Recalling a Past Generation: Some Observations on German-Canadian Mennonite Writing[1]

Victor G. Doerksen, *University of Manitoba*

A recent article in *Books in Canada*[2] by the Saskatchewan writer E.F. Dyck presented to Canadian readers something that he called "the emergence of (Mennonite) literature in western Canada." Dyck argued there that "the Mennonite imagination is so fixated on the traumatic Russian experience that it overlooks its European roots. . . ." One might wish to take issue with the differentiation between Europe and "Russia," since, as we now know, they are parts of the same "house." But there is more than a kernel of truth in Dyck's contention, although the literature that Dyck is ostensibly referring to, the current outpouring of English language writing by so-called Russian Mennonites, is not nearly so fixated as was the literature of the previous generation, a generation which has for all practical purposes been forgotten.

To Canadian Mennonites (and others too) the very existence of a literature prior to the appearance of Rudy Wiebe's *Peace Shall Destroy Many* in 1962 is questionable at best. The fact that this writing was in the German or Low German language seems reason enough to ignore and forget it. But if one wants to do justice to the literature of today it is necessary to consider upon whose shoulders the current, popular writers stand. They did not appear *ex nihilo,* although the radical language shift from the use of German in home, school and church to English in all those institutions may have given that appearance.

Indeed there was what perhaps should be called a Russian-German-Canadian-Mennonite literature, situated between the immigration of the 1920s and the institutional language change in the 1950s and 1960s. I say a "literature" consciously and not only self-consciously, a movement, one might call it, with something like a beginning, a middle and an end and other features of infrastructure. In the following I would like to describe this development and then comment on the nature of the end that this movement had and its relationship to the new English-Canadian writing which succeeded it.

The Mennonite immigrants of the 1920s were not the first Mennonites

in Canada. Earlier groups had reached this country from Pennsylvania and later, in the 1870s, from Russia. But the immigrants of the 1920s were the products of a Russian Mennonite commonwealth, as it has been appropriately called by the historian David Rempel, which had in the last decades before the First World War and the Russian Revolution made great strides in economic and cultural development. After centuries of cultural passivity these people had begun to engage in the activities of a society with more than an oral tradition and culture, writing stories and poetry — in German of course — and developing other art forms like music, painting and even the art of photography![3]

When the Revolution and its aftermath drove many of these Mennonite farmers from their Ukrainian villages they were scattered across the wide Canadian landscape from Ontario to British Columbia, though most of them landed on the prairies. Among this far-flung diaspora those whose training and inclination led them to literary interests were a minute minority. All of the odds, one might say, were against them, geography, economics, the religious community, who considered it frivolous to write "lies" as J.H. Janzen put it,[4] and so on. Nevertheless, in the course of time and through the mostly reluctant agency of Mennonite weekly papers like the *Immigrantenbote* (later *Der Bote*) or the *Mennonitische Rundschau* some contacts were made between these writers and eventually, largely through the efforts of several outstanding individuals, the wherewithal for the production of literary work was assembled.

We now know something about the monumental task taken on by Arnold Dyck, who almost single-handedly developed a cultural infrastructure from his humble headquarters in Steinbach, Manitoba. He had arrived in 1923, an art teacher who hoped to make a living in Canada by painting portraits of wealthy Mennonites a la Rembrandt, but who found himself penniless, pitching hay on a Manitoba farm and wondering how to support his young family. Failing to obtain the editorship of the *Bote,* which went to a former teacher of his from Russia, Dietrich H. Epp, Dyck took over a local paper, the *Steinbach Post,* in which he served his literary apprenticeship. In 1934, in the depths of the Depression, Dyck left the *Post* and began the publication of a literary journal, *Die Mennonitische Volkswarte,* a monthly magazine which included a wide range of primary and secondary texts as well as photographs and historical articles. In hindsight, the *Warte,* which ceased publication in 1938, contains a surprising wealth of literary texts by a number of isolated literati from places like Stuartburn and Stonewall, Manitoba, and Superb, Saskatchewan, to name just a few. The writers at these addresses, Gerhard Loewen, Gerhard Friesen (Fritz Senn) and Peter J. Klassen, were in the same position Arnold Dyck had found himself in, attempting to scratch out a living on original frontier farms instead of following their real interests, which the *Warte* now enabled them to contemplate.

The publication of the *Warte* may be considered the end of the beginning of the movement, since it represents a gathering of a body of writers and demonstrates what it is they have to say. What united all these writers and gave their literature its integrity and passion was the fact that they had a shared past, a shared world of place and experience, but a past world. This simple and overwhelming fact is documented in the lyric poetry of Fritz Senn, the major novel of Arnold Dyck, as well as by numerous other works with titles like: *Die Heimat in Flammen, Die Heimat in Trümmern, Heimat Einmal,* and so on. One part of this fact has been well argued in Harry Loewen's article: "Canadian Mennonite Literature: Longing for a Lost Homeland."[5] There is something very obvious about this observation, since they were after all uprooted immigrants, but at the same time one should observe that the imaginative consciousness of these writers was formed in a world which no longer existed. That lost world in its imaginative construct was not perfect by any means, but it had a certain wholeness or completeness to which a poetic consciousness could in fact respond. In that first Canadian generation there is nothing abstract or historical about this kind of imaginative response to a lost homeland. That these authors were truly displaced persons, one may see as much from the comic writings of Arnold Dyck whose characters Koop and Bua are lost on the new steppes in the western Canadian frontier country as from the elegiac sadness of Fritz Senn's love poems to his Russian homeland. One must correctly call such texts exile literature, though their exile was one from which they could not return, as did, eventually Thomas Mann and Brecht from theirs.

One might guess that such a movement of German language writing in Canada in the Thirties might have come to an unceremonious end at the onset of World War II, but the contrary is true. If anything, this literature flourished during and for a time after the War. That great precursor of Canadian multiculturalism, Professor Watson Kirkonnell, reported regularly in the *University of Toronto Quarterly* on the literature of "New Canadians" and said in 1939: "German literature in Canada has thus far been a rather scanty and puny creature, especially when the size of the German-Canadian community is considered." He then went on to report at some length on Peter J. Klassen's collection, *Großmutters Schatz.* In the following years during and immediately after the War, Kirkonnell regularly mentioned the writings of J.H. Janzen, Peter J. Klassen, Arnold Dyck and Abram J. Friesen, until, in the fifties, his references were mainly to the Echo Historical Series, some 14 monograph histories of Russian Mennonite colonies, which were appearing at the time and which signal the end of the productive movement I am describing.

Returning to the beginning of the War, it may well be in order to ask about the nature of a "German" literature in Canada at that time and about the problem of Germanism, as it has been called. As we know, societies in sup-

port of national Germany were formed and propaganda was published, also in Mennonite papers. The *Warte* contains a poem entitled "Der Führer" by Fritz Senn, published in 1938.[6] One cannot deny that feelings for the "German cause" ran high among some Mennonites — there are several studies of this fact — but I would like to argue that it is problematic at best to use the term "German" in an other than linguistic sense when speaking of Mennonites who had emigrated to Canada from the Ukraine and in most cases had never been in Germany.

The Anabaptists of the 16th century were people of a number of western European countries and the Mennonites used the Dutch language for a long time — well into the 18th century — before adopting High German as their church language. During their hundred-year stay in Russia, German served to separate them from the surrounding peoples, but the educated immigrants who came to Canada in the 1920s had read as much Russian as German literature and their sense of place was scarcely German. For example, Arnold Dyck's favorite work of literature was Chekhov's *Stjepp,* which influenced his major work *Verloren in der Steppe.* In a sense their enthusiasm for Germany and things German was natural in the strange North American setting, but it was more an attempted continuation of the Russian situation than a consequential political or "national" option.

During the 1940s, then, the major works of this literary movement appeared. Arnold Dyck wrote his *Bildungsroman,* as well as his major works in Low German, the *Koop enn Bua* comical adventures, which, as Al Reimer has demonstrated, raised the old Mennonite dialect to new heights of expression. Bishop Jacob H. Janzen, who had settled in Ontario, wrote the bulk of his literary work during the 40s, including a multi-volume novel, *Die Grafschaft Ebenfeld.* Both Peter J. Klassen and J.P. Klassen wrote their major prose works during this period, which was to be a culmination and indeed a last opportunity, since a number of these writers died later in that decade or early in the 50s.

During and after the War there were also further efforts toward a literary infrastructure apart from the church and its organizations. Arnold Dyck published two volumes of a *Warte Jahrbuch* (1942/43) and later a magazine called the *Mennonitische Lehrerzeitung* was begun, which in turn became the *Mennonitische Welt.* In 1951 Dyck published a *Mennonitische Auslese* and ten years later he assisted Heinz Kloss in the compiling of a first anthology of German-Canadian literature, the notorious *Ahornblätter.*[7] But in spite of their impressive names and ambitions these papers and collections were doomed to a short lifespan. The days of what Arnold Dyck chose to call "*das deutsche Buch*" were clearly numbered. In 1955 Arnold Dyck wrote:

> 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 of having 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?[8]

As I have indicated, that is indeed what Russian-Canadian-Mennonite literature (written in German) was all about. It was an attempt to give expression to a complex reality which had come to an abrupt end in the violence of war, revolution, anarchy and famine. It was really not about immigration and integration, about what Dyck called "Americanization" or accomodation. But such a process of acclimatization or whatever we choose to call it was inevitable in time, and with the deaths of a number of these writers in the later 1940s and early 50s it was clear that the literary movement of Arnold Dyck and his friends had been a generational one. More, in Canada it had necessarily been an organism cut off from its roots, for which death was only a matter of time.

When we consider the wealth and range of the writing being produced today by "Mennonite" writers, at least in the areas of poetry and fiction, then one may well be struck more by the differences from the earlier writing in German than by any particular continuity. The earlier generation produced a greater range perhaps in genre and certainly was very uneven in quality, but it is not hard to identify the heart of the matter, that is, the "fixation on the traumatic Russian experience" (E.F. Dyck) which is everywhere apparent in that writing. I will not refer in detail to the obvious work, *Verloren in der Steppe,* which dispassionately and even ironically reconstructs the old Russian Mennonite world in all its minutiae, while at the same time showing the growing artistic awareness of its hero, Hänschen Toews. Rather, I will refer to some poems by Fritz Senn to illustrate how the Mennonite imagination engaged the fact of a lost world. I have elsewhere attempted a reading of an early poem cycle by Senn, called "*Hinterm Pflug.*"[9] In that cycle natural and biblical imagery are combined with considerable success to describe the life of the village and farm but also the events which led to the destruction of that life. Biblical imagery, for example that of the parables, is easily related to the agricultural images that derive directly from Senn's (Gerhard Friesen's) own experience.[10]

The cycle tells of a supernatural plow (and Plowman) that plows under the field of the Mennonite world — thus its people are the clods of earth. In the fourth poem there is a dialogue between the Plowman and the clod, somewhat akin to the wrestling of Jacob with the angel:

"Da du so hart bist, will ich dich bereiten,
Wie man ein Feld bereitet und bestellt;
Da du so hart bist, soll mein Pflug durchgleiten
All das Gestrüpp, das dich geprellt.
Bis dass dein Herz und all sein Streiten
Ganz lose auseinander fällt.

Dann mag sich Sonne drüber breiten,
Du hartes, wüstes Distelfeld."

To which the recalcitrant clod of earth replies:

"Da du so stark bist, kannst du mich durchqueren,
So wie ein Strom das Feld durchquert;
Da du so stark bist, kannst du mich verheeren,
So wie ein Sturm ein Dach verheert.
Da du so stark bist, kannst du mich verzehren,
So wie ein Blitz den Baum verzehrt.
Da du so stark bist, darf ich dir nicht wehren,
Daß mich dein scharfer Pflug durchfährt." (IV, 1-16)[11]

This overwhelming force, attributable to God, fate or even some evil power (Communism?), remains ambiguous and mysterious throughout the cycle, an ambiguity which Friesen exploits in showing his Mennonite protagonists as victims who are not without some guilt.

The cycle alternates narrative passages with lyrical reminiscences. Poem VI rehearses something of the story of the Russian-Mennonite experience, not omitting the bitter realization that the causes of their trouble were not external only:

Bauern, die vor hundert Jahren
Pflügend durch die Steppe schritten,
Um ihr Glaubensgut zu wahren
Heimweh immerfort gelitten:
Die noch reinen Samen streuten
Und in trotz'ger Weltverachtung
Sich der harten Arbeit weihten,
Und der göttlichen Betrachtung.
Trotzge Bauern, die verbissen
Mit dem Pfluge Steppenschluchten
Und mit Strenge ihr Gewissen
Zum Gedeihn zu zwingen suchten. (VI, 47-58)

Wie sie zogen Zaun und Hecke,
Welt und Wirrnis abzuwehren,
Und in ihrem Weltverstecke
Rauschten nur die Weizenähren. (67-70)

Wie sie trotz der heilgen Lehren
Fingen an am Geld zu hangen.
Sind dem Geiz voll Gier und Gähren,
Sind dem Feind ins Garn gegangen. (79-82)

Senn goes on to tell the story of the forcible loss of house and home, but not before he has laid some of the blame on the self-satisfaction and materi-

alism which anticipated those disasters. Thus, when the poet-peasant reminisces about all of those experiences it is not simply to condemn the anarchists and communists, but rather a much more complex puzzle that he contemplates:

> Ernstlich gilts des Pflügers Bahnen
> Tiefe Rätsel zu ergründen,
> Immer ists ein Spornen, Mahnen,
> Deren Lösung schwer zu finden . . . (36)

Without repeating an interpretation of this cycle which I have given elsewhere, I would like to conclude this section by citing Poem XI, which combines the lyrical and reflective elements of recollection in a peculiar and I think effective way. The transition is marked by a transposition from short to longer and even longer lines, lines which cause the reader to think longer and even longer thoughts:

XI

Im Dämmern liegt das Herbstgelände
Von Ruhesehnsucht überhaucht —
Das Feuer ferner Stoppelbrände
Versinkt, verraucht.
  Die Herde gleitet von der Weide
  Den Ställen zu,
  Der Pflüger im verstaubten Kleide
  Eilt Heim zur Ruh.
  Im Dorfe kühler Abendfriede,
  Laternenschein —
  Die Hammerschläge einer Schmiede
  Schlafen ein. —
  Ein jeder findet seine Klause
  Nach Müh und Not. —
  Bereitet schon in jedem Hause
  Stehn Milch und Brot . . .
Wär Friede zu erwandern auf der Welt,
Hier fände ihn verborgen, wer ihn sucht,
Hier unter der Akazien grünem Zelt . . .
Doch wir sind in der Fremde, auf der Flucht.
Wir zogen fort und ließen Pflug und Feld,
Das Dorf, die stille Bucht
Und werden, wenn die Dämmrung fällt,
Von alten Bildern heimgesucht:
Die Mütter singen, kleine Kinder schrein
Und ferne rollt noch irgendwo ein Wagen.

Die letzten Pflüger müssen bald zuhause sein,
Ein irres Blinken — feuchter Mondenschein,
Die Fenster gehen auf, die alten Uhren schlagen,
Der Bauer schläft vor seiner Türe ein.

Du bist das Schweigen, das die Gärten lauter rauschen macht
Im stillen Dorf zur Vollmondnacht.
Du bist das Schweigen, das die Grillen ruft zum Reigen,
Zur Rast, was wirr und überwacht,
Dorthin, wo Sterne stehn und steigen.
Du bist das Schweigen, das aus frischen Schollen steigt,
Das Schweigen, das sich über reife Saaten neigt. —
Du bist das Schweigen, das das Herze lauter schlagen macht
Des trotzgen Bauern auf der Bank vor seiner Türe,
Wo er die Wache hält um Mitternacht. —

Nach dem Pflüger hab ich die toten Ahnen gefragt,
Und einer der Ahnen hat mir dieses gesagt:
"Ewig wuchtet der Pflüger, der Schollen bricht;
Nur eure Augen sind trübe und sehen ihn nicht.
Alles ist Acker, ewig geht der Pflug . . ."

Und keiner der Ahnen fand je einen besseren Spruch.
Wisset! Der Pflüger, den ihr als den stillen gekannt,
Wird von den Bauern nicht gerne mit Namen genannt.
Denn der Stille stand auf und brachte Entsetzen, Gericht . . .
Lippen der Bauern schweigen und nennen ihn nicht. (p. 46/7)

Senn's later poems are mostly reminiscence. Some of his best are almost ungainly in their plainness ("Roggenbrot," "Der letzte Wagen"), those with Mennonite themes ("Menno", "Johann Cornies") are outnumbered by Russian names: Dostoevsky, Solzhenitsyn, Repin, Rasputin, etc. Apart from one poem celebrating Heinrich von Kleist there is little reference to German authors. And, frankly, the German language that he uses, too, is not that of a contemporary or even recent native. Indeed, the High German of the Mennonites is an artificial language, adopted for use in the churches and the schools, never able to replace the *Plautdietsch* which had long been their primary idiom.

In concluding these observations about the German-Canadian-Mennonite generation of writers, I want to add something about the change that took place in the 50s and 60s and that is still continuing, usually referred to as the language shift from German to English. It is true that the Mennonite institutions around that time changed, for a variety of reasons, to the use of English, but I think it must be emphasized, because of that obvious fact, that the change from the generation of Arnold Dyck and Fritz Senn to that

of Rudy Wiebe and Di Brandt is much more than a linguistic shift; and this point can be seen perhaps most clearly in connection with the argument advanced by Harry Loewen and others about the loss of a homeland as the major theme of Mennonite writing.

Put in simple terms, that earlier generation was a displaced generation; it had had a homeland, truly a world — with its own language, along with the other infrastructure — to lose and the loss of that world was, apart from everything else, an overwhelmingly traumatic experience. The fact that the writers of that group were "fixated" on that experience is the most natural thing in the circumstances. For the first time since the 16th century these latter-day Anabaptists in many cases fled for their lives, although they could no longer understand this in purely religious terms. For many the New World was not a real option; we cannot imagine everything that "Americanization" meant to Arnold Dyck, but to him it was not a cause for optimism. Therefore, when English-Canadian Mennonite writers take up themes having to do with a lost homeland or any of the religious travel imagery which has long been part of the tradition, that too may be "natural", but it is a *literary* motif for them; it is their story too, but it is *story.* These writers are Canadians, with a thoroughly Canadian sensibility, even if they grow up in Steinbach or Reinland, and their own experience is fundamentally different from that of their parents. Certainly there is plenty for them to work with or against, as the case may be, in their Mennonite story. And the degree to which they may or may not be called — or want to be called — Mennonite writers may well be a function of the degree to which this material still engages them. There are some obviously transitional phenomena. In this respect Armin Wiebe's *The Salvation of Yasch Siemens* is a tour de force, translating the *Plautdietsch* idiom into an English that is accessible to a surprisingly wide audience. The poet Audrey Poetker listens to an inner voice that is, for her, German. Patrick Friesen revisits his birthplace of Steinbach and reopens a dialogue with his deceased father. And so one could go on and on . . . But whether these and other writers will go on (and on) in this vein is quite another question. And this question is a part of a larger question about the nature and viability of what we call "ethnic culture," a question which goes beyond the parameters of this paper.

Canadian-Mennonite writing in the German language is essentially a thing of the past. A recent project collected over a thousand items as evidence of such writing from the time between 1920 and 1960.[12] Some of this writing is being preserved in new editions, some is being translated into English and some will be the stuff of academic articles and theses.[13] This literature will presumably not cause any undue dislocations in the canon of Canadian literature as we know it, but it should be given careful attention by social and cultural historians as well as literary scholars, since it documents like nothing else one of the most traumatic phases of the five-hundred year history

of the Anabaptist-Mennonite story, a story which has become, for better or worse, part of Canadian history.

Notes

[1]This paper was first presented in a preliminary form at Conrad Grebel College in May, 1988, then in November, 1988, at the University of Winnipeg, and in another format at the University of Trier in May, 1989. My thanks are due the Multicultural Directorate of the Secretary of State and my assistant, Carla Bullinger, as well as the several audiences.

[2]October, 1988.

[3]See *Forever Summer, Forever Sunday. Peter Gerhard Rempel's Photographs of Mennonites in Russia 1890-1917,* ed. John D. Rempel and Paul Tiessen, 1981.

[4]Thus the title of a collection of Mennonite short stories: *Liars and Rascals* (ed. by H. Tiessen, 1989).

[5]In Walter Riedel, ed., *The Old World and the New. Literary Perspectives of German-speaking Canadians* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1984), pp. 73-93.

[6]*Fritz Senn: Gesammelte Gedichte und Prosa,* ed. V.G. Doerksen (Winnipeg: CMBC Publ., 1987) p. 64.

[7]This collection was subjected to a massive attack in the German-Canadian paper, *Der Nordwesten,* in hindsight no more or less than the overkill of an energetic young German scholar, which nonetheless set back German-Canadian studies for some time.

[8]Transl. by Gerhard K. Friesen, in "Life as a Sum of Shattered Hopes: Arnold Dyck's Letters to Gerhard J. Friesen (Fritz Senn), in *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 6, 1988, 124-133.

[9]Victor G. Doerksen, "The Divine Plowman and the Mennonite Clod: A Reading of "Hinterm Pflug/Stimmungen" by Fritz Senn, in *Annalen 4,* Vancouver, 1984, pp. 208-229.

[10]Some of this language has been criticized as being *Bauernromantik* and worse — *Blut und Boden* language. Although some expressions are doubtless somewhat primitive, they do in the main arise from a genuine way of life, both in Russia and, unfortunately for Friesen, also in Stonewall, Manitoba.

[11]Cited from *Fritz Senn: Gesammelte Gedichte und Prosa,* p. 17f.

[12]A collection supported by the Multicultural Directorate of the Federal Secretary of State and conducted together with Prof. Harry Loewen, which is located at Menno Simons College, University of Winnipeg.

[13]As for example, the theses of Frank Michael Strauss "Motive der Genese 'ethnischer' Literatur am Beispiel mennonitischer Autoren in Kanada" (Trier, 1987), and Monika Stürzebecher, "Der Heimatbegriff in der Literatur der russischen Mennoniten" (MA thesis, McMaster, 1987).