

The Purple Pulpit

A Previously Unpublished Prose Text by **Fritz Senn**

Translated and Edited by **Gerhard K. Friesen** *Wilfrid Laurier University*

I

When Victor Doerksen was preparing his Fritz Senn edition,¹ I provided him with all the literary Senniana then available to me. While searching through my father's other papers, I recently discovered several hitherto unpublished manuscripts hidden among octavo booklets from the time he and my mother were studying Dutch in Wilhelmshaven.² The most extensive of these manuscripts constitutes a German prose narrative, of which I present an English rendition (III) after a brief introduction (II). In Part IV of this paper I have appended my translation of a letter by Senn which contributes to a fuller understanding of III.

II

The German original consists of three handwritten segments in three separate notebooks (subsequently referred to as *A*, *B*, and *C*). *A* offers slightly more than three pages of text in blue ink and is entitled *Herr, gib ihm die ewige Seligkeit* (*Lord, grant him eternal blessedness*). It begins with a four-line epigraph Senn also used as the opening of his poem *Machno*,³ and ends with the armed intruder's beating of the bed covers.⁴ A later version incorporating some revisions, *B* contains eight untitled pages written in pencil, including the three-line epigraph rendered in my translation, and ends as Quapp is being urged on by the six intoxicated bandits aboard his carriage. Labelled *Fortsetz[ung]* (*Continuation*), *C* provides the remainder of the text with fourteen pages written in ball-point pen.

Apart from the inherently consecutive nature of the three originals, there are some additional clues for dating them. *A* and *B* consist of the poor wood-

pulp paper produced in Germany after World War II, while *C* features the much better paper available as of 1948. The first page in *C*, quite unconnected with the narrative under discussion, refers to the 1960 centennial of Anton Chekhov's birthday and thus provides a *terminus post quem*. A *terminus ante quem* is furnished by the fact that Fritz Senn's failing eyesight would have precluded an autograph of such length after 1965.

Deteriorating vision would also explain a chronological defect in the narrative⁵ and why this text remained a fragment. From approximately the same time as *C* date four notebooks Senn labelled *I. Paradies*, *II. (Inferno) Orkus*, *III. Exodus*, and *Das Leben Machnos (The Life of Makhno)*, respectively. Although all but the second, which offers a variant version of the poem *Machno*, are empty, they indicate that Senn was no longer able to undertake a planned and obviously sequentially integrated larger work. And while it remains unclear whether the narrative I have chosen to translate under the title *The Purple Pulpit* was intended as part of such a large-scale project, there is conclusive evidence that Senn was continually occupied with *Makhno* as a literary subject for about two decades.⁶

Although *The Purple Pulpit* cannot be considered a completed work, it warrants some interpretive insights. Regardless of whether it was meant to be part of his projected *Life of Makhno*, the text must be read as literary prose rather than as an authoritative historical statement. Senn never professed to be a historian, and as an unrepentant participant in the Russian Mennonites' organized defense against the Makhnovtse (See Part IV), he could hardly have endeavoured to treat their leader in an objective biography. Besides, until Victor Peters published his monograph on *Makhno*,⁷ the source material available to Senn was very limited, and he had to rely mostly on his own experiences and his imagination. Nevertheless his portrayal of *Makhno* (unimpressive physical appearance; proclivity to drunken debauchery; primitive oratorical style; appeal to the *Lumpenproletariat*) and followers (uninhibited gratification of greed and lust; lack of conventional military discipline; savage terrorism against defenseless victims; shrewd political opportunism) agrees with the established historical facts. On the other hand, the figures of Marusja Konovalova⁸ and Gritsko Gretchtsodav, whose historicity I have not been able to verify, may be Senn's own creations.

It is only if we go beyond a historical understanding, however, that the narrative reveals its full significance. Although the omniscient narrator openly sympathizes with the plight of Mennonites represented by Quapp, and with his choice of diction clearly denounces their tormentors' depravity, the result is not a completely one-sided account. The beginning conjures up an idyllic Mennonite milieu in Southern Russia. Perhaps at the expense of historical accuracy,⁹ the farmers are shown to ignore unmistakable warnings of impending disaster. By staying in bed and literally shutting their eyes to approaching threats, they are desperately clinging to the illusion that their traditional way of life will go on. Quapp ignores reality until the midnight hour brings a cruel awakening with the sudden intrusion of destructive

demons. The village, a sanctuary of comfort, order, plentitude, beauty, harmony, and sweetness, suffers an abrupt transformation. From a paradise it changes to a hell on earth, from cosmos to chaos. Senn underlines this implied analogy with the fourfold use of the adjective *wüst*,¹⁰ which in Luther's translation of the Bible describes the state of chaos before creation (Genesis 1:1). Such an intent, incidentally, shows the narrative's affinity with the first part of Senn's projected larger literary project.

Inherent in the Eden analogy is the subject of human guilt. I surmise that Senn, had he carried the narrative to its conclusion, would have integrated it with the information about young Makhno which he reported in a letter to Victor Peters (Part IV). Makhno's mistreatment and neglect on two German (possibly Mennonite) estates in Russia, in Senn's view, only epitomized the generally degrading treatment of Russian hired hands on Mennonite farms. In other words, just as Quapp and his neighbours have ignored the portents of the imminent invasion by Makhno's henchmen, so Mennonites have long overlooked the ill-use of their Russian workers.

In the context of the same letter to Peters, the brief description of Makhno's boots, just before he boards Quapp's carriage, thus acquires a deeper meaning; their worn-down heels are the visible reminders of Makhno's permanently scarred feet—and feelings—in the service of German-speaking employers. At the same time, however, Makhno's boots may also convey that, despite his present power, he is essentially still the same vulnerable and limited human being he was in his youth; as Goethe has Mephisto tell Faust:

Du bist am Ende—was du bist.
 Setz dir Perücken auf von Millionen Locken,
 Setz deinen Fuß auf ellenhohe Socken,
 Du bleibst doch immer, was du bist.
 (Faust I, 1806-09)

(You're after all—just what you are.
 Wear wigs of a million ringlets as you will,
 Put ell-thick soles beneath your feet, and still
 You will remain just what you are.)

Such a reminder would seem entirely appropriate in light of the fact that Quapp's carriage has just been painted purple. If one assumes that Senn's choice of this colour is not coincidental but purports to add another meaningful detail, it can be interpreted as a symbol. Before modern chemistry discovered methods of synthetically producing thousands of colours for commercial use, organic substances were used for manufacturing dyestuffs. Antiquity knew only ten of them, and just one that would not fade in sunlight. Gained from the blood of the cannibal shellfish *purpura*, purple was more coveted than gold and soon became a sign of majestic power. From the Greek tyrants to the Roman emperors, despotic rulers reserved purple as their exclusive privilege, and any private persons using it were guilty of high treason. Biblical allusions to purple as a symbol of royalty include Mark 15:17 and

John 19:12, relating how Roman soldiers clothed Jesus in a purple robe to mock his claims of Jewish kingship, as they perceived them. The Byzantine emperors adopted the designation *Porphyrogenitus* (born in the purple), as an addition to their official title *Basileus Autocrator*. After the fall of Byzantium in 1453, the Russian rulers asserted themselves as heirs of this dynastic tradition. Ivan III married a niece of the last Byzantine emperor in 1472, and in 1561 Ivan IV (the Terrible) had the Patriarch of Constantinople formally legitimize the czars' adoption of the Byzantine imperial title.

The purple carriage Makhno uses as a platform for his harangue would thus reveal his true (conscious or subconscious) autocratic ambitions. The symbolism of this "footing" (regardless of whether it is based on an actual or fictitious event) consequently clashes with the anarchism he is proclaiming in his speech. Together with the fact that Senn describes some of Makhno's followers as Reds,¹¹ this underlines that his black banner is merely a flag of convenience, as it was with pirates who flew it in previous centuries. And since there is a distinct descriptive parallelism between Makhno's first appearance and the unfolding of this flag, Senn seems to be indirectly saying as much as "Er hängt seinen Mantel nach dem Wind," i.e., Makhno trims his sails to the wind, or is a turncoat. For after all, whenever Makhno found it convenient, he would collaborate with the Bolsheviks in prolonging political chaos, while paying only lip service to anarchism.

III *The Purple Pulpit*¹²

Like Dante Alighieri roams a man
Through an oriental underworld
From the Black Sea to Turkestan.

Shortly after World War I, when the time drew near which we have ever since referred to as the time of Makhno, the Mennonite village N. was experiencing an extraordinarily mild Indian summer. The farmers were still occupied with bringing in the bountiful harvest of pumpkins, melons, and corn from the fields. There and in the steppe, the trails were covered with withered or half-green vines. The village air was suffused with the sweetish smell of boiling syrup, and the abundant crop of watermelons was almost too plentiful for storage. On this village a romantic autumn night descended with a full moon and a light mist. All of a sudden, however, it seemed as though something unusual was disturbing this peace. At what seemed an uncommonly late hour, one heard far-off vehicles, neighing horses, intermittent rifle shots, and from time to time brutal laughing and cursing. The farmers, who had recently heard a good deal about depraved and pillaging hordes, saw the moonlit nocturnal sky reddened by distant fires. But they remained in their warm beds and refused to accept that bloodshed and violence would henceforth terrorize their idyllic village.

Thus the Quapp farm¹³ was lying in tranquility, or so it seemed. Inside the house, the ancient wall clock with its long pendulum was just striking midnight, when the startled farmer suddenly sat up listening in his bed and called to his wife, who was sleeping by his side. Before she could answer, however, the bedroom door opened, and an armed villain with a fierce grin was shining a smoky lantern into Quapp's face. So suddenly had this broad-shouldered ogre barged in, that the farmer was momentarily unable to tell whether this was a dream or reality. With his whip, the intruder began to beat the bed covers and made the feathers fly. The farmer and his wife were also struck. While the livid farmer was keeping quiet and restraining his anger, his wife moaned and thereby seemed to provoke the cruel attacker even more. The lantern went out, and the scene turned more sinister yet. When the farmer heard his wife shriek, he groped about with his powerful arms. Then there was silence, except for a dreadful groaning.

Confident that his wife had escaped, Quapp entered the next room to discover that the main gate to the farm yard was wide open, and that the yard, stable, barn, attic, and cellar were alive with intruders. Quapp went into the stable. Next to his own horses he found, partly fettered, partly free, the scrubby, run-down nags of these nocturnal demons, two of whom were busy getting oats for their hungry hacks. Two others were already saddling his best horses by the light of a lantern. Nearby a pig squealed and excited chickens cackled. In the yard there were shots, and the farmer knew full well that this night's peace and quiet were over and done with. What was he to do with all his belongings, where should he seek safety for his family and himself? Where were his loved ones anyway in this nocturnal chaos? [...] ¹⁴

Entering the barn, Quapp saw shaggy nags up to their knees in watermelons. Irritated he stepped into the yard, where dawn was breaking. Here the leader of the bandits noticed him, and ordered him to ready immediately the best team and to take along two days' fodder; in the district town O., he said, Quapp would be relieved and allowed to return home. Thus the farmer set out to grease the carriage wheels and gather the harnesses, although all over the stable items were missing. As he mustered his horses, he realized that all but three of them were saddled. Those were three of his heaviest ones, whom he had never used on a trip and who, unshod, were now supposed to survive a long journey. Here Quapp saw no alternative, and, for better or worse, he had to resign himself to his grim fate. While harnessing two of the animals, he was driven by harsh commands, threats and curses. Shortly afterwards the fully laden *Obojaner*¹⁵ departed. Its passengers were not the last ones to leave, and with a number of the marauders still lingering on the farm, the stable and barn doors remained wide open.

In the convoy moving along the highway, the German farmer's carriage differed visibly from the Russian ones. No other was so weighed down. Three men sat in the back, three in the front, and ahead of them, practically in the forage box, sat Quapp as driver. He was a stout, heavy farmer whose weight made the spring-suspended carriage lopsided. Glumly he eyed the armed

bandits behind him, who all reeked strongly of alcohol and were urging him on with curses.

At the entrance to the town the convoy met up. The entire town was in confusion and resembled a stirred-up anthill. In the streets there were cracks of whips and shots, carriages raced up and down, a few houses were already burning, while the local people were converging in the alleys and house entrances, trying to watch out in all directions, and scurrying back and forth in disorganized crowds.

Green moss covered the scanty grey huts with their overhanging straw roofs. The window panes were dull. Sunflower heads, tomato and tobacco plants were drying by the windows. Most of these “peasants” owned a crooked shack, an emaciated cow, a mangy sheep—and nothing else. In the spring the government loaned them seed stock, half of which they ate up, for their own bread was not sufficient. From the other half, part they sowed, part they distilled into liquor. In the fall, therefore, they harvested next to nothing. To the government agencies they blamed the crop failure on the lack of manure from their wretched cows and scabby sheep. The state waived their tax payments in kind, by turning the seed loan into a grant, and thus the peasants were among the heartiest sympathizers and supporters of the Revolution.

The convoy prepares to enter the town. Some riders are dozing in their saddles. A mutilated corpse lies at the town gate. Peasants in embroidered denim shirts hastily doff their caps before the approaching cavalcade. The black robe of Makhno, who is now riding a horse, blows in the wind like a banner. The ribbons of his bashlik¹⁶ are thrown back over his shoulders, and his curved sabre hangs very close to his side as though it were glued on. The black flag is unfolded, and the convoy moves into the town. The inhabitants cross themselves, bolt their doors and shutters, and the entire locale falls into a rigid silence. The telephone poles have been plastered with announcements that *Batjko*¹⁷ Makhno is going to address the populace tomorrow in the large market square. All of a sudden the notorious Marusja Konovalova, clad entirely in black leather, rides up next to Makhno. She has massive arms and legs, like tree trunks; and her breasts are as huge as a Swiss cow’s udder.

For the night the convoy is quartered in a big school. The spacious yard is filled with wagons and horses tied to them. Guards secure the enclosure on all sides. At sunset the church-tower bell¹⁸ strikes seven: don, don, don. Two blocks away a sudden conflagration starts and spreads swiftly in the brisk evening breeze.

Quapp feeds and looks after his horses. His carriage is now occupied by other teamsters, six of them, who are rocking themselves in it. Gradually Quapp and his trusty team are pushed away from his carriage. Someone else has led his jades to feed from the handy forage box, and Quapp is forced to make do with an inferior, rickety feeder. When he finds that the rest of his oats has been stolen, Quapp feels even more dejected—he and his fine bays must go hungry. If he only had a scythe or a sickle, to cut some grass in the

vicinity for his horses. But where could he possibly find such a tool now? The school yard is already dark when two lanterns and a Russian with a paint bucket arrive. Quapp's carriage is separated from the horses, and then it is painted purple by the lantern light. It is supposed to serve as the platform for Makhno's speech in the morning.

Quapp constantly worries about his team. The late autumn night feels painfully cool. Hungry and depressed, Quapp thinks of home, of tasty fried potatoes and milk. Now he discovers that the Red rabble have also robbed him of his food chest, in which he had stowed his overcoat. "Uncle Quapp," calls a subdued voice behind him, and as he turns around he recognizes his neighbour's son, Wiens's Willusch—pale, afraid, and in rags. He has nothing left but his whip, the bandits having seized his carriage and team. He had been pressed into convoy service a few hours later than his neighbour, with shabby, run-down horses. For Quapp he brings the grievous news that Quapp's farm burnt down yesterday. Quapp hides his face in the mane of one of his horses.

The town does not settle down. A kulak's¹⁹ belongings are dragged from his burning house. Even its courtyard's iron gates are carried away by the riotous rabble. Wiens's Willusch has disappeared again. All he wants is to return home. For the time being Quapp cannot think about that. He cannot simply give up his horses and carriage and flee. And even if he left the purple carriage behind, he and his horses would never reach home, for the whole countryside is swarming with Makhno's dreadful companions and followers, whose numbers are increasing daily. Quapp spends the whole night with his horses. Through the night the school remains illuminated with church candles and lanterns. Doors are banging, and guards with fixed bayonets escort prisoners into the basement. The screams of tortured victims can be heard, mingled with savage cursing, singing, and drunken yelling. "*Rasdolje!* Freedom!"

At dawn seven barefoot people, including kulaks, in shirts and underpants are led into the yard and shot by the house wall. The guards fight over their trousers and boots. Now Makhno's right-hand man Gritsko Gretchtso-dav ("grits smasher") with his wooden leg, cursing and drunk, bursts in among them. "Have you dispatched those mad dogs?" Babbling he walks up to each victim and stomps his wooden leg into his eyes. Then he stands in their midst and sprays them with his urine.

Quapp has been forced to witness all this. He presses his face against the warm sides of his bays, cries, and trembles feverishly.

And how does it look inside the schoolhouse? In the teacher's room Makhno and his Marusja have set themselves up. On tables and chairs valuable Bibles, icons, mitres, ecclesiastical vestments, corporal cloths, and altar-tomb covers lie spread out and wildly intermingled. On one table are the remains of a meal—meat roast and buckwheat gruel—tin-can lids used as ashtrays, along with empty and half-empty *samogon*²⁰ bottles, while the room is pervaded with the strong stench of *makhorka*²¹ and cheap liquor. On

another table Makhno is asleep under a heap of covers and fur coats. His *nagan*²² and sabre lie on a chair next to him. His female companion sleeps on a row of chairs. An icon that has evidently served as a target during their nocturnal carousal has been perforated and disfigured by shots.

In an adjacent classroom a kitchen and food storage have been set up. Since the school is not equipped with a regular kitchen, a few buckets of sand and earth have been poured and spread out on the floor. A steel drum, with its upper end removed, functions as a so-called *pushka*²³ (an open hearth without chimney), whose smoke has thoroughly blackened the room. At a window hangs half a carcass of a scrawny farrow. Sabre blows have split students' tables and chairs into fire wood. Pots and pans have been fetched from the nearest houses.

In another classroom, four fat women are stretched out on tables and chairs, sleeping off their intoxication. The wooden-legged Mordwinian²⁴ hobbles in and wakes them up with ghastly curses. Then he opens a window and fires his *nagan* into the morning air.

A little later a load of fragrant hay rolls into the school yard, and Quapp is glad to see his hungry faithful bays feed. From the tipsy militiaman who brought the hay, Quapp has got a half-raw piece of meat and a dozen buckwheat pancakes. The wooden leg stomps through the yard and orders everything to be ready within two hours, to resume the journey to Gulaipole, Makhno's hometown. First, however, Makhno will deliver his previously announced harangue in the market square. Each teamster and horseman is doled out a shot of *samogon*, and after downing it most of them clear their throats, spit, and swear. It is fiendishly potent rotgut. Quapp has declined it and prefers to drink clear water. At ten o'clock he has to drive up with the purple carriage.

From the school building comes Batjko Makhno, armed with sabre and *nagan*. His gait bespeaks the skilled horseman but has no military bearing. Actually he is a pale and puny fellow with long, black, combed-back hair. His poorly fitting green tunic is badly wrinkled. Although his spurred boots are spit polished, their worn-down heels tell of difficult bygone days. So this is the man whom the bloody history of this ill-fated civil war has chosen as its central figure—a history of raids, pillaging, profanation of churches, maimed corpses, and drunken depravities. Nimbly he leaps into the anarchist headquarters on four wheels. Marusja and a sailor with an accordion follow him. The latter has barely sat down when he coaxes the *Marseillaise* from his instrument, then abruptly switches to playing *Stenka Razin*.²⁵ Again the local people snatch off their hats in Makhno's presence. A Mennonite is coaching the leader of the anarchist bandits!

The market square is crowded with people wrapped in sheepskins and chewing sunflower seeds, as the purple vehicle arrives. Flanked on both sides by five armed riders, the coach turns around. Makhno stands up, strokes his pitchblack hair backward, and yells at the top of his voice:

“Comrades, male and female citizens! Our native country is in utter

turmoil. The generals, aristocrats, and landed proprietors, all those lordly bloodsuckers have settled down in cosy comfort and view the world from their snug abodes. They know no hunger and no privation. We are going to smoke out these cunning foxes and destroy them. For many years we have sweated blood, but now we have reached the end of our patience. Volunteers, come join the ranks of my courageous troops! We need brave men and good horses. Instead of the red flag we wave the black, the flag of death and mourning. What's it to us—the red flag and the so-called Third International?²⁶ I give you the International of chopped-off heads and ripped-open bellies, that I give you for sure. Whoever is not for us, is against us, and him we annihilate—whether he be red or white, young or old.”

IV

Wilhelmshaven, November 16, 1970

Dear Dr. Peters,²⁷

Your book was a pleasant surprise, and we thank you for it. For an old participant in our Self-Protection [*Selbstschützer*] like me, the book is of interest, as it will be to many others. Even if our preachers shake their heads at the erstwhile *Selbstschutz*, I side with our friend G. G. Dück, who was our courageous leader during my days in the *Selbstschutz*, knew no fear, and got the Blumenfelders out of a pinch—which was by no means an easy task. We agreed with Ernst Moritz Arndt, a pious Christian who called Napoleon the eldest son of Satan, and wrote, “The God that created iron did not want servile men.” [“Der Gott, der Eisen wachsen ließ, /Der wollte keine Knechte.”]²⁸ Our honourable ministers—I mean those opposed to the *Selbstschutz*—would certainly also have shaken their heads if they had seen the desecration of dead bodies in Andreburg and Blumental. In one house, one could behold the following: In the parlour the corpses of the murdered family. In the adjacent corner room the bandits had whored and celebrated all night with *samogon* [cheap whisky]. As a toilet they had used the second-lowest drawer of a dresser. The linen dishevelled and dreadfully soiled.—How far men can debase themselves and even turn into animals, I witnessed there. Blumental and Andreburg were in the Prischib area, where no organized *Selbstschutz* existed.²⁹—We, from the regions of Halbstadt and Gnadenfeld, however, often patrolled Blumental and Andreburg. No Mennonites lived in the Prischib area, just Lutherans (Swabians). Since [the beginning of] the First World War, most Germans in Russia were hated and despised as *ni-emtse*. But in the matter of those bestial murders, one has to ask for the real reason. And in that connection I want to mention this episode. In the late fall of 1918, I was assigned to do guard duty on the belfry in the large village of Petropavlova. After taking care of my horse, I went up to reconnoiter. I had barely surveyed the surroundings when I heard steps behind me and turned around. It was a man who greeted me politely. From his hands and his face I discerned intelligence. He identified himself as the sexton and bellringer

[*storosh* and *svonary*]. We began to chat. He told me that, two months ago, he had moved (actually fled) here from Gulaipole and knew Makhno's folks. They had lived in the same street. Nestor [Makhno] had once been a dear little fellow. His father (stepfather) had been a very good shoemaker but also a terrible drunkard. At a very tender age Nestor had to run all errands for his stepfather, collecting and returning footwear, and buying him vodka at the tavern. One day he brought this master his booze, but on the way he had lost the change. His drunken stepfather (perhaps he was just the mother's lover, *lyubovnik*) gave little Nestor a cruel beating and walked out of the house cursing, leaving the front door open. That was in the winter. When the mother came home, the whole house and the boy were, of course, as cold as ice. From now on the mother took him along to her place of work. The boy was eight years old at that time. In the spring his mother found him a job to tend the calves on an estate. The owner was a German (*niemets*) who had between fifteen and twenty calves (dairy farm). For him the boy frequently had to go on distant errands that sometimes lasted into the night. In the morning after one such exhausting day, the boy took the calves to their pasture, lay down, and fell asleep, while the calves entered the neighbouring grain field. When the proprietor appeared, he beat up young Nestor and cut his daily wages. A few weeks later, the same thing happened again, and this time the owner had his dogs drive the boy off his property. With torn trousers Nestor escapes and climbs a tree by the road leading from the estate to the town. A Russian, who happens to come along in his wagon, gives the boy a ride, and thus he arrives in a German village (*nemetskoye selo*). It might have been Klippenfeld or Hamberg, or some other German (Mennonite) village. A farmer takes the boy in, to prod the horses for threshing. Although he is well fed, he is physically neglected. His feet have not been washed for a long time, they well up with sores [*verhöckern*], and the skin splits on his heels. Nonetheless he has to muck out the livestock stables with his bare feet. The horses' urine enters the wounds and causes agonizing pain. In addition, the customary "Russian room" [*Russenkammer*] in the stable is occupied, and he has to sleep on straw or grass in the cows' manger. At night the rats gnaw away at his trousers, in whose pockets he used to carry his lunch (bacon and bread) on his previous job. No one mends his clothes.³⁰—Here the narrator, to whom I had listened attentively, fell silent. He heard his adolescent daughter call that he had forgotten to ring the bell at two o'clock. "That's what happens when one gets talkative," he said. Far away a shot was fired. I went to look for my horse. It was a windy autumn day. As arranged, my comrades arrived. That shot had killed a sick dog, as requested by its owner. I ascended the tower once more, to take leave of the sexton and thank him for his tale. We spent the night in Hamberg and returned home the following day.

These reminiscences came to me when I read your book, for which I thank you sincerely. Many of our people should read it, especially the cowards [*Memmen*]. There is no dearth of them. Those cowards' pietistic pusillanimity [*Kopfhängerei*], in my opinion, is not going to be regarded more

highly by God than the deed of a courageous man protecting his wife and children. Our people [*Volk*] are also guilty. Although a document from the time of [Johann] Cornies referred to Russians as a strangely hybrid race [*ein Zwittergeschlecht*]¹—half human, half horse—housing them in the stables was usually disgraceful. And many think the account has been settled. But whether that is really so, we do not know yet.

Here I must stop, otherwise this letter will get too long. In the near future I will be [sending] you, in return for your estimable book, two books by the Jewish author Isaak Babel,² who served in the Red Army and also with Makhno, and who was beheaded under Stalin. [...]

With kind regards to you and your wife,
[signed] Olga and Gerhard Friesen

P.S. Please excuse the many typographical errors. My eye trouble does not abate, and I can hardly see the typewriter keys.

Notes

¹Fritz Senn, *Gesammelte Gedichte und Prosa*, ed. Victor G. Doerksen (Winnipeg, 1987). Hereafter referred to as ed. Doerksen.

²In evening courses offered by the *Volkshochschule* during the mid 1950s. The instructor was the Dutch expatriate Jakobus van Dithmarsch, who also managed a local bookstore much patronized by Senn.

³ed. Doerksen, p. 91.

⁴Since *B* was obviously meant to supersede *A*, I have based my translation on *B* and *C*.

⁵Cf. fn. 14 *infra*.

⁶In addition to the above-mentioned poem about Makhno (first published in 1951), there are two others: *Machno II* (also published in 1951) and *Machno, der Räuberhauptmann* (from Senn's *Nachlaß*, undated). Cf. ed. Doerksen, pp. 92, 209.

⁷Victor Peters, *Nestor Makhno. The Life of an Anarchist* (Winnipeg, 1970). Since then there have been no significant advances in Makhno scholarship. Michael Palij's book *The Anarchism of Nestor Makhno, 1918-1921. An Aspect of the Ukrainian Revolution* (Seattle and London, 1976) is an unconvincing effort to dignify Makhno's deeds with an aura of Ukrainian nationalism. Makhno is shown to have campaigned, confiscated, and negotiated—but not to have pillaged, raped, and tortured.

⁸Possibly based on Marusja Nikiforova, another Ukrainian would-be anarchist and partisan leader, who supplied Makhno with arms. In her honour, he named one of his units *Marusja*. Cf. Peters, p. 49.

⁹It is hardly conceivable that any Mennonite village would have remained untouched by the preceding war years and the Russian Revolution. In fact, the *Selbstschutz* was organized in anticipation of the power vacuum created by the withdrawal of the German troops from the Ukraine at the end of World War I.

¹⁰In the eight lines of Senn's last Makhno poem (ed. Doerksen, p. 209), the word occurs twice. Although *wüst* has six other meanings in addition to *void*, this does not invalidate its allusive power.

¹¹Also repeatedly in the poem *Machno II* (ed. Doerksen, p. 92).

¹²This title was chosen by the translator, as explained in the preceding introduction.

¹³The German original has *der Hof des Vollwirts Quapp*, signifying a village property of slightly more than 165 acres.

¹⁴My ellipsis, to indicate a possible break in the narrative, as necessitated by the sudden time shift from shortly after midnight to dawn.

¹⁵An open four-wheel carriage with spring suspension.

¹⁶A woolen hood; the Russian word originally refers to the leader of a Tartar tribe.

¹⁷Literally *father dear*, used in Russian to express respect and submission to a leader, general, or priest. Ukrainian partisans and peasants proclaimed Makhno their *Batjko* after he led them to defeat a punitive expedition of Austrian troops against the village of Dibrovka, in early October 1918. Makhno's forces were henceforth known as "The Revolutionary Partisan Detachments of Batjko Makhno."

¹⁸Russian churches traditionally have their bells in a separate tower, the *kolokolnik*.

¹⁹A kulak is a well-do-do farmer, the owner of an estate employing hired labour.

²⁰Home-brewed liquor, "moonshine."

²¹Cheap coarse tobacco.

²²Revolver.

²³Literal meaning: cannon; cf. German *Kanonenofen*.

²⁴Mordwinians (also Mordvins) are a people numbering ca. one million, inhabiting the middle Volga provinces of Russia and speaking a Finno-Ugrian language.

²⁵Stephan (Stenka) Timofeevich Razin (died 1671) led a robber community along the Volga and tried in 1670 to establish an independent Cossack state. After being executed in Moscow, he attained mythical stature in Russian folklore and is remembered in popular song, of which a German rendition was in vogue during the 19th century. For its 1920 celebration of the Bolshevik Revolution, the Soviet government erected in Moscow's Red Square a colossal statue of Stenka Razin as depicted in that folksong.

²⁶On November 1, 1914, Lenin announced that the Second (Socialist) International, founded 1889 during the centennial of the French Revolution, had failed. During World War I, Lenin and his supporters repeatedly called for the organization of the Third (Communist) International. Also known as *Komintern*, it was formally established in March 1919.

²⁷I am grateful to Dr. Victor Peters of Moorhead, Minn. for making a copy of this letter available to me. In my translation, the square-bracketed ellipsis towards the end indicates my omission of two sentences of a purely personal nature.

²⁸The first two lines of the 1812 poem *Vaterlandslied* [*Patriotic Song*] by the historian and politician Ernst Moritz Arndt (1769-1860), a stalwart champion of German freedom and unity.

²⁹A *Selbstschutz* unit from Prischib did exist, according to John B. Toews, "The Origins and Activities of the Mennonite *Selbstschutz* in the Ukraine." *MQR*, vol. 46 (1972) 16-17.

³⁰It should be noted that the German original employs the subjunctive of oblique discourse for the sexton's entire narrative, implying a certain detachment and thus safeguarding Friesen's objectivity in reporting second-hand information.

³¹Isaac Emanuilovich Babel (1894-ca. 1941), whose 1926 collection of stories *Red Cavalry* made him immediately famous. One of the most energetic Soviet writers of the 1920s, he lapsed from official favour in the next decade, and the exact circumstances of his death are uncertain.