The Only Mennonite *Heimat*: Mennonite Low German

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I

Arnold Dyck claimed that *Plautdietsch* (Low German) was the only true *Heimat* (homeland) Mennonites ever had. While I *knew* this to be true, it was only upon re-reading Arnold Dyck in Germany 40 years ago that I came to *believe* him. *Plautdietsch*, analogous to Yiddish, is a direct, spirited, and spiritually alert language that is a thousand years old and more.[1] And yet, though Mennonites made the dialect their way of life for more than 200 years, it was held in contempt as a literary vehicle.

When Arnold Dyck's *Koop enn Bua* series appeared in the 1940s, this contemptuous view of Low German was reversed. Dyck established a literary style and a vigorous idiom with which Mennonites immediately identified. The *Koop enn Bua* books were widely presented as Christmas gifts in the 40s and became inconspicuous but welcome friends to Mennonites everywhere in southern Manitoba and beyond. *Koop enn Bua* were fictional but contagious fancy ignited them into life. Whatever else Arnold Dyck accomplished, he showed Mennonites for the first time that their lives were richer than they realized, and that the church, an institution of moralizing meddlers, could not intrude upon the sanctity of the imaginative word. If the spirit supercedes the letter, then *Koop enn Bua* managed to do so with an impact previously unknown in Mennonite life.

Primarily a humorist, Arnold Dyck was so successful with his *Koop enn Bua* series that more than anyone else he is probably responsible for the notion that *Plautdietsch* is more suited to comic than serious writing. Dyck himself tried to dispel that notion with his somber, elegiac short story *Twee Breew*. His enormous influence may also reflect, at least in part, the fact that Mennonite Low German is to a surprising degree uncharacteristically secular and cultural in both content and effect rather than religious and spiritual.

While re-reading Arnold Dyck in Germany I discovered what I had lost and immediately attempted to make amends for having neglected the mortal dimension of my soul, namely my mother tongue, by recording the entirety of Dyck's vocabulary into a concordance. In addition to Dyck's vocabulary, I have recorded the vocabulary of all Mennonite Low German literature I have managed to find over four decades. Furthermore, I recorded new words from thousands of conversations I conducted, formally and informally during my adult life.[2]

If the dictionary represents the letter of the law, what constitutes the spirit of the law that animates the Mennonite way of life? It is the intent of this essay to define that spirit, both in historical and cultural terms.

Professor Walter Mitzka, an East Prussian, made his academic home in Marburg/ Lahn. Not only was he the leading dialectologist of Low German vernaculars, but he was also the heart and soul of the *Marburger Sprach und Wortatlas*. Also, he recognized that *Plautdietsch,* while in its essence and vocabulary West Prussian, also contained vocabulary remnants from the former Mennonite homes. Mitzka noted that this exclusive vocabulary was unknown to German neighbors. What no academic in this field has ever recognized is the simple fact that Mennonites fostered and promoted this virtual language within a language because it helped elevate their status from distinct to unique, very much in keeping with God's commission to be a separate *Volk*, a people apart.

II

The subject of Dutch remnants in *Plautdietsch* formed the basis of my doctoral thesis.[3] These remnants can be seen in words like *Japs* (measure of two-cupped handfuls), *drock* (to be busy), *foaken* (often), *pienich* (diligent), *Vondoag* (today), *Olbassem* (currants [berry]), *Spald* (pin), *Tjliere* (glands of a pig) can be traced back to the Dutch. A whole series of clothing items retained from the Dutch come to mind: *meiw (mau* in Molotschna dialect), is a sleeve, while a *Schlaub* is still used for a bib (the Dutch diminutive *Schlaubtje* being the miniature version). While *schlaubre* means to slobber, *Schlaub-betjze* are bib-overalls. Note also the following examples: *Oohmtjestow* (room in which ministers congregate before a church service), *leewtolich* (lovable, gracious, amiable), *mooj* (tired, lazy, apathetic, or cozy, pleasant, particularly of mellow-humid weather), *goodschetjs* (easily, actually, at least), *Hock* (pen, box, a fenced in area outside or partitioned off area in a stable in which young cattle or horses are kept, but also a grain bin), *Stelozh* (scaffold,

frame, trestle), *Aflentakoahre* (the first cars, for they featured transparent celluloid windows which speed and wind caused to flutter, to *flenta*); *Menjsel* (mixture, particularly a liquid base), *fleiw* (insipid, unsalted, vapid), *Tjniepa* (bug, beetle). Low German terms of ecclesiology also reflected the Dutch language. *Klarken*, one of the two branches of Mennonites living in the Prussian Werder, also known as *Flämmische* (Flemish) or "the fine ones", stood opposed to the *Friesen,* the coarse ones or the *Dreckwagen*, that is, those of the dirty carriage, willing to accept persons excommunicated from other Mennonite churches. The *Friesen* were a Mennonite church group holding a distinct religious conviction and of different ethnic background from the Flemish (*Flammen*). The Dutch language was used an ethnic indicator, thus the descendants of Dutch settlers from the Vistula Lowlands and the Pregel Valley were *Hollenda*. Often the terms *Holländer* and *Mennonite* were used synonymously. However, the fact that the above vocabulary plus many others listed in my Mennonite Low German dictionary are non-existent in any of the Low German dialects from East Friesland to Danzig is proof that Mennonites took along these terms from their former Dutch homelands 450 years ago to the Danzig area and from there to Ukraine, then to Canada, the United States, South America, Mexico, and more recently from the Soviet Union to Germany. The number of Dutch remnants or rest-words exceeds 100, although it is often difficult to distinguish between western Low German and Dutch.

During the Danzig area sojourn, the Mennonites enriched their vocabulary from the Polish and Old Prussian languages. A stove pipe was no longer a *Rooah*, it was replaced by the Polish *Trubb*, or *Owetrubb*. A dish rag ceased to be a *Laupe* and became a *Kodda* or *Oppwauschkodda*, while a discarded rag was now a *Lunz.* Girls and horses have a propensity towards vanity with both sporting bangs on occasion. And in Poland the handy term *czuprinja* for bangs became the Mennonite *Czibrientje* or *Tschebrientje*. Also *irjendwanneea* gave way to the handier Polish *bylewann* or *bylewanneea* and all meaning anytime because *byle* means any, generally as a prefix.

Tvarog, the Polish term for a small round cheese also became our word but we changed it to *Dwoaj*. Incidentally, the term *Dwoaj* is related to dwarf and the German *Zwerg*. At Easter time a special kind of bread was baked by Mennonites and this was now known as *Pastje* from the Slavic *paska.* The rich, sweet spread on the *Pastje* was also Slavic and called *zyr;* in Slavic it means cheese. *Glomms* for cottage cheese was now in use and not only for fried cheese cakes called *Glommskuake.* A "dumb" person or "knuckle-head" became, appropriately, a *Glommskopp*, usually of the male gender. In the yard and in the barn handy new terms were adopted and have remained. A *poseatjel* is a sledge hammer and comes from the Polish. A mare is called a *kobbel* while a gelding generically answers to *kunta.* In the pig sty the boar is now a *kujel.*

In Ukraine Mennonites made further changes to the Low German. The climate was gentler, with longer and warmer summers and short, but fairly severe winters. Cabbage was grown but it was no longer *Kohl* but *Komst* and the Ukrainian soup was adopted, then slightly adjusted to the Mennonite taste minus the red beets but

retaining the name *Borscht.* Beans were no longer *Boohne* but *Schauble. Schaubel* is related to the German *Säbel* and the English sabre; the shape readily explains why. Tomatoes were now grown, probably for the first time, and became *Boklezhane.* This term is a misnomer, coming as it does from the Arabic-Persian-Jewish operated bazaars in Ukraine, where the egg plant is called *patlezhan. Kuckeruzz* was the term for corn and this term was transplanted to and retained in North America. In the fields cattle fod der was supplemented by the invariable Slavic turnip called *Wruck*; a smaller, gentler variety was mixed into stews and served as a vegetable. Today's *Rutabaga* is fancier only in name. Hot beds were now in operation and they were termed *Krütstetj* or *Parnick* from the Russian *parnijtk.*

In the Russian Empire for the first time Mennonites witnessed what the Orient had to offer in terms of melons and our forebears quickly caught on. The melon patch was big and dignified by a special term located, as it was, on a choice piece of garden land removed from ordinary plots and named *Berstaund.* It offered *Arbüse* (watermelons) in great abundance, of a quality that was probably the best in the world, at least so say the Mennonites of *Einlage* and *Chortitza* to this day. In Saporozhje last year an elderly Mennonite teacher from Petersburg informed me that she would never consider migrating to Canada because, *Jie weete je nich mol waut goode Arbüse send*; you do not even know what good watermelons are. In addition to watermelons, which became the Mennonite source for syrup and related sweeteners, as well as an item of commercial enterprise, melons of every shape and size were grown.

And now back to the kitchen. The Ukrainians showed us true cabbage rolls and called them *Holoptzee.* Mennonites have followed suit to this day although because Mennonites were, in the main, wealthier than their Slavic neighbors, they stuffed their *Holoptzee* with ninety percent meat and ten percent rice, while the Ukrainians reversed the process and both do so to this day. Baked dough pockets filled with ground, seasoned meat were termed *Perischtjie* while cottage cheese dumplings were called *Verenitje.* Now *Verenj* in Russian means jam so we have reason to assume that jam, marmelade or confiture were stuffed into the *Verenitje* on occasion. Also, the wild pear was used in jams, puddings and as a cookie filler and the term for this tart delicacy was *Kruschtje,* wild pear. But *Kruschtje* jam was also spread on bread, which no longer answered exclusively to the term *Brot* but was more commonly termed *Bultje.* It is held in some quarters that *Porzeltjess* comes from the Slavic. This is simply false. *Porzeltjess,* yeast-based dough balls filled with raisins and some two inches in diameter, are deep fried and, while cooking, they rotate. Now *Purzelbaum schlagen* means to somersault in German and that is exactly what *Porzeltjess* do when fried; this is a form of visual onomatopoeia. Many Mennonites in Russia did not regard alcohol as a sin and so they produced spirits in its many forms, including illicit moonshine called *semag(h)on*, although the High German derivative, *Braundwien*, that is, "burnt wine" or distillation, was also used to describe brandy.

There were many other borrowings from the Ukrainian and other Slavic languages. When men dressed, their belt was no longer a *Gürtel*; this strap of many

uses was called a *Pojas*, as practically every Russian-Mennonite lad came to know, posteriorally speaking. *Kubanka* is a variety of rust-resistant wheat grown by Mennonites in Russia and later brought to North America. *Mamalega* was a Kuban famine dish of cornmeal (Kuban was a Mennonite settlement in the former Soviet Union). *Machucha* is Russian, then becomes Mennonite Low German and means the remains of sunflower oil presses. This was used as cattle feed until the Great Famine in Russia when it became a lifesaver for many starving Mennonites as well.

What the Mississippi River is to the American South and Midwest, and the Rhine to Germany, the Dnieper was to Mennonites. It quickly became known as *Nippa* in the dialect and the longer Mennonites were away from it, the bigger, more beautiful, and certainly deeper, it became. This was the Dnieper River, where the first Mennonite settlement, the Old Colony, was founded. The term *Nippa* has become so prevalent and so established in the Mennonite dialect that it is frequently used as a synonym for river in general. It is even used as a verb, as in *Daut Tjind haft sich enjenippat*: the child has *dniepered*, wet itself.

Along the way the Mennonite Low German also borrowed words that were of ancient Germanic origin. It cannot be determined when the term *Koagel* entered the vocabulary of the Mennonite mother tongue but it came to stay. It has several related meanings. First, it refers to a field, specifically to the individual narrow fields on the *Streifenflur*. Transliteration from Mennonite Low German usage has led to another spelling, namely, *Kagel*. Second, it is a piece of land behind the home as part of the yard in a Mennonite village, usually about 10 acres in size. It was used as pasture and garden. The surrounding village farm-lands were also divided into strips of open fields, each of which was called a *Koagel*. Tacitus, in his writings on the Germans 2000 years ago, spoke of their fields as *coerls*. Denman W. Ross in his *The Early History of Landholding Among the Germans* (Boston: Soule and Bugbee, 1883) describes the *coerl* as being one *Tagwerk*, or a real day's work.

The larger plot of land on a farm was also formerly described with a Germanic word, *Fieastäd*. Since no more convincing etymology for the term can be determined, mine will have to suffice. First, it refers to a specific amount of land sufficient to provide for a family, generally the required amount of land for a young couple to establish their own household, or in the more patriarchal homes, enough for a male suitor to win the approval of a Mennonite bride's parents in Russia. Second, *Fieastäd* refers to a permanent place of fire, a hearth or fireplace, denoting termination of nomadic ways. In Ukraine where fields tended to be large, the Germanic terms *Acka, Fletj* and *Feld* did give way to the generic *Stap* from the Russian *stepj*. Scarecrows, common on Mennonite corn fields, orchards and in their sizeable melon patches, the previously mentioned *Berstaund*, were also of Germanic origin. These artificial wardens were termed *Kraujeschejcha, Goadeschiesaul, Goadeschejcha, Jeträajdeschejcha, Heazhgrül* and *Berstaundeschejch*(a). A *Schejcha* is a disperser or chaser, while a *Schiesaul*, likewise Germanic, means monster and *grül* is a fright.

Some Germanic words were first adopted in Ukraine. When they arrived in Ukraine, Mennonites purchased horse cutters from the Swedes. The forked tree of the cutter is called *Feebastang* to this day. The etymology is difficult to trace because *Feebastang* means a fever-rod, while the Swedish term is *Fehmerstong*.

III

In the latter half of the eighteenth, but primarily in the nineteenth century, a relatively large number of settlers of communal orientation came to the United States. They were united by a biblical principle and by their own language, mainly a Germanic dialect. Some were astonishingly successful. However, as soon as their distinct language was neglected or given up, faith alone could not support their ideological structures and they all disappeared. The Amanas of Iowa were the last to go. To a lesser extent, migrants of communal or ideological orientation also came to Canada. For purely climatic considerations, Canada generally was the new home of second choice. And yet, there are three groups, each with its own Germanic dialect, which came and stayed, either via the United States or straight from Europe to Canada. They are the Jews, the Mennonites, and their Anabaptist cousins, the Hutterites.

The Jews of Medieval Europe took a shine to the Germanic character, otherwise they would never have entertained long term plans to settle and stay in Germany, where they even forged their own language out of Middle High German between the nineth and twelfth centuries in south-western Germany. This language, Yiddish, is now a thousand years old. It was the Nazi regime which hastened its demise. The Jews in Ukraine likewise felt distantly related to the Mennonites in that in essence they both were homeless wanderers. This relationship was strengthened during the time Mennonites served as *Musterbauern* on the *Judenplan* in Ukraine. It was a time when Mennonites were asked to show the Jews how to farm successfully. Basically, they got along so well there that even in Canada, specifically in southern Manitoba, the Jews settled in proximity to Mennonite villages or even in them. My childhood ears recorded my father conversing with Jews and I saw in their eyes the joy of mutual understanding when they used terms like *proster Schnorrer* (cheap or vulgar chiseler), *Landsmann,* or, when describing a ne'er do well whose lowly station was attributable to the lack of *Settfleesch*, *Sitzfleisch* or staying power.

My dictionary lists numerous Yiddish words and customs that found their way into Mennnonite Low German but none is more telling than the expression *Jüdschet Dentje,* or Jewish thinking. It states, essentially, that Jews tie their shoes in Yiddish during the week-day but that they tie their cravats on the Holy Day in Hebrew. This has a humourous ring to it, possibly even profane, but the statement encapsulates the entire phenomenon of retaining your only *Heimat,* your distinctive language, the shadow of that essence which called us into being. Once the language which sets Mennonites apart is gone, faith alone fails and the ideology for which people formerly risked life and limb and forsook home and country crumbles and is gone.

Yiddish is all but gone, Mennonite Low German is glowing with the intensity of a final flame, while the Hutterian dialect is alive but not well. The Upper German dialect of the Hutterites will succumb to the most painless but deadliest of all maladies: the path of least resistance. Once dead, a language becomes defunct, never to be resurrected. We have numerous historical examples thereof, but for living proof, a wide-angle camera will snap the picture for posterity before our very

eyes. All Germanic dialects in North America have the term *englisch woare, englisch werden*, to become English, as a warning of the generic threat of the evils of the outside world making inroads into their core. This is exactly what has happened, what is happening. From that day on, shoes and cravats will be tied only in Hollywood-inspired English. The homeland of Low German will be replaced with English, God's Own Country, which tolerates little or no deviation from the norm of Bill Gate's windows and the practiced lowest common denominator. Or, to use a more appropriate image from the Prairie itself, every word spoken is a footstep. And with neglect these steps are obliterated, never to be re-traced.

Notes

[1] Cynthia Ozick, "Yiddish and Sholem Aleichem" in *The New Yorker*, August, 1988; Jack Thiessen, "Yiddish in Canada: The Death of a Language," *Schuster*, 1974.

[2] See: Jack Thiessen, *Mennonite Low German Dictionary* (Steinbach, MB: Hanover Steinbach Historical Society, 1999).

[3] John [Jack] Thiessen, *Studien zum deutschsprachigen Wortschatz der kanadischen Mennoniten*, Elwert Verlag, Marburg/Lahn, 1964.