

# Gerhard Loewen (1863–1946): Early Mennonite Poet and Teacher in Russia and Canada

Harry Loewen, *The University of Winnipeg*

Between 1880 and 1914 Russian Mennonites experienced great changes. In response to institutional, economic and political reforms in their country, Mennonites improved their educational system, raised the professional level of the people in their colonies, and became more receptive to high culture, literature and art.<sup>1</sup>

A creative literature was established by Russian Mennonites well before World War I. The leading poet in the nineteenth century was Bernhard Harder (1832–1884) whose collection of poems and songs, *Geistliche Lieder und Gelegenheits-Gedichte*, published in 1888, proved immensely popular with Russian Mennonites. Another poet was Johann J. Loewen who in 1899 published his collection of poems, *Herzenstöne für schlichte Christenherzen*. Both these poets wrote didactic verses in imitation of nineteenth-century German religious and devotional poetry. But Mennonites also developed in the latter part of the nineteenth century a love of more secular literature, particularly through the study of the classical German writers in school. In 1910 Jacob H. Janzen and Peter B. Harder began to publish fiction in the form of short stories. While Mennonites generally remained suspicious of creative writing, simply because it was fiction, didactic stories and poems were acceptable because of their religious and moral intent. Peter B. Harder was perhaps the first Russian-Mennonite writer to publish a novel, *Schicksale, oder die lutherische Cousine*. A sequel to this novel was being printed in Germany when World War I came and prevented its publication.<sup>2</sup>

The foundations of Russian-Mennonite literature which were to develop in North America and in the Soviet Union after 1920 were therefore well established before 1914. Jacob H. Janzen was one writer who continued to write stories and plays in Canada, thereby establishing a direct link between pre-Revolutionary Russian-Mennonite literature and the Canadian-Mennonite

literary world of the 1920s and 30s represented by such writers as Arnold Dyck, Peter J. Klassen Gerhard Toews, and Fritz Senn.

Another important transitional figure who wrote extensively in pre-Revolutionary Russia and in Canada after emigration was the poet, writer and teacher Gerhard Loewen (1863–1946). Loewen published a collection of poems, *Feldblumen* (*Field Flowers*), in Russia in 1905 and later many poems in Mennonite journals and newspapers. He represents not only a connection between the Russian and Canadian literary traditions, but as a senior figure in the Russian literary scene he is a link between the older tradition of hymn-poetry and the new more secular poetry. The aim of this paper is to deal with Gerhard Loewen as teacher and poet among his people, describe the role he played in bridging the Old and the New World, and assess his influences on German-speaking Mennonites in Canada.

Much of Canadian-Mennonite literature written in German between the 1920s and 1950s deals with a nostalgic longing for a lost Russian homeland.<sup>3</sup> Many writers, Gerhard Toews (Georg de Brecht), Arnold Dyck, and Fritz Senn among them, look back to a time and place when Mennonites lived in a more secure and harmonious world, a world that was destroyed by war, revolution and civil war. These writers were aware that a Mennonite “paradise” had never existed, that there had never been a state of “forever summer, forever Sunday,”<sup>4</sup> but in Canada they sought to recreate an imaginative Mennonite world, an idealized existence. The fiction they created helped them and their readers to maintain their identity in a new and largely alien land. While Gerhard Loewen in some of his poems and articles mourned the loss of his Russian homeland, he also accepted and affirmed his new home in Canada. He sought to transmit German-Mennonite values to his people, particularly the young generation that was growing up in a land in which those values were foreign.<sup>5</sup>

Born in 1863 in the Khortitsa colony in South Russia, Loewen showed an early passion for stories and poems. His greatest desire, however, was to become a teacher.<sup>6</sup> Loewen was not university-educated nor did he study abroad like many later Mennonites born after 1880. He completed his secondary education in the Khortitsa colony, qualified as a teacher through summer courses and the study of pedagogical materials from Germany, and began to teach elementary school in 1880. His specialty was German language and literature and religion, subjects he loved and taught to the end of his life. While Loewen was not a “Germanist” in an academic sense, he possessed an extensive knowledge of classical and romantic literature and from such sources he drew his poetic inspiration.<sup>7</sup>

Loewen married in 1884 and a wedding photograph shows the young couple in an affectionate pose, with the bride sitting on her husband’s knees. His wife bore him thirteen children, eight of whom died in infancy. Loewen taught in several schools in his home colony, including the village of Einlage near the Dnieper River, and served as spiritual counsellor to a Mennonite Forestry Camp. In 1896 Loewen was awarded a silver medal with a red

Alexander ribbon "for outstanding service" among his people.<sup>8</sup> The Loewens moved to Arkadak in 1910, a newly established daughter colony in the Saratov region, where Loewen farmed, taught school, and ministered to a Mennonite congregation. When the Mennonite Commonwealth in Russia came to an end after 1917 Loewen, together with three of his grown-up daughters and a son (his wife had died in Arkadak), emigrated to Canada in 1925. Within three months of his arrival in Manitoba, the 61-year-old Loewen found a position as teacher of German and religion in Altona's Mennonite Educational Institute.<sup>9</sup> Then, together with his children, he purchased an 80-acre farm near Stuartburn in south-eastern Manitoba, had a house built on the banks of the Roseau River,<sup>10</sup> and continued to live there with a married daughter until his death on June 2, 1946.

Loewen's experiences were less turbulent than those of many of his contemporary Mennonites. Living in Arkadak he had not suffered the hardships and upheavals of those who lived in South Russia. And with grown-up children, pioneering in Canada proved less troublesome for him than it was for those with small children and a growing family. Whereas writers like Gerhard Toews had felt the terrible impact of civil war and famine in South Russia, and writers such as Arnold Dyck and Fritz Senn had to struggle with dislocation and poverty in Canada, Loewen was spared such experiences and was able to pursue his chosen profession: teaching. Moreover Loewen was endowed with a cheerful disposition and early in his career developed a basically positive view of life which was a constant source of strength.<sup>11</sup>

Loewen's optimistic view of life is evident in many of the poems, book reviews, and sketches he wrote and published in Canada. In describing events and people he sought the positive side of human nature and attempted to draw encouraging lessons from them. For Loewen even the anarchist Makhno, who with his bands had terrorized Mennonite communities between 1918 and 1919, could not be an altogether evil figure, as he was depicted in most Mennonite accounts. In a review of Gerhard Toews' *Heimat in Trümmern* (1936), Loewen wrote about Makhno: "Ich glaube, ein Mensch, wie weit er sich auch verirren, wie tief er auch fallen mag, bleibt doch immer noch ein Mensch." Quoting the Austrian writer Franz Grillparzer in his drama *Weh dem der lügt*, Loewen concluded his review by stating, "Ganz schlecht ist nur der Teufel."<sup>12</sup> Judas also, according to Loewen, was not wholly bad: "... sonst hätte ihn der Herr Jesus nicht ins Apostelamt berufen."<sup>13</sup>

In spite of experiences of isolation and poverty in Stuartburn, Loewen was generally quite happy in Canada. The small community in which he lived, far away from the main centres, filled him with peace and contentment. In 1928 in a humorous response to the perception of some people that neither human beings nor animals could live in Stuartburn, Loewen wrote: "Hier *leben* nicht nur jahraus, jahrein eine ganze Anzahl Menschen und Tiere, sondern sie *freuen* sich auch ihres Lebens." He then mentioned the

village hall where a "swaying mass of people" danced and enjoyed themselves. Loewen added: "Auch meine Kinder und ich fühlen uns hier ganz glücklich."<sup>14</sup>

Loewen's cheerful disposition is further illustrated by a literary exchange between himself and Fritz Senn. In 1937 Senn published a poem in the *Mennonitische Volkswarte* entitled "Roggenbrot," in which he recalled his lost homeland and lamented the fact that the kind of rye bread baked in Russia could not be found here.<sup>15</sup> Loewen replied with a "Roggenbrot" poem of his own: "Roggenbrot. Ein Pendant zu dem gleichnamigen Gedicht von Fritz Senn." In this poem Loewen celebrates the present, not the past, and urges his people to build a new home in Canada: "Und immer noch lässt er den Pflüger schaffen/ Mit fester Hand, die nimmer darf erschlaffen,/ .../ Die Roggenkörner hat er nicht vernichtet." Loewen concludes with a personal request to Senn, inviting him to visit Stuartburn and there taste good ryebread: "Drum, lieber Fritz, nur nicht den Mut begraben,/ An Roggenbrot kann man auch hier sich laben./ Sei herzlich drum nach Stuartburn eingeladen,/ Hier gibt's genug der braunen, duft'gen Fladen."<sup>16</sup>

In Russia Loewen had published numerous articles of a didactic nature, and in Canada he continued to instruct his Mennonite readers through his writings. One overriding theme dominates his prose writings, namely, the need for Mennonites to become more sensitive to cultural, aesthetic and spiritual values, or to use Loewen's words, which recur in many of his writings: "the beautiful, the noble and the true." Loewen sincerely believed in his educational mission, a mission which was to be achieved through the study of nature, of literature and God — in that order.<sup>17</sup> Lamenting the lack of culture and the dearth of "good literature" among Mennonites, Loewen nevertheless believed that his people could be made receptive for the "higher things in life." He wrote: "Wir Mennoniten gehören, wie mir scheinen will, im allgemeinen zu den allerprosaischen Menschen in der Welt. Wir sind viel zu materialistisch angelegt und vergessen dabei so leicht, dass es noch höhere Dinge gibt als Geld und Gut...."<sup>18</sup> Mennonites, according to Loewen, had cultivated their religion quite well, but had neglected to cultivate an appreciation for literature: "Unsere Anlage für Poesie, die doch eine nicht minder wertvolle Gabe unseres Gottes ist, bleibt meistens ganz unberücksichtigt...."<sup>19</sup> He continues: "Es ist unsere Aufgabe, auch den von dem gütigen Schöpfer in unsere Seele gelegten Sinne für das Schöne nach Möglichkeit zu pflegen und weiter auszubilden."<sup>20</sup> "Bad" reading materials such as "sensational novels and detective stories" were to be avoided because: "[Es ist] keine gesunde geistige Nahrung für unsere heranwachsende Jugend."<sup>21</sup>

In Canada Loewen published articles regularly on subjects such as: "Kunst und Natur,"<sup>22</sup> "Ueber Poesie,"<sup>23</sup> "Ueber Harmonie, Musik und Gesang,"<sup>24</sup> "Ich und mein Buch,"<sup>25</sup> "Jungbrunnen,"<sup>26</sup> and others dealing with nature, art, literature and religion. The purpose of art, according to Loewen, was to lift the human spirit above things of this world: "[Wir] sollen beim Anblick des Schönen Den ahnen, für den die ganze Erde mit all ihrer Pracht

doch nur der Schemel seiner Füße ist."<sup>27</sup> In a series of articles dealing with poetry and art, "Harmlose Plaudereien über Poesie und Verwandtes," published during the Great Depression when most Canadian Mennonites were more preoccupied with economic survival than art, Loewen sought to introduce his readers to poetic theory and aesthetics.<sup>28</sup> To illustrate poetic forms and such literary devices as rhythm, rhyme and meter, Loewen quoted from the poetry of leading German writers, including Klopstock, Goethe, Schiller, Möricke, Claudius and Nikolaus Lenau.

Those who knew Loewen, both in Russia and Canada, were impressed with his love of nature. Neighbours saw him going for walks in all weathers.<sup>29</sup> While teaching in Einlage Loewen was in the habit of walking down the valley to the Dnieper River to study trees and rocks and to observe the beauty of the landscape.<sup>30</sup> One observer later wrote that on his walks Loewen seemed to be in search of "all that is beautiful, noble and pure."<sup>31</sup> On excursions with his pupils Loewen always carried magnifying glasses and a telescope with him, instruments he used to explain the "beauties and wonders of nature."<sup>32</sup>

This concern with a sense of place and nature was central to Loewen's life and writing. Arnold Dyck wrote of Loewen that "he was a lover of nature. Seldom does one find one so tender, so devoted, so lost in his love for the out-of-doors."<sup>33</sup> To study and celebrate the beauty of nature was to be aware of God's creation and to worship his goodness. For Loewen, God was not the judgemental figure proclaimed by many of his fellow ministers. One of his students later lamented that in his sermons Loewen would stress "God's beautiful world" at the expense of the "glorious Lord and the risen Christ."<sup>34</sup> Whereas for many Mennonites religion was about human action and personal salvation, for Loewen God's plan involved more than just people: it incorporated his entire creation, the landscape and animals.

Loewen's love of nature extended beyond his writings. He was an enthusiastic photographer and around the turn of the century he experimented with stereoscopic photography.<sup>35</sup> But unlike many contemporary Mennonite photographs which depict family groups and Mennonite property, Loewen's pictures are naturalistic. Photography was obviously an art form for Loewen. Many of his pictures represent views of the changing seasons close to the Dnieper River, deep ravines and forest paths, villages nestled among trees in valleys, the break-up in spring of the winter ice, floods, and trees covered with hoarfrost. Photographs depict Loewen sailing in a boat with friends on a lake in Arkadak, reclining under a tree on the shores of the Roseau River in southern Manitoba, and out in the Canadian bush with young pupils, no doubt busy in nature-study.<sup>36</sup> His love of place and nature was easily transferred from Russia to Canada. A few years before he died he expressed a wish to see the mighty St. Lawrence River, the Rocky Mountains, and Canada's north at first hand. But poverty and advancing age prevented him from fulfilling his wish.<sup>37</sup>

Loewen was among the first Mennonites to break with the purely devotional-religious verse-making and to turn instead to German classical

and romantic poetic models. Together with Martin Fast and Jacob H. Janzen, Loewen founded a "Hainbund" (league of poets) in Russia for the purpose of encouraging each other in the writing of poetry. The three men, according to Janzen, agreed on themes, wrote poems, and sent their writings to each other in chain letters for comparison and criticism.<sup>38</sup> According to Janzen, Loewen's poems were structurally the most accomplished among these three poets; and they breathed "a heart-warming joy that is closely allied to nature....his spirit soared in freedom and gushed forth as free and expressive as the waters of the Dnieper in the valley of Chortiza and Einlage."<sup>39</sup>

In 1905 Loewen published his collection of poems entitled *Feldblumen*. In calling his poems "field flowers," Loewen implied two things: Firstly, that his poems were natural expressions of his thoughts, feelings and experiences, and secondly that they were not artistically polished productions. In a dedicatory poem to this collection he writes: "Feldblümchen sinds; denn nicht in dumpfen Räumen,/ Im engen Haus nicht sprossen sie empor:/ Im freien Feld und unter Waldes Bäumen/ Erblühte wonnig ihr bescheidner Chor."<sup>41</sup> In 1946 the *Feldblumen* collection was enlarged and republished in Canada with the editorial assistance of Arnold Dyck.<sup>42</sup> This second edition includes ninety-six poems arranged in four parts: "Im Schosse der Natur," "In Freuden und Leiden des Lebens," "Göttliches," and "Trennung und Tod." Written mostly in rhyming stanzas and in a narrative style, the poems deal with all aspects of human experiences: the coming and passing of the seasons; longing, love, joys and sorrows, birthdays and other celebrations; religion, prayer and God; and, finally, old age, separation and death.

Unlike Fritz Senn's poetry, there is little philosophical or theological reflection in Loewen's poetry. Many of his poems seem to have been written with children in mind. Some poems are explicitly stories for children: "Der Kinder Frühlingsliedchen" (p.12), "Drachensteigen" (p.29), "Verachte nie ein Tierlein" (p.40), "Mädchen und Kätzchen" (p.45), "Eine lustige Geschichte vom Katter Murrner" (p.50), and "Der Bettelkinder Lied" (p.60).

Some of Loewen's more serious poems are reminiscent of German classical poems. For example, his poem "An Gott," written during a violent thunderstorm, clearly follows the blank verse and meter of Klopstock's ode "Frühlingsfeier." Loewen's poem begins with an address to God who presides over a harmonious universe.

Wenn Du freundlich  
Vom wolkenlosen Himmel  
Zur Erde niederschaut  
Ew'ger Vater, --  
Da jauchzet alle Kreatur:  
Die Lerche, sie steigt  
Mit Jubelgesang  
Tief in des Aethers  
Bläuliche Ferne

Empor  
 Und in der duft'gen Nächte  
 Wonnig berauschender Stille dringt  
 Hervor aus der Tiefe des Hains  
 In schmelzenden Lauten  
 Philomelas schmachtendes Lied  
 Sinnberückend. (p.101)

God's friendliness in nature is then contrasted with his anger as expressed in a thunderstorm:

Aber Du zürnest:  
 Es rollt der Donner deiner Stimme  
 Durch schwarzer Wolken  
 Schauergeklüfte,  
 Es zucken feurige Blitze,  
 Den Pfeilen gleich,  
 Entsendet von straffer Sehne,  
 Verderben bringend  
 Zur Erde nieder:--(p.102)

But for Loewen, as for many classical German writers, in the end there is balance and harmony. The poem concludes:

Doch ob Du lächelst,  
 Ob Du zürnest, Herr,  
 Ich weiss, Du bist mein Vater,  
 Der keines seiner Kinder je vergisst,  
 Darum vertrauend streck ich meine Hände aus  
 Zu Dir. (p.103)

Nature also plays an important role in Loewen's poems dealing with parting and death. In "Es rauscht der Wald" the poet remembers the death of his wife, experiencing it as part of the passing seasons:

Es rauscht der Wald! Die Herbsteswinde gehen  
 Wehklagend durch den Raum  
 Und reissen fort mit ihrem wilden Wehen  
 Das letzte Blatt vom Baum  
 Nur eben noch sah ich ihn grün sich färben,  
 Den schatt'gen Wald, — nun muss er welken, sterben,  
 So bald, so bald! (p.131)

And in a parting poem, "Abschied von Arkadak," the poet thinks more of the trees and valleys of his home village which he has to leave behind, than of the people themselves:

Manch schöne Stunde duft' ich hier geniessen  
 In stiller Einsamkeit, mit Gott allein,  
 Und wollte dies und das mich mal verdriessen,

In dir, Natur, vergass ich alle Pein.  
 Du säuseltest dein müdes Kind in Schlummer,  
 So oft das Herz bedrückt' ein schwerer Kummer,  
 Und schlossest warm in deinen Schoss mich ein. (p. 109)

Interestingly, there is a sensuous, almost erotic quality in some of Loewen's poems and sketches, particularly in his writings dealing with human relationships and nature. In the poem "Das Lied des Fischers," reminiscent of Goethe's ballad "Der Fischer," the poet listens to the song of the fisherman:

Und sie weiss, was ich empfinde,  
 Und sie kennet meine Lust,--  
 Ja, ich fühl's wenn sie mich linde  
 Zieht an ihre treue Brust.--(p.58)

And in a poem entitled "Was Haschen mir sagte. Ein Jugendgedicht," a young girl holds a rabbit that has been wounded by a hunter close to her bosom. Suffering intense pain, the rabbit gives the girl the following advice: "Schilt nicht, o Maid, des Mannes Herz!:/ Wiss', wen er liebt, dem macht er Schmerz" (p.43).

These sensuous images are nowhere more evident than in Loewen's graphic description of a break-up of the Dnieper in spring: "Tag für Tag tritt man an den Strom hinaus und erwartet mit Sehnsucht den Augenblick, wo er die schmutzige Decke abstreifen und uns wieder seinen schönen blauen Busen zeigen wird....Da plötzlich gehts von Mund zu Mund: 'Der Dnjepr schwillt mächtig an, nun muss das Eis bald gehen!'....Siehe, da liegt der Riese vor uns da und atmet schwer. Krampfhaft hebt und senkt sich seine gewaltige Brust wie bei einem, der eine schwere Arbeit verrichtet."<sup>43</sup>

Loewen relates a tantalizing story about two young female teachers who with their pupils came to Einlage to take part in an excursion to the Dnieper. Loewen was to be the tour guide. In the evening, after the school girls had been put up for the night in a classroom, Loewen decided to play his gramophone "for the pleasure of the teachers." When the music began the girls appeared at the door barefooted and in their nightdresses, asking their teachers "whether they could dance." It is obvious that the human body and even human sexuality were for Loewen part of God's natural creation, not to be hidden away beneath heavy black clothing or to be constrained by severe moral strictures — as was the established Mennonite practice.

While writing verses came easily to Loewen and, as he tells us, he could not help but write, he was quite modest about his role as a poet. The sub-title in the first edition of his *Feldblumen* is "poetische Versuche" ("poetic attempts"). When in 1945 he was referred to by the editor of *Der Bote* as "a retired poet," he corrected him by stating that he was a teacher who had received the poetic gift "in a small measure."<sup>45</sup> This is a typically modest statement by a Mennonite who claimed that he wrote poems for his own enjoyment and comfort and for the pleasure of his pupils and other people who cared to read him. Loewen also stated that he wrote poems as a device to

instruct young and old. *Feldblumen*, he tells us, was published for the benefit of his people, whose literary standards needed to be raised. In teaching his readers to appreciate literature and art he could have used examples from the great works of the German masters, but he feared this would have discouraged ordinary Mennonites who could never hope to rise to such levels. In publishing his own "poetic attempts," ordinary people could see that they too could appreciate and even write poems.<sup>46</sup> Loewen always thought other Mennonite writers better than himself.<sup>47</sup> He claimed he was not even a good judge of other writers' work. In writing reviews he refused to be called a "critic," as he claimed he merely responded "emotionally" to what he read and then expressed what he enjoyed or found wanting.

Surprisingly, perhaps, Loewen did not seem to share the view of those Mennonite writers who felt that with the passing of the German language and German-Mennonite cultural values Mennonitism was doomed in Canada. With writers like Arnold Dyck he too lamented the gradual disappearance of "das deutsche Buch,"<sup>49</sup> but at the same time he encouraged his people to transmit as much as possible of their German-Mennonite traditions to the next generation whose language would be English: "Sollten wir da nicht beim Uebergang ins Englische von unseren Vorzügen so viel wie möglich mit hinübernehmen in die neue Heimat und uns die Vorzüge dieser möglichst zu eigen zu machen suchen? Dann hätten beide Seiten dadurch gewonnen."<sup>50</sup> This openness to the English language and values manifested itself in his appreciation for English poets (Bliss Carman) and Canadian history and culture. He sought to learn English and he tried his hand at translating and adapting English works. He also corresponded with experts in Canadian literature such as Watson Kirkconnell.<sup>51</sup>

As a subject of Imperial Russia and after 1925 of Canada, Loewen was apolitical. He knew his Russian history well, like most Mennonites loved the tsars, and wrote in glowing terms about Russia's cultural achievements.<sup>52</sup> Nowhere in Loewen's work, however, are there examples of extreme Russian nationalism or patriotism as in Heinrich Heese's and Bernhard Harder's writings.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, in spite of his love of German culture, literature, and of Germany itself, there is hardly a reference or allusion to the Third Reich or World War II in his writings during the 1930s and 40s. When Germans in Canada, supported by some Mennonites, organized their "Deutsche Tage" and expressed views against the "evils of Bolshevism," Loewen hardly took note. The Germany he knew and loved was the Germany of poets, thinkers and composers. A year before his death he heard of the defeat of Nazi Germany and feared for the loss of the Germany and German culture he held so dear. In the margins of a poem by Martin Greif (1839-1911), "An Deutschland (1870)," Loewen wrote: "Juli 1945. Ja, wo ist jetzt Deutschland?!! Ich bin zum Sterben betrübt, wenn ich daran denke, was aus meinem lieben Deutschland geworden ist: Deutschland, Deutschland über alles, über alles in der Welt! O warum musste ich seinen Untergang erleben!!! Nie heilt mein Herz von diesem Schmerz!"<sup>55</sup> As far as Canada was concerned, it had

become a new home for himself, his children and grandchildren, and for his Mennonite people.

Loewen was always interested in the education of children and as he grew older his attention to children increased. In the 1930s he urged publishers and editors to carry more suitable material for children and young people in their papers. He regularly contributed articles, stories, poems and playlets for younger readers of the *Bote* and the *Mennonitische Rundschau*. Serialized articles such as "Kleine Bilder aus der Krim,"<sup>56</sup> still make interesting reading for people of all ages. In writing his sketches and articles, Loewen always wrote at a personal level, addressing his readers as he would a group of pupils or adults: "Ich fühle mich trotz meiner 76 Jahre noch heute nirgends wohler als unter Kindern und jungen Leuten; und ich wünsche nichts lieber, als dass meine Führung euch zum Nutzen gereichen könnte."<sup>57</sup> In the last few years of his life, when he could no longer teach in schools, he continued to instruct his grandchildren at home.<sup>58</sup>

Loewen was undoubtedly influential, both as a poet and teacher. At his funeral, attended by many mourners from far and near, the officiating Mennonite minister referred to him as "Ein Dichter von Gottes Gnaden."<sup>59</sup> In the *Bote* he was remembered as "a great Mennonite pedagogue," and several former students expressed their appreciation and love for him, mentioning his regard for nature and literature, his positive outlook on life, and his effectiveness as a teacher.<sup>60</sup> Arnold Dyck paid tribute to Loewen as one of the Russian Mennonites' first published poets, who laid the foundation for Mennonite literature not only in Russia but also in Canada.<sup>61</sup> The works of Loewen, Peter B. Harder and Jacob H. Janzen, according to Dyck, "reached the farthest outlying Mennonite villages and found their way into the large cities where Mennonite young people were pursuing their studies. Reading the books, they were inspired toward literary endeavours — endeavours which bore fruit after the great war and on foreign soil."<sup>62</sup> That "foreign soil" included Canada as well.

In some ways Loewen was unusual as a Mennonite writer. He not only wrote poetry, but he also consciously and methodically sought to prepare Mennonite readers, especially the young, to be receptive to literature and the arts. His tireless activity as a teacher, both in Russia and Canada, his faith in young people and their future and his openness to, and appreciation of, his new Canadian homeland, made him in a real sense a bridge between the old world and the new, between the old and new generation, and between the Mennonite past and a Mennonite future.

Also special in Loewen's work is his sense of place and nature. The first generation of Canadian-Mennonite writers wrote of a lost homeland but much of their writing involves stories built around the experiences of war and revolution. The writings of Gerhard Toews, Jacob H. Janzen, Arnold Dyck, Fritz Senn (and even those of more recent poets like Patrick Friesen and Di Brandt) are "people" rather than "place" oriented, dealing with human affairs and the tensions of community and family life. Rudy Wiebe is one of the few

Canadian-Mennonite writers whose novels and stories, like the writings of Gerhard Loewen, are firmly grounded in nature and landscape and recognize the links between people and place in the present and the past. For both Loewen and Wiebe nature, imbued with religious significance, even sexuality, is seen as part of God's creation and an expression of his love.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>On the reforms in Russia prior to 1914 and the changes among Mennonites there, see the following recent articles: James Urry, "Prolegomena to the Study of Mennonite Society in Russia 1880-1914," *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, Vol. 8 (1990); Harry Loewen, "Intellectual Developments Among the Mennonites of Russia: 1880-1917," *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, Vol. 8 (1990).

<sup>2</sup>For a discussion of this literature see Al Reimer, "The Russian Mennonite Experience in Fiction," in Harry Loewen, ed., *Mennonite Images: Historical, Cultural and Literary Essays Dealing With Mennonite Issues* (Winnipeg: Hyperion Press, 1980), 221-35, and Al Reimer, "The Print Culture of the Russian Mennonites 1870-1930," in John Friesen, ed., *Mennonites in Russia: Essays in Honour of Gerhard Lohrenz* (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1989), 226-27, 232-33.

<sup>3</sup>See my article, "Canadian-Mennonite Literature: Longing for a Lost Homeland," in *The Old World and the New: Literary Perspectives of German-Speaking Canadians*, ed. by Walter E. Riedel (Toronto/Buffalo/London: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1984), pp. 73-93.

<sup>4</sup>John D. Rempel and Paul Tiessen, eds. *Forever Summer, Forever Sunday: Peter Gerhard Rempel's Photographs of Mennonites in Russia, 1890-1917* (St. Jacobs, Ont.: Sand Hills Books, 1981). I am merely using the title as an expression of a view of, or feeling for, Mennonite past experience in Russia.

<sup>5</sup>I am grateful to Gerard Loewen's relatives, especially Howard Krushel of Calgary, who supplied me with diaries, photographs, and copies of articles not otherwise available.

<sup>6</sup>Gerhard Loewen, "Kleine, harmlose Schulplaudereien aus der guten alten Zeit," *Der Bote* (9. Sept. 1931), pp. 2-3.

<sup>7</sup>In numerous published writings in Russian and Canadian Mennonite papers, Loewen deals with the importance of German literature for Mennonites. His favorite writers were the classical and romantic poets, notably Klopstock, Goethe, Schiller and most nineteenth-century writers. Nikolaus Lenau (1801-1850) was a special favourite of his. In the margin of a Lenau poem ("Seemorgen") Loewen writes: "O, Lenau, wie lieb ich dich! Dich, der du die Menschen und ganz besonders auch die Kinder so sehr geliebt" (In a copy of *Nikolaus Lenaus sämtliche Werke*, hrsg. von Edward Castle, Leipzig Hess & Becker Verlag).

<sup>8</sup>Arnold Dyck, "The Poet Gerhard Loewen," *Mennonite Life*, 3:1 (Jan. 1948), pp. 22-23.

<sup>9</sup>Loewen, "Ein eigener Herd ist Goldes wert," *Der Bote* (13. Dez. 1944).

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>On Loewen's optimism, see, for example, the article "Halte, was du hast," *Der Bote* (1. März 1933), p. 2.

<sup>12</sup>Loewen in *Mennonitische Warte*, 3:25-27 (Winter 1937), pp. 60-64.

<sup>13</sup>Loewen in *Mennonitische Warte*, 3:34-36 (Herbst 1937), p. 203.

<sup>14</sup>Loewen, "Ein Anfang in Canada," *Mennonitische Rundschau*, 51:22 (30. Mai 1928), p. 11.

<sup>15</sup>"Roggenbrot." *Mennonitische Warte*, 3:28-30 (Frühling 1937), p. 65.

- <sup>16</sup>*Mennonitische Warte*, 3:34–36 (Herbst 1937), p. 237.
- <sup>17</sup>See Loewen's article "Jungbrunnen," in *Mennonitische Warte*, 4:37 (Jan. 1938), pp. 13–18.
- <sup>18</sup>Loewen, "Harmlose Plaudereien über Poesie und Verwandtes," *Mennonitische Volkswarte*, 1:9 (Sept. 1935), p. 338.
- <sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*
- <sup>20</sup>Loewen, "Geschmacksache," *Der Bote* (20. Nov. 1935), pp. 1–2.
- <sup>21</sup>Loewen, "Harmlose Plaudereien über Poesie und Verwandtes," *Mennonitische Volkswarte*, 1:5 (Mai 1935), p. 182.
- <sup>22</sup>*Mennonitische Volkswarte*, 2:2 (Feb. 1936), pp. 45–47.
- <sup>23</sup>*Der Bote* (11. Dec. 1935), pp. 5–6; (18. Dez. 1935), pp. 5–6.
- <sup>24</sup>*Mennonitische Volkswarte*, 2:6 (Juni 1936), pp. 176–81.
- <sup>25</sup>*Der Bote* (11. Marz 1936), p. 2.
- <sup>26</sup>*Mennonitische Warte*, 4:37 (Jan. 1938), pp. 13–18.
- <sup>27</sup>"Kunst und Natur," *Mennonitische Volkswarte*, 2:2 (Feb. 1936), p. 47
- <sup>28</sup>*Mennonitische Volkswarte*, 1:5 (Mai 1935), pp. 180–82; 1:9 (Sept. 1935), pp. 335–38; 1:10 (Okt. 1935), pp. 373–77; 1:11 (Nov. 1935), pp. 418–23; 2:1 (Jan. 1936), pp. 12–17.
- <sup>29</sup>C. G. Tilitzky, "Lehrer Loewen," *Der Bote* (28. Aug. 1946).
- <sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*
- <sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*
- <sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*
- <sup>33</sup>*Mennonite Life*, 3:1 (Jan. 1948), p. 23.
- <sup>34</sup>B. Sch. "Gerhard G. Loewen," *Der Bote* (18. Sept. 1946).
- <sup>35</sup>Howard Krushel of Calgary sent me Loewen's stereoscope and several photographs to view.
- <sup>36</sup>Copies of photographs in my possession.
- <sup>37</sup>Loewen, "Ein offener Brief an meinen Freund Peter Klassen, Superb, Sask[atchewan]," *Der Bote* (18. Aug. 1943).
- <sup>38</sup>J. H. Janzen, "The Literature of the Russo-Canadian Mennonites," *Mennonite Life*, 1:1 (Jan. 1946), p. 23. Martin Fast (1861–1934) of Alexandertal in the Mennonite Volga settlement was a Mennonite Brethren poet who wrote prolifically before 1914. He never emigrated. See Hans Harder, "Martin Fast: ein Gedächtnis," *Der Bote* 28 (12. Juli 1939), p. 2.
- <sup>39</sup>Janzen, "The Literature of the Russo-Canadian Mennonites," p. 23.
- <sup>40</sup>*Feldblumen. Eine Sammlung von poetischen Versuchen* (Halbstadt, Gouv. Taurien: H. Braun, 1905).
- <sup>41</sup>All quotations from *Feldblumen* are from the 1946 edition.
- <sup>42</sup>*Feldblumen. Gedichte* (Steinbach, Man. Canada: Verlag von Arnold Dyck, 1946). Page numbers in the text of this paper refer to this edition.
- <sup>43</sup>Loewen, "Eisgang auf dem Dnjepr," *Friedensstimme*, 9 (30) (20. Apr. 1911), p. 4. See also a later version of this article in *Der Bote* (8. Apr. 1936), p. 6.
- <sup>44</sup>Loewen, "Lang, lang' ist's her," *Der Bote* (6. Sept. 1939), pp. 5–6.
- <sup>45</sup>"Ein offener Brief an den Herrn Editor des 'Boten'," *Der Bote* (24. Jan. 1945).
- <sup>46</sup>Loewen, "Was mich veranlasst hat, meine 'Feldblumen' drucken zu lassen," *Der Botschafter* 2 (29) (26/9 April 1906), p. 9.
- <sup>47</sup>Loewen writes: "[Martin] Fast und ich waren gleichen Alters, [J.H.] Janzen jünger als wir beide, aber sowohl Janzen als auch Fast viel begabter als ich, so dass der aus diesem Bündnisse am meisten Gewinnende ganz entschieden ich war, was ich noch heute dankbar anerkennen muss" (*Der Bote*, 29. März 1944, p. 1).

<sup>48</sup>See the following reviews: "Grossmutter's Schatz" [review of P.J. Klassen's collection of stories], *Der Bote* (18. Okt. 1939); "In grosser Verlegenheit" [review of J. H. Janzen's *Erzählungen aus der Mennonitengeschichte*] *Der Bote* (8. Dez. 1943); "Verloren in der Steppe. Von A. Dyck (Eine Rezension)," *Der Bote* (6. Dez. 1944), pp. 5-6; "Wanderndes Volk" [review of J. H. Janzen's book], *Der Bote* (20. Juni 1945), p.5.

<sup>49</sup>*Arnold Dyck Collected Works, Vol. I: Verloren in der Steppe, Aus meinem Leben*, ed. by Victor G. Doerksen and Harry Loewen (Winnipeg: Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 1985), p. 514. With regard to the Low German language Loewen felt that young people should be taught High German as much as possible: "So schade es ist, die plattdeutsche Sprache zu verlieren, die doch auch ihre eigenen Schönheiten hat, — unter jetzigen und hiesigen Verhältnissen hat die hochdeutsche Sprache eine viel grössere Bedeutung für uns (besonders für unsere Kinder) als die plattdeutsche. Und unsere von den grossen Dichtern so hoch ausgebildete hochdeutsche Sprache ist doch sehr schön" ("Wie machen wir's, dass unsere Kinder mit Lust deutsch lernen?" *Der Bote*, 31. Okt. 1945).

<sup>50</sup>Loewen, "Wanderndes Volk," *Der Bote* (20. Juni 1945), p. 5.

<sup>51</sup>See, for example, Loewen's letters to Watson Kirkconnell, University of Toronto, June 27, 1945, and Feb. 18, 1946, and his translation of a poem by Lew Wrigglesworth, "Mariechen," *Der Bote* (12. April 1939), p. 4. Concerning the "Mariechen" poem Loewen writes: "Dazu kam mir der Gedanke, ich konnte wohl gar dem einen oder dem andern Leser des Boten, der das sinnige Liedchen in dem englischen Blatt [*Free Press Prairie Farmer*] vielleicht übersehen hat, eine kleine Freude damit machen." Ibid.

<sup>52</sup>See, for example, his series of articles, "Kleine Bilder aus der Krim," *Der Bote* (3. Mai 1939), p. 5; (10. Mai 1939), p. 7; (24. Mai 1939), pp. 4-5; (31. Mai 1939), p. 5; (7. Juni 1939), p. 5; (14. Juni 1939), p. 5; (21. Juni 1939), p. 5; (5. Juli 1939), pp. 4-5; (12. Juli 1939), p. 5; See also his earlier article "Eindrücke aus Moskau," *Friedensstimme*, 11 (57) (24. Juli 1913), pp. 8-10.

<sup>53</sup>On Heese's and Harder's patriotic poems and sentiments, see P.M. Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia 1789-1910* (Fresno: Board of Christian Literature, 1978), pp. 702-705, 958. See also Bernhard Harder, *Geistliche Lieder und Gelegenheits-Gedichte* (Hamburg: Verlagsanstalt und Druckerei A. -G., 1888), pp. 579-86.

<sup>54</sup>See Jonathan F. Wagner, *Brothers Beyond the Sea. National Socialism in Canada* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier Univ. Press, 1981)

<sup>55</sup>In Loewen's personal copy of Martin Greif's poems.

<sup>56</sup>See fnt. 52.

<sup>57</sup>*Der Bote* (3. Mai 1939), p. 5.

<sup>58</sup>Lena Wagenhoffer, "Nachruf meinem lieben Vater Gerhard Loewen," *Der Bote* (10. Juli 1946).

<sup>59</sup>*Der Bote* (12. Juni 1946), p. 3.

<sup>60</sup>J. H. Enns, "Er war ein Lehrer..." *Der Bote* (26. Juni 1946); Isaak K. Janzen "Noch einmal Gerhard Loewen," *Der Bote* (7. Aug. 1946).

<sup>61</sup>Dyck, "The Poet Gerhard Loewen," *Mennonite Life*, 3:1 (Jan. 1948), p. 22.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid. p. 23.