' es nicht gewußt.
Wir kannten's wohl, jen Land,
wir sprachen seine Sprache,
wir achteten sein Volk
als Volk der geistigen Kultur,
von der auch unser Geist sich nährte;
doch unsre Heimat, wähten wir,
sei nur das Land, in dem wir lebten,
des Freud und Leid wir redlich teilten
wie jeder andre Bürger.
Dem war nicht so, und — Gott sei Dank,
daß's anders war,
und daß die Augen uns geöffnet wurden.

So pressten wir die Lippen aufeinander
und öffneten die Herzen jenem andern Lande.
Doch ganz zu eigen
sind wir ihm später erst geworden.
Erst dann, als es darniederlag,
als es der Feinde Übermacht erlegen,

There came a terrible awakening.
Through heavy years of suffering,
of war and murdering,
of plague, starvation —
every day
every hour it was
hammered into our weary souls
that we were strangers,
enemies in our own land,
who had crept with stealth into a strange house.
It was explained to us
that our land was not our land,
that our goods were not our goods,
that they were stolen goods.
We were told
that a hated foreign land
that Germany was our home,
the land we had not seen
for a hundred years
whose people had long forgotten us,
in that land, damned by the world
because it fought a world of enemies
with head erect, triumphantly,
there we should be at home.
God help us
for remaining ignorant so long!
We knew it well, that land,
we spoke its tongue
respected its people
as a nation of high culture
nurturing our spirit,
but our homeland, we thought,
could only be the land in which we lived,
whose joy and sorrow was our part
with other citizens.
But that was not the case, — thank God
that it was otherwise!
and that our eyes were opened.
And so we pressed our lips together
and opened our hearts to that other land.
But only later could we
give ourselves to her
only when she lay vanquished,
subjugated by her enemies,

als es entehrt, entwürdigt,
dem Hohne preisgegeben, — dann,
dann erst wurden wir so ganz sein eigen.

Doch

unser — wurd es nicht. —

Und heute nun zieht dieses Land an uns vorüber,
nach hundert Jahren wieder sieht es unser Auge.

Wir sehen sein Gestade,
es winkt so traut, so lieb zu uns herauf.

Uns bricht das Herz vor Sehnsucht,
und Tränen netzen unsre Wangen
vor Heimatschmerz —

Du großer Gott! — so schreien wir —
gescheh'n denn keine Wunder!

Kann denn die Mutter ihres Kindes auch vergessen!

Du schweigst, Allmächtiger? —

Vergib, o Herr —

wie sollte jemand andern helfen können,
der selber hart gefesselt
im Staub der Erde liegt. —

Wir werden still.

Und stille ziehn wir weiter,
Tief in uns aber stöhnt ein neues Weh. —

So scheiden schweigend wir,
und tiefes Schweigen ist der Widerhall. —

Leb wohl, du einz'ge Heimat,
es darf nicht sein.

Heut' kann es noch nicht sein,
daß du um uns die Flügel breitest.

Gott schütze dich und gebe dir ein Neuerwachen!

Und wenn der große Gott

auch heut' Gebete noch erhört,
wird unserm Flehn sein Ohr er nicht verschließen können,
dann wirst zu neuem Leben du erstehn,
wirst stolz dein Haupt du wieder heben;
und dann wirst du auch Ausschau halten
nach deinen Kindern,
die heut in alle Welt verweh'n.

Dann —

dann denke auch an uns,
dann denk an jene deiner ärmsten Söhne,
die nie die Luft der Heimat kannten,
die Fremdlinge stets blieben,
wo immer sie ein grausam Schicksal hingestoßen. —

dishonored and discredited,
the object of derision — then
only then we became her own.

But
she did not become ours
and today that land passes by us —
we see it after hundred years,
we see its shores
that wave to us and greet us.
Our hearts break in longing
and tears of homesickness
furrow our cheeks
You great God! we cry —
are there no miracles?
Can a mother forget her child?
You are silent, omnipotent One?
Forgive, o Lord,
how should they help another
who themselves lie chained
in the dust of the earth.

We fall silent
and quietly pass on,
but in us a new pain is born.

So, silently we depart
and deep silence is the echo.

Fare well, you only homeland,
It may not be.

Today, as yet, it may not be
that you enfold us with your wings.
God shelter you and give new birth!
and if the mighty God

today still answers prayer,
He will not turn away from our petition
and you will resurrect again
and lift your head again
And look about and seek your children
spread over all the world.

Then, —
then do not forget us
do not forget your poorest sons
who never knew the homeland air,
remaining strangers always
wherever cruel fate had cast them.

Wir werden heute nochmals weiter wandern,
wir werden nochmals in die Irre geh'n,
bis du uns rufst.

Ein köstlich Pfand jedoch wir heute mit uns nehmen,
nachdem die wahre Heimat wir geschaut.
Ganz tief im Herzen liegt es still verborgen.
Das ist der großen Sehnsucht Schmerz,
das ist das heil'ge Heimatweh.

Allmächt'ger Gott,
laß dieses Weh,
laß dieses Kleinod nie uns mehr verlieren,
bis sicher es zurück zur Mutter uns gebracht! —

Today we will wander on again,
we will again stray from the path
until you call us.

But we will take with us a precious token,
having seen our true homeland.
And deep within us it will lie,
the great pain of longing,
the sacred sorrow of homesickness.

Almighty God,
let us not forget this sorrow,
this token deep within
until it has brought us back to our mother
once again!