

When the War Came to Kleindarp

A Story by **Al Reimer**, *Phoenix, Arizona*

When war was declared in September '39 the tranquil Mennonite village of Kleindarp hardly noticed. Life went on pretty much as usual. Until the Sunday morning Steve Froese, home from the army in Winnipeg on his first weekend pass, came marching into church in full uniform, including a wedge cap sloping over one side of his military haircut and highly polished hobnailed boots. What shocked the congregation even more was the dress sword flapping at his side. That the sword was illegal for a raw recruit to wear they had no inkling of. What mattered to them was the effect. So far as the meek-eyed Mennonite worshippers were concerned, Steve might as well have marched down the center aisle firing his Lee-Enfield rifle.

Steve's noisy march up the aisle seemed endless. The congregation, men on the left, women on the right, held its collective breath, mesmerized by an alien intrusion beyond its wildest nightmares. At the third pew from the front Steve came to a smart, boot-crunching halt and with impassive face waited for the red-faced man nearest the aisle to shift away his bulk so Steve could take his place in full view of everyone.

Ohm Toews, the *Eltesta*, stooped and bald with a thin fringe of white, had just shuffled to the pulpit to sigh out his usual German words of greeting, followed by a few meagre introductory remarks and a scripture reading, before making way for the first sermon. The wild apparition of a soldier clomping

towards him almost took away what little breath remained in his tired lungs. Mouth open, he could only gape and gasp and clench the pulpit with his withered fingers while Steve, in serene slow motion, settled himself on the rump-polished wooden bench, the sword jutting up from his waist, and looked up at Ohm Toews with guileless attention.

Everyone there knew that Steve Froese was not a member of the church, and had never attended it since he was a shy-eyed, undernourished lad who came only for the Christmas Eve program so he would receive, along with the other kids, a *Tutje*, a big brown paper bag filled with peanuts, hazelnuts and walnuts, hard candies and an orange. The Froese family had once been members of the South End congregation, but had “fallen off,” as the local expression went, because the father, Abe Froese, a shiftless day laborer, had started drinking home-brew with some of the Lutheran German farmers who lived a couple of miles south of the village.

And as Ohm Toews quaveringly slid into his scripture reading, nervously trying not to look at the khaki-clad abomination below him, Steve sat expressionless, pretending to listen. What every man and woman guessed was that he sat there not listening but gloating, revelling in the outrageous sensation he was creating just by being there, in the congregation, in his thick brown uniform with the sword clanking dully whenever he moved.

Tension mounted as Ohm Toews, his scandalized introduction concluded, asked the congregation to kneel in silent prayer. Thick bodies twisted, reversed themselves and laboriously lowered knees to the hard wooden floor, elbows braced on the shiny seats with fingers interlaced and heads bowed. Those closest to him did not need to squint sideways to see if Steve was kneeling too. They knew he hadn't moved, would sit there in shameless blasphemy while they silently implored God to remove this scoffing sinner from their midst. How could this be happening? Was this what war was bringing with its violence and disorder? Letting this wolf of evil into a Christian sheepfold? And one of their own boys too.

The first speaker rose to deliver his sermon. He was Jake Plett, a prosperous farmer only recently elected to the ministry, but already an imposing figure in the pulpit with his ruddy broad face, bull-dog neck and robust middle-aged bulk. Jake was fearless, some said he was close to overbearing. He had a steady, unnerving gaze which he now levelled full-bore at Steve, who returned the preacher's stare without blinking an eye.

“In this house of God,” Jake began in German, but not sure it was proper to address a soldier in the traditional Mennonite church language, he switched to lumbering, heavily accented English. “In this house of God we do not welcome people dressed in soldier clothes”-Jake looked very stern-“and I ask that young man down there”-pointing directly at Steve-“to leave this gathering until he has taken off those clothes and come into God's house in plain Christian clothes. Then, and only then, will he as a lost sinner looking for God's grace be welcome.” Jake paused, then added, “*If he is sincere.*”

The pointed words were not lost on the congregation, but seemed lost on Steve. His brazen gaze never wavered under the finger-pointing of Jake from the pulpit. Steve began to look around, contempt writ large on his brown-freckled face. He was enjoying himself, knowing that the hard-muscled farmers around him would never, in their aversion to violence, try to evict him forcibly. He was safe, knew he had the upper hand and could play it to the limit against these cowards. He smiled to himself. Wherever he looked, especially on the women's side, eyes fell to the floor in frightened modesty.

Jake tried a new tack. Like Luther before him he was not afraid to confront this devil in khaki. He decided to ignore his written sermon in favor of some straight-from-the-heart talk aimed directly at this stubborn military sinner.

"Young man," he thundered, "you may be a fallen off, or worse, an unbaptized sinner, but a Mennonite you were born, and so the meaning of *Wehrlosigkeit*, Mennonite nonresistance, you should know. That you force your way into this peaceful place of worship, dressed as you are in the colors of war and at your side a sword yet"—Jake's voice suddenly dropped to a dramatic whisper and his prominent eyes glistened—"that too much is for us to bear." His tone turned crafty. "If you won't leave-now, this minute"—it was clear Jake was not going to wait out the fateful minute—"then I will have to learn you here and now-and the listeners will forgive me my English—the sacred rules of our Mennonite faith, especially our long having of spiritual *Demut*, humbleness, and nonviolence. 'He who lives by the sword shall die by the sword,'" he roared suddenly and looked for a moment like he was about to leap down to Steve's pew, wrest the sword from him, and make good the biblical injunction himself.

For the first time Steve Froese's confident look faltered. This was not what he had expected. Was he to sit here for the next hour listening to this windy preacher throw pacifism at him, give him hell for wearing the King's uniform ready to defend all these pious buggers against Hitler? Wasn't that treason? Shouldn't he get up right now and accuse this guy of committing treason in time of war? Not yet, he decided. He'd wait for the right opening, give it to the guy good if he got insulting.

Jake was now in high gear, confident he was handling the sinner below according to the Lord's leading.

"When our forefathers became Mennonites in Hollaund many, many years ago"—he couldn't recall at the moment how many years ago—"the Heavenly father gave to us precious gifts of faith: the gift of the Gospel, pure and simple, free from the scheming priests; He gave us for the converted faith baptism, not for the little babies empty baptism; best of all, He gave us the sacred lesson of nonviolence, of not taking up the sword like the evil World"—another hard look at Steve—"and killing with blood and gore our fellow men in wars and rebels and murders and"—he was about to add "in plagues and famine," but realized in time they didn't fit.

As he spoke he was thumbing the big, worn German bible before him. He was trying to think of some suitable anti-war, nonresistance texts he could read out to bolster the words God was giving him. Knowing they would be hard to find in the Old Testament, he jumped over to the New. But realizing he was speaking in English and would have to translate the texts, he gave up the search and decided to trust the Lord for inspiration.

Steve was growing more uneasy by the minute. His dramatic entrance had been exactly what he had hoped for, but these *fromme Menniste* seemed to be getting used to him sitting there. He looked around again at the averted faces and felt that it was now they who were laughing at him. He'd soon show them. He hadn't forgotten what these pious hypocrites had done to his family. His anger rose as he remembered that morning years ago when Ohm Toews, not quite so feeble and bald then, and two other sourpuss preachers from the church had come to their house. Pappe was sitting at the battered, round kitchen table in his filthy long-johns and greasy black pants with frazzled suspenders, looking bleary-eyed from last night, sipping black *Prips* while cursing Mame for being an old sow he should have gotten rid of before she filled the house up with ten dirty brats. "To the devil with all of you," Pappe shouted, spilling his *Prips*, just as Ohm Toews knocked timidly on the door. Caught off guard, Pappe bellowed, "*Waut toom schinda*, who's there?" and lurched to his feet.

"We've, we've come to talk to you, brother Abe," Ohm Toews began hesitantly, shocked by the rude welcome.

Pappe, standing there broad-legged, got red in the face. "There's nothing to talk about, you damn hypocrites." He decided to go on the attack first. "Toews, I've seen your boys in the beer parlor at St. Marie Saturday nights, and yours too, Friesen." He pointed at one of the assisting ministers, an emaciated, hump-shouldered man with stained buck teeth.

"Brother Froese,"—Ohm Toews doggedly tried to deflect the anger of the man inside—"may we come in, peaceful and quiet and in Christian brotherly love?"

"No, you're not coming into my house. I've had it with you *fromme Deevils*. I know what you want to say and I'm not listening. No siree, I stopped listening to you hypocrites a long time ago. I'll run my own life. Go ahead, throw me out of church, that won't bother me a damn bit. I should've left a long time ago. I should never have joined in the first place, and wouldn't have if it hadn't been for her"—pointing at Mame standing by the stove, pretending to stir something—"wanting to get married in church. That bit of water you dribbled on my head baptizing me—that didn't change nuthin. I'm smarter than that."

Pappe was really working himself up now, repeating what he had often yelled in his drunken rages as he stormed around the house cuffing and mauling anyone within reach, especially Mame.

Ohm Toews listened patiently to the blasphemous tirade, but his face had tightened. "Well, then, Abe, there's nothing more to be said for now. You have

hardened your heart against God and the church, and for that you'll have to pay the consequences." He turned and with the other two by his side walked slowly to the mud-splattered black Model A Ford parked on the side of the rutty gravel road running past the house.

His enemies in retreat, Pappe banged open the torn screen door and stood on the warped gray boards of the *Schaffott* hurling more insults.

"And don't come back you bastards. Next time I'll greet you with my *Schroofflint* and give you a taste of real medicine. You think I'm stupid? I see right through you all, with your widow and orphan funds—and where's some help for a guy like me with all these brats and no steady job?"

Pappe had worked himself into a crying jag, and as the Model A pulled slowly away he broke down in ragged sobs, his heavy chest heaving against his twisted blue suspenders.

And the pious bastards had thrown Pappe and Mame out of church and Steve and his younger brothers and sisters never went to Sunday school again. A couple of times, though, he had boldly gone to the Christmas Eve program to get a *Tutje*, which he hid in the barn and did not share with the other kids.

The preacher was still going on about how meek and good the Mennonites had always been, his heavy voice bearing down on him. Jake had remembered the Sermon on the Mount, from which he could quote a little even in English. "We Mennonites have always tried to follow what Christ said about loving your enemies and praying for them. 'Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth,'" he intoned triumphantly, and, for the soldier's benefit, followed that with, "'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.'

"Yes, beloved friends," Jake continued in a softer voice, "we have been humble for a long time, and as peacemakers we have tried to set an example for the World. But Caesar is strong and we are few, and Caesar's servants can reach into our little circle even and do damage." Jake paused, gave Steve a significant look and decided to take the plunge.

"Many of you remember that when Duck Janz, then just a young boy, ran away to join the army in the last big war, the whole village was shocked that in this Christian Mennonite community such a thing could happen. I was then just a boy myself, but I remember how we all prayed that it would still be made good, this terrible sin, that the Heavenly Father would find and return to the fold the lost sheep."

Jake paused again, cupping the moment like a flickering candle. He could feel the congregation hanging on his every word, intrigued by the personal turn his sermon was taking. God was putting inspired words in his mouth. He would not fail Him.

"Well, precious friends, you know what happened. The lost sheep for many years did not return, and when he did return he was still lost, more than ever lost, a hardened sinner who lives among us to this day without repenting."

Jake swallowed hard. He detected more than one gentle sob on the women's

side. The men sat with averted eyes. The Lord was leading him. He had no choice but to go on. He bent his stern gaze once more at the young soldier, who was no longer meeting his eye.

“Can it be, dearest listeners,” and Jake sounded sad and reluctant, “can it be that in this new war even more of our boys will answer Caesar’s call to pick up the gun and kill their fellow man over there in Europe, the very place where our Mennonite forefathers first learned to follow Jesus our Redeemer in meekness, love and peace?” He felt a wind of prophecy pass through him. He was ready. “How many of our boys will this cruel war take? Mennonite soldiers bearing arms! Think of it, you fathers and mothers, your sons in soldier clothes serving Caesar! We already have the first one here with us. How many more will there be? How many more of our God-fearing Mennonite boys will by Satan be pushed to follow this bad example? Let us hope—”

Steve had leaped to his feet, face rigid with fury. “Watch what you say, preacher. I’m no bad example. I’m serving our King, not Caesar, and I’m proud of this uniform.” He swung his arm wildly around the sanctuary, his sword clanging against the curved armrest of the pew. “I’m fighting for my country while you pious hypocrites enjoy the comforts of home—your cowardly sons too—and keep making more money and getting fatter every day.” He drew himself to attention and shouted up at Jake, “It’s treason, that’s what it is, and I’ll report you to the authorities.” Then he made an abrupt about face and swaggered down the aisle looking neither left nor right.

A hush fell over the congregation as Steve’s hobnailed boots thudded on the worn black aisle runner. At the front door Steve did another about face, drew his sword, waved it over his head and shouted, “Treason.” Then he was gone.

Something seemed to have gone out of Jake Plett that morning. People said his preaching was never quite the same again. Later in the war, when two of Jake’s own sons joined up, one the Army, the other the Air Force, Jake seemed to grow old overnight. But he had enough spark left to lay down a rule that was never broken. When his boys came home on leave they had to take off their “soldier clothes” in the barn, where their “Christian clothes” were hanging on harness pegs, and change before coming into the house. That was Jake’s rule and he stuck to it. Both boys were sent overseas and both saw action, one in Italy, the other in France.

Steve Froese, a corporal in *A Company, Second Battalion, The Queen’s Own Cameron Highlanders of Winnipeg*, was returning to his base in Sussex from The Black Horse pub on a borrowed motor-bike one rainy Saturday evening in February, 1942, when he failed to negotiate a tight turn on the wet road and was instantly killed.

When Jake Plett heard about the accident he saw it as a special sign from God, though he never said so publicly. When his own two sons came back from the war unhurt, Jake knew that God had granted him a great favor and had forgiven him for what had happened with the soldier in church that terrible Sunday.