

7/2

S O P H I A

W I S D O M

*Say to Wisdom, "You are my sister."
Proverbs 7:4a*



Life Writing

SPRING 1997 VOLUME 7 NUMBER 2

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SOPHIA:

A Greek feminine noun associated with the biblical wisdom tradition, translated "wisdom" and personified in the book of Proverbs; equivalent in the New Testament to logos, the creative word that was with God in the beginning, creating and giving life to the world.

SOPHIA is published three times a year by Sophia Wisdom, Inc., an editorial collective of Mennonite Brethren women.

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About the Cover:

"Wedding Day" is a painting by Ray Dirks, part of his exhibit, "Two Journeys", which showed to record crowds at Winnipeg's Main Access Gallery January 17– February 16, 1997.

Through the exhibit of paintings, artifacts and words, Ray paid tribute to Mennonite grandmothers. This painting is based on the wedding portrait of Peter and Mary Siemens, Ray's maternal grandparents.



Editorial

From a Female Perspective

by Dora Dueck

One of the most interesting books I've read wasn't a book in the conventional sense of the word. It was a fat sheaf of computer paper containing the diary of some distant relatives. My aunt had been transcribing the handwritten German text into print and gave me her working copy to read.

The man of the house began the diary in January, 1929. He allowed himself one line a day. The first four entries recorded burials; most simply stated the day's activity, such as, "Started to plow."

When he grew ill, the woman of the house became the keeper of the diary. She wrote from April 1938 until 1946. She wrote a little more than her husband did, sometimes two lines per day. She might, for example, mention both the weather *and* the day's work. When her husband died, she entered an unusually lengthy description of his final hours, closing with this cryptic, poignant comment, "Now I'm alone, the marriage bond formed 40 years ago broken."

What was it that fascinated me about this diary, even though it was in German, full of mundane details, repetition and names of people I didn't know and couldn't keep straight?

What compels any of us, in fact, to read collections of letters, memoirs, diaries, and biographies, whether they're of people we know or people in history? Why are the glimpses of others' existence so interesting?

One answer comes from the narrator of one of Alice Munro's stories:

People are curious. A few people are. They will be driven to find things out, even trivial things....You see them going around with notebooks, scraping the dirt off gravestones, reading microfilm, just in the hope of seeing this trickle in time, making a connection, rescuing one thing from the rubbish.

Another answer, I think, is that we recognize our interdependence and look into the lives of other people with the need to find help in living our own. How did *that* woman, we wonder, conduct her marriage, raise her children, work, overcome the obstacles to her calling, express her faith? We gather from life writing things that we can use for ourselves.

The greatest truth – what God wanted us to know – also came via biography. It came to us in the lived life of Jesus Christ. We know God because the life of Jesus was written down. We know because of the Spirit-illuminated Word. We comb the Gospels as we would any piece of life writing, following the text into the heart of the Person we love and long to hear and follow.

"Life writing" is now the official designation, adopted by the Modern Languages Association in the U.S., for the area of scholarship earlier referred to as "autobiography and biography." It's writing that arises out of the lived life, and includes memoirs, confessions, journals, letters.

We're using it as our theme in this issue because we've compiled some wonderful examples of it: letters, travel reflections, biographies, and more. But in its broadest sense, this has been the content of *Sophia* from its inception. "*Sophia* offers herself as a rallying place for women in an uncertain, changing world," says our mission statement. "She is interested in women's stories, in their aspirations and disappointments, their successes and failures."

Betty Wylie says of women diarists, "Ultimately, they were telling themselves – us – what it's like to be human from a female perspective."

We aim to keep talking with each other in these pages about what it means to be human, and Christian, from a female perspective.

Dedication

When we began to plan this issue last fall, we asked Marlene Peters of Jubilee Mennonite Church to share some life-writing: something of her pilgrimage, either spiritual or bodily, based on her journals. Cancer had been her road companion (sometimes distant, sometimes close) for eight years, but so had her Bible and a notebook and pen.

Marlene agreed to our request. She began to re-read her journals and mark passages for possible inclusion. She spoke eagerly of what shape the material might take.

Her condition worsened rapidly, however, and she died on December 7, 1996, at age 43. With fondness and regret, we dedicate this issue of *Sophia* to the memory of Marlene Peters, our friend and sister.

Stories of Life, Stories of Faith

by Lori Matties

I spent January to April of this year in India with my family. We were there for several reasons: to attend the Mennonite World Conference in Calcutta, to visit my sister in New Delhi, and to study (as a project for my husband's study leave) how Indian Christians interpret the Bible.

My sense of identity as a Mennonite Christian was broadened as I met Mennonites from around the world and heard their stories. My understanding of human culture grew as I tried to understand the many cultural groups within India. As I observed habits and traditions that often came into conflict with my own, I began also to reflect on my own culture and how we are often oblivious to the ways in which our habits are harmful to us.

It is in that context that I began this reflection on God's instruction to the people of Israel to keep their history alive.

When your children ask you in time to come, "What is the meaning of the decrees and the statutes and the ordinances that the LORD our God has commanded you?" then you shall say to your children, "We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt, but the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand."

(Deut. 6:20 - 21 NRSV)

It is no accident that the people of Israel were told to answer their children's questions about the law with a story. It was the story of God's mercy and faithfulness that gave the laws their meaning. That story of God's ongoing presence gave the people their identity.

In the rituals of worship, in festivals and on pilgrimage (e.g. Deut. 26:1-10), the stories kept their faith alive. In times of war, in exile, they were retold with new nuances, to bring new understanding to the present situation.

The Christian story also finds its essence, not in rules and principles, but in the narrative of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Narrative, writes Stanley Hauerwas in *The Peaceable Kingdom* (Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1983), is the most fundamental way we can speak about God.

"Christians and Jews," he says, "share a particular history that reflects the God who has brought us into being." We are a people who live by a story. We gain our identity by joining our personal history to the history of God's people, and in particular to the narrative of Jesus Christ.

We who live in the west tend to lead our lives as if the past had no importance. We are oriented toward the future. We pay little attention to the wisdom of our forebears; we have little memory of their traditions. We find our identity not so much in our family heritage as in our occupations. Many of us leave family and locale to pursue our chosen careers.

This is not all bad. Some traditions and families lock us into positions that are not life-giving. But if, in following a new road, we deny our past, if we try to erase completely from where we have come, we lose our identity. We no longer know who we are.

Loss of identity is played out in a different way for one group of people in India. By stripping them of their sense of humanity, the structure of caste creates a terrible oppression upon those who have been left out of its system. These "dalits," formerly called "untouchables," are struggling not only for their physical welfare but also for an identity. Because they have no place in their society, they have no memory that gives them a sense of who they are.

We gain our identity by joining our personal history to the history of God's people, and to the narrative of Jesus Christ.



From The Source

Some who have made their way out of the excruciating cycle of poverty have tried to emulate those in higher castes. They have tried to forget their roots and their fellow dalits.

Some have become Christians. Like those who were "no people" in Hosea's prophecy, these have become "God's people" as they have entered into the life of Christ and are forging for themselves a new theology and a new identity. Some of these are reaching out to help their suffering brothers and sisters. Pondering this, I am reminded of my own culture, and I wonder about the ways we divide people into castes and make some into "no people."

Other Indian Christians have inherited characteristics and attitudes of the missionaries who brought them faith. Some of these attitudes are hurting the church. I feel shame and I wonder about the ways we allow our culture to mar the witness of Christ.

I attended a workshop led by a Christian artist who has spent much time meditating on the Scriptures to discover for herself "the feminine face of God." She grew up in a convent school where all the images taught were male. She engaged us in the exercise of painting a mandala, a circular design that explores a central theme. We were divided into



groups of eight. We discussed the themes we wished to portray and how to symbolize them.

My group decided to centre on God as light, and to symbolize aspects of that light with other themes such as water, beauty in nature, community, and working together. On the outside ring of our circle we painted our hands and feet and imprinted them on the paper. I was struck by the fact that we, the women of God everywhere, are joined by our hands and feet that work in God's service, no matter what language we speak or what customs we follow.

We have always drawn inspiration from the lives of those around us. Why do we want to know how others have lived? Why are we so interested in hearing each other's stories? Because each life, both great and ordinary, is a metaphor not only of the community in which it is lived, but also of the life of Christ.

We embody his teaching by our lives, and thus we not only identify Christ but ourselves as well. As we remember Christ in the body, we gain a new memory and a new identity as one in the cloud of witnesses (see *Hebrews 12:1-2*), from Abraham and Sarah to Mother Teresa to one another.

We must continue to tell our stories. We must listen to the stories of our sisters and brothers everywhere. Our personal stories are larger than ourselves. They are witness to the ongoing life of the church, the body of Christ. They are witness to the next generation of the life and love of God.

The narrative of our lives affirms and revolutionizes the narrative of our faith. When we listen to our mothers and sisters and aunts who have often carried that story in times of great trouble, we are enriched.

For the sake of the whole cloud of witnesses, let us walk on the road together and be bold enough to tell our stories, God's story of judgment and mercy.

Sophia editor Lori Matties was "on leave" for this issue and sent us this piece from Bangalore.

MISSION STATEMENT

Sophia offers a forum for women in the MB church. Her pages provide room for dialogue, room for women to speak to each other about their place in the family, the church, the work place and the world. She recognizes that the MB sisterhood is rural, urban and suburban, that its members speak with various voices.

Sophia offers herself as a rallying place for women in an uncertain, changing world. She is interested in women's stories, in their aspirations and disappointments, their successes and failures. She invites expressions of joy and sorrow, concern and outrage. She encourages women in the use of their gifts in all spheres of life.

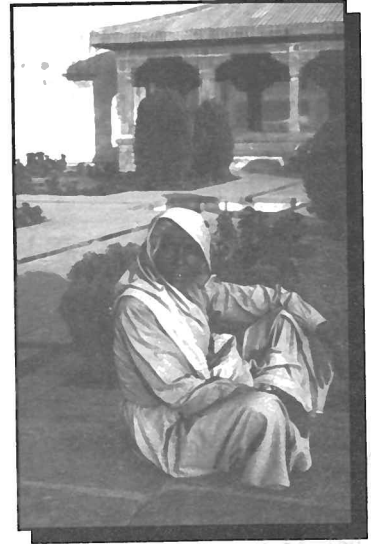
Although Sophia was conceived and brought to birth by and for MB women and celebrates sisterhood, it is her desire to be inclusive. She hopes to challenge both men and women; she welcomes their voices and invites them into dialogue.

Sophia acknowledges the authority of God, the giver of wisdom, and of the sacred Scriptures, the story of God's dealings with women and men.

"Oh the depths of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!" (Romans 11:33)

The Colours of Life

Millie Kroeker attended the Mennonite World Conference, held in India, this past January. Sophia asked her to reflect on her visit there.



Recently, I read an editorial on India by New York Times columnist A.M. Rosenthal. "The glory of the variety of Indian ways, history, religions, art and friendships — the colours of life —", he writes, "made me rush forward to meet the gift of the day."

How true this was for me as well. It's also true that every day was anything but a relaxing holiday. But my difficulties paled when compared with the joyful colours of Indian life around me.

You might say that it's easy for me to dismiss my difficulties. After all, next to the hardships of the majority of India's people, my problems are minuscule. After three weeks away, I came home to a richness of life that many wouldn't dream of. Their difficulties, in many cases, seem so constant and insurmountable.

So, why was it that, surrounded by these people whose lives I could not live, each day in India seemed like a gift?

Let me give you a few snapshots of some of the gifts that came my way:

1. Coming from a young country like Canada, I was continually awed by the ancient architectural wonders around us. Our tour guides told stories about life in those ancient places that captured my imagination. Had I lived in the palace of one of those Mogul rulers of the 17th century, what would my life have been?
2. Shopping in Indian markets was always an adventure. One particular market is highlighted in my mind because it was decidedly off the tourist track. After some initial but determined efforts to treat us like tourists, onlookers left my friend and me to make sense of things on our own. This suited us just fine. I especially enjoyed being able to observe life around me simply as another grocery shopper, not as someone "different." It felt so hospitable.
3. I love kids of all ages and those I connected with in India stole my heart. One group of young boys invited me to play street cricket with them. They insisted I take lots of turns at bat and treated me like a special friend. Their smiles and efforts to communicate make me smile even as I remember them now.
4. I'll always remember Shiny Susan and her father, Menno Joel. Seven months earlier they had lost their mother and wife to a tragic accident. [*P. Karuna Shri Joel was executive secretary for the Mennonite Brethren Women's Conference in India. Ed.*] They shared their memories of her short but outstanding life and together we wept at her and her baby's gravesite. I'll always feel honoured to have been treated with such love and respect.
5. Gandhi's cremation site is visited by thousands each year. During our visit, a young man from Kerala State, India, asked if I could stand beside his wife for a photograph. She was wearing a severe black headcovering and clothing and I'm sure we looked about as different as two women could. But she and I exchanged names and where we were from. We smiled into each other's eyes and connected in a way that was greater than our differences.



6. After shopping at a special silk shop, the members of our tour group were each presented with the gift of a lovely shawl. Mornings and evenings were just cool enough for the comfort of a shawl around our shoulders. Even at the Assembly Gathered part of the Mennonite World Conference, I wore the shawl. One day an Indian conference attendee informed us that the words printed on the shawl honour Shiva, the Hindu god whose symbol is the phallus. To him this shawl was a gift of a different colour, and an idolatrous one at that.
7. Visiting the Mother House in Calcutta was a very special gift to me. It's the orphanage where Mother Teresa herself lives. Initially, the sight of all these abandoned babies was too much to bear. But soon I began to see the love that you could almost touch in this place. It gave me the grace I needed to go beyond overwhelmed sympathy to giving a loving touch to those who needed someone to smile at.
8. After the Mennonite World Conference in Calcutta we went south to visit the Mennonite Brethren churches. My husband, Wally, and I were invited to stay overnight in the home of an Indian family. Although they felt their house was inadequate by our standards, they treated us with warm hospitality. Even more important than meeting all of our physical needs, they gave us glimpses into their lives which made us feel welcome, accepted, and loved. We felt so grateful.
9. Travelling always broadens my life experience. This trip allowed me again to see God in places outside of my previous experience.

The list of gifts goes on. The colours of my own life are richer and more vivid because of these gifts, and I'm grateful.

.....

Millie Kroeker teaches in ESL programs and is a member of River East MB Church. She and her husband, Wally, have two grown sons, and are expecting a second grandchild.



Letters to the Editor

On a day of bitter disappointment I cut open the brown envelope with *Sophia* in it.

As I read it from cover to cover, the rhythmic words soothed my sorrowing spirit.

I also want to confess to making three copies, without your permission, of Al Doerksen's "The Colour of Breakfast."

Our budding teenage grandsons need that.

Thanks for the music,

Hilda Born

No confession needed for copying articles for personal use. Thanks for writing! Ed.

We Need You!

This is a volunteer-based magazine, so we particularly need the involvement of our readers.

We want to increase our circulation, and have set some specific targets for this year. We hope you'll renew promptly when your notice comes, and also promote *Sophia* in your church and among family and friends. Please consider buying subscriptions as gifts.

We are discussing some changes to *Sophia*, and ask for your input and prayer. These include the frequency of publishing as well as a new name.

(Watch for an announcement by our board in the fall issue.)

What would you like to see in future issues? What do you think about what you've read so far? We love to get letters.

We would like to enlarge our writers' base. There are only so many people we on the editorial committee, between us all, know. We welcome suggestions of writers, of themes, of stories. We welcome your poems and articles. (Our fall issue is on "Sisters".)

We also gladly accept offers of help – to serve on the board or get involved in other ways.

Thank you, each one of you!

“Dear ones far, far away...” a year of letters

The widow Anganetha Wiebe said farewell to her daughter Helena and son-in-law Hans Dyck in late 1929, as they set out with their sons Peti, 4, and Hans, 3, (and a third son Gerhard born enroute) in an attempt to leave Russia. She expected to follow her children. This was not possible, however, and thereafter, the only contact between the Dycks (who successfully reached Manitoba) was through letters.

The following excerpts from that first year of Anganetha Wiebe's correspondence reveal not only events of the time, but the strong character and deep faith of the writer.

The letters were translated by granddaughter Ruth Wood.



Anganetha

Chortitza, January 13, 1930

Dear ones far away!

We have now had four letters from you, one from Moscow, one from the train as you were leaving, and this is the second letter from Germany. When we got your first letter from Moscow we already knew that we could not emigrate; we had already accepted that we had to stay here. We often said to one another, if only we could hear God's voice clearly telling us whether to leave or to stay. Then, on Monday, the day after you left, as I walked over the hill to Grandmother's house, it became so clear to me, just as though a voice spoke: "You cannot leave now." Then I resolved to stay here.

However, after Wednesday, November 14, it was no longer possible to leave. We often think about you and your boys and always pray for you, and believe firmly that you will reach your destined place. Many greetings to the boys, God keep them for you; has Peti become very thin, since you say he has been ill for nine days now?

We celebrated Christmas very pleasantly, undisturbed. We even cooked chocolate, and did a little baking; God has been very good to us, has given us courage according to his great goodness. Added to that the good news that you have escaped from Moscow.

January 14, 1930

Dear ones, today we received the very sad news of the death of your beloved children [*Peti and Hans died in the refugee camp, of complications following measles*]...it is so difficult for me to accept that they are both dead, if only one had survived, if only you could have kept one; I can hardly imagine it, seeing you again, but without your boys.

Dear ones, I so much want to console you, but I cannot accept that they are dead; but let us submit to God's will, though we can accomplish this only poorly....God keep your little Gerhard safe and we pray that you may keep him. Do read much in God's Word and comfort one another with 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.

We greet you and kiss you in spirit, we are closely bound to you, although separated by such a great distance. Because I am so distraught I have written the same thing over and over.

January 18, 1930

My dear children! This week we received your two letters, with such sad news, we were not accustomed to hear sad news from you. [*Infant Gerhard had also died.*] Now we are so dejected, this unexpected thing has happened, your dear boys dead! I was visiting Tante Braun last evening, when suddenly I was gripped by such fear, that another one of you could die. I could not rest, went home and prayed for you, we are so far apart, it takes so long before we even know what is happening with you. I experience now what is said in the hymn:

"Though my lips are silent, my heart is in prayer." Netl and I often discuss, if only you could have kept one of the big boys, the little one was not enough for us. But at the last we prayed so hard for that little one, but you had to give him up . . . we were never even able to see that baby.

Dear Lena, I am wondering if the thought goes through your mind that you should not have left; but when you think that Hans may have had to return to the place he was in before [prison] and gradually his health would be destroyed and he would die . . . at least now you can be together.

January 20, 1930

Today we received your letter, and it comforts us again that you have the prospect of getting away, and that those in America are so concerned for you. When I think of the boys, I silently wish I could have Peti back, he had such trusting eyes, but of course I would not want to disturb them, it's just a thought that goes through my mind. Do comfort each other like Papa and I did; the first time we were attacked and threatened with death, he said to me:

"Both joy and sorrow
Good fortune and bad
We bear with one another."

We are often frightened by evil rumors and can get carried away so that we forget to "lift up our eyes to the hills from whence cometh our help". Grandmother is here now, she prays constantly; she has had to vacate her house. Write us only the necessary news, that you are well and whatever difficulties you encounter there, we must do without many things in these times, including the pleasure of reading good news from you. I am heartsore as I write these words, and I ask you to pray for us all.

We are having a mild winter, will use the old fence for heating; we cannot use our small oven now since coal is available only for schools and government buildings.

February 19, 1930

Dear Hans and Lena, in the fall banns were read for our children Netl and Peter Regehr and now, this coming Saturday, they will be married. I must restrain myself, as I would have liked to postpone this for a long, long time. As you know I am not eager for my children to marry; I always need to be forced to accept it. Especially at this time, when there is so much hardship already.

I no longer feel at home here; as I walked down the street one day I felt like such a stranger here.

Words from Jeremiah 8:22 come into my mind, "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is not the health of the daughter of my people recovered?"

May 22, 1930

Dear ones far, far away,

In some places there is much want and suffering, where the dead are not even buried in coffins any longer. We are still able to live in our house and we have enough to eat too, we can often share with those in need. Everything is so expensive here, but our cow helps so much, we sell milk and butter too. What is it like over there, do you now drink tea, since there is enough sugar? Do you still cook *borscht*? Sometimes I say, if we do end up in another land sometime, do let us keep some of our old ways, things we have become fond of, such as *paska*, *borscht* and tea.

Here there is so much theft, everything has to be under lock and key, when we work in the garden we lock the door to our small room. The storm windows have to stay up all summer so that entry cannot be gained by the windows. Our Netl and Peter were in Einlage today, wanted to buy a young pig and many other items, but what they brought home were some flowerpots, a few spools of thread and a few other little things, this shows you how much there is available to buy.

Onkel Abram Klassen [*the writer's brother*] and his family disappeared in November, he escaped from prison, and now we hear that he is a cowherd; here he was a preacher and elder. Grandmother cried about that, it seems so humiliating; we consoled her, reminding her that many important men, such as Jacob and Moses and David, were shepherds.

June 19, 1930

Dear children in the far distance,

How God does love you, your children have been lifted up to heaven, thus they will never be lost. The suffering of this world is often so depressing; as I walked to church last evening I felt especially sad, since worldly pursuits are carried on right beside our church; a club has been opened there.

A young couple is living in our summer room, we get along fairly well with them, they pay nothing, we had to take them in [*to appease the authorities*].

Here poverty and want continue to progress, a cow costs 500 rubles and more, a fat pig they say up to 1000 rubles, perhaps too it may be that the money is decreasing in value, we may all be millionaires yet.

June 11, 1930

The vegetables are up already, there are potatoes as big as hens' eggs under the plants....We have cooked *moos* three times with gooseberries, and once we made pancakes, we really shouldn't do that, as it is too expensive because of the lard. We must always write about these little events, and never mention the most important occurrences, that is why this letter sounds so strange.

July 12, 1930

Tomorrow we are celebrating baptism, only a few are being saved these days, it is not the time now for religious conversions. Almost more are leaving the faith than are coming to it.

July 27, 1930

We are happy for much that other people would not even think about; for example, that we are allowed nine candies on each coupon book is cause for joy, especially the children's joy at this is really sincere. But when we receive your letters and find that you are still well and undiscouraged, then we are truly joyful.

Sunday, August 10, 1930

Dear children, Today I have to tell you very sad news, that we have been burned out. Last Wednesday, very early in the morning, while it was still dark, we were still asleep, fire broke out, and it went so fast we had not quite half an hour's time to bring out our things. Our beloved old house is just a pile of ashes. The weather is so hot and dry, day after day 32 degrees, everything was so dried out and thus burned so fast . . . the firemen came too late, and without water as well.

We are now living in the *Mangelstube* [a room in the cellar where clothes were pressed], the door and the window are burned up, but it is adequate. We got most of the furniture out except the cupboards, from the pantry nothing except two jars of butter. The worst of it is that both our cows were burnt up, which means our total nourishment here.

The floor in the back room is burned through; Peter and Abram have laid boards over it so that we are sheltered from the heaviest rains. We do not know as yet what we can build now, wood is unobtainable nor anything for a roof, you would not recognize our yard.

This morning we had a little service, thereby we were consoled, sometimes we despair of life. We think the fire was caused by smoking; our tenant always went to take care of the horses at night and while doing that he smoked. I often noticed it, but to say anything to him about it was

against my nature. The fruit trees near the house have suffered greatly, the acacia trees look sad, in short the destruction is indescribable. May this loss bring us closer to God.

September 7, 1930

We are still living in the cellar room, no other solution has been found for us, it is impossible to build, there is nothing to buy. One night there was a storm and we in our tumbledown house almost without a roof, it rained through so much that in the morning we were very discouraged, could not cook at all, everything was wet, so we did not want to sleep here another night. Sometimes we think we cannot endure it, how we long to get away from here, it is also very hard to live without cows.

Peter Regehr's shoes got burned up too, the Sunday ones as well as the workshoes, it is a month now and he still has none. The coupon book alone is not enough, another book is needed as well and also a written request must be submitted, and at last he could have a pair, but they were both for the right foot. I believe we will once again be forced to wear wooden sandals.

Our Abram has been brought low, he sleeps in the front room, on two tables he has laid a mattress, and the remaining chickens roost above him; when the rooster crows in the morning that is the end of sleep for him.

At first my feelings were deadened just as they were at Papa's death, it was as though I could not truly perceive it, that comes later. Each time such a blow comes, I think now it will be enough; even when your children died, at first we thought – it is not possible, but much is possible in this our earthly life.

October 16, 1930

Dear children,

We are still in the cellar rooms, but it is not as bad anymore, not like it was in the beginning. We plan to improve it somewhat, we have the small iron stove set up, on which we cook. I believe we will be warm enough in the winter if we have to stay here. At times we are still happy that we can live here, no one chases us away, everyone knows we are poor, that there is nothing to steal from us.

It almost sounds like a fairy tale to live in a land where you can buy everything, and not to even require a coupon book. Grandmother turned 78 years old in August and I am 57 on October 4.

Eleven years ago on my birthday the Machno [terrorists] arrived, a long time when one looks ahead, but when the years are past, it seems like a dream.

Sunday, November 16

We expected workers who were going to build our house, but the weather was so bad, that it seemed nothing would get done, it rained and they did not come, we almost despaired and prayed mightily. Now the frame is standing, and we plan to arrange two dwellings in it. We would rather leave everything and move away, far away from here to another country, but we are forced, we have to build.

We now have a cow, with Liese and Peter together; she gives two pounds of butter a week, as it is divided into two halves we cannot spread it very thickly.

Monday, December 15, 1930

We will continue to live here in the cellar for the winter, and are preparing ourselves somewhat so that we can endure it, the floor of course is cement as you know. We brought the chickens into the large part of the cellar, but there they are not safe from theft. Abram [a teacher] is engaged to the daughter of a teacher in the Institute, a Christian girl, now he is having a very hard time with himself and wants to become a Christian too. A teacher is not permitted to attend church services nor be baptized, and when he gets married he cannot be married in the church; how sad that people are being forced to become godless for the sake of earning their daily bread. Do not write back about this as it could draw attention, now and then a letter is opened.

Now it is almost a year since your dear boys died, I still sometimes remember how we celebrated New Year's Eve with no premonition and no thought that something so very sad was happening; it seemed to me that I had not watched and prayed enough. Greetings from your mother.



Over the next nine years, more than 31 of Anganetha Wiebe's letters reached her daughter in Manitoba. In the same energetic, courageous style she continued to write of their (mostly dire) circumstances: food scarcity and famine during the years 1931-33, the imprisonment of daughter-in-law Ira, the later loss of sons Abram and Peter (who were said to be "travelling for an indefinite period," a euphemism for exile).

Her last letter to Hans and Helena Dyck, November 21, 1939, described her as alone in the village with daughter Netl, daughter-in-law Liese and their children. Later, the events of World War II took them as far west as Poland, though they were sent, in 1945, back to Russia.

Anganetha Wiebe died August 31, 1947, at age 73, of gradual weakness following diarrhea (starvation?). Daughter Netl wrote of their mother's death in 1955, following a 16-year interval of no news, "She never wanted to die just yet, she said she still wanted to see Lena [Helena Dyck] again. But at the last she gave herself wholly to God's will, she said the first thing she would do on her arrival in heaven was to fall down at the Saviour's feet and thank and worship Him for the great thing He did for us."



L.to R.: Anganetha Wiebe, her mother Lena Klassen, her sister Helena Braun

Finding Connections:

Reflections on the lives of
16th Century Anabaptist Women

by Linda A. Huebert Hecht



photo by Melinda Hecht-Enns

The book *Profiles of Anabaptist Women: Sixteenth-Century Reforming Pioneers* contains the stories of Anabaptist women from various parts of Europe, written by 19 different authors. (See *Book Review*)

My work as co-editor involved soliciting manuscripts, writing letters to contributors, translating profiles from German to English, adding references from the literature on women's history, and more generally linking the profiles together.

The idea for the book took shape two years after I completed my Masters degree in History and had worked with Arnold Snyder on a biography of Helena von Freyberg, the noblewoman and lay leader from Tirol. The profiles I wrote for the book focussed on women in the Austrian territory of Tirol. The following reflections grow out of my knowledge of those women in particular, as well as other women in the *Profiles* book.

Names give identity

On the cover of the *Profiles* book you will see my full name – Linda A. Huebert Hecht. I don't know why my parents chose the name Linda – perhaps it was new for that time. A. stands for Agnes. I was named Agnes, I believe, for my maternal grandmother, a traditional practice for a first daughter.

But Grandma also had a daughter named Agnes, and so, growing up in a close-knit family, I heard my middle name mentioned often. Aunt Aggie, as we called her, remained single and did a lot for her nieces and nephews. As a dress fitter at Eaton's, she was well-qualified to help my mother with the annual ritual of female MBCI students, sewing a jumper (our school uniform).

Huebert is the name I was born with. Our family uses the original spelling of this Anabaptist/Mennonite name which comes from Belgium. When my father passed away in 1989, a growing awareness of my duty as the firstborn child to carry on the family name led me to begin using the name Huebert Hecht. I had taken on the name Hecht almost 25 years earlier, when I married Alfred. His family name means fish – pike, to be exact. In the 16th century names usually designated a family's work. A Wagner was a cartwright, a

Mueller a miller, a Weber a weaver, and so on. Women naturally took the names of their fathers but their work was not necessarily in his craft or profession. You can read about one exception in *Profiles*. Margarethe Pruess worked in her father's print shop as a young girl and married three different printers, which is how she was able to be one herself.

For me, the most exciting thing about studying the Anabaptist court records is to come across the names of women. Even when there is little else I can find out about them, their names give them an identity.

The lists of Anabaptist women of Tirol which I've compiled give me a sense of who my foremothers are. The sheer numbers of their names tells us that women figured prominently in the Anabaptist movement. Since women

constituted half the population, had they boycotted the Anabaptist movement, there wouldn't have been one. The meetings, after all, took place in homes, the "work place" for women. It's no wonder, then, that so many of their names appear in the court records. Moreover, those whose names are included, appear because they were arrested. Many more women remain nameless to us, because they managed to escape interrogation.

Sisters: famous, or infamous

Wouldn't we all like to be famous, or at least have a sister who is?

Among 16th century Anabaptists there were quite a number of sisters. Some we might now consider famous because of their relationship with key Anabaptist leaders. For example, we know that Agnes, sister to Jacob Hutter, founder of the Hutterites, was arrested. Barbara Velcklehner was another sister, not famous but important in Tirol, who convinced two other women to become Anabaptists.

In the eyes of the 16th century law these sisters were heretics, deserving the death penalty for their beliefs and activities. Had you lived in Tirol at the time, you might have preferred not to be related to one of them; one day soldiers might stand at your door too, throw you into prison and interrogate you about your sister's Anabaptist involvements.

But how infamous were they, these Anabaptist sisters? Take the case of Anna Egger. A single woman, she was described as Peter Egger's one-eyed sister; this meant she

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was cross-eyed. Peter, another man, and Anna were accused of preaching and baptizing in regions west of Innsbruck. This was infamous behaviour indeed!

Pregnancy and Childbirth

I gave birth to a son in 1969 in the middle of a move to the United States. He was born six weeks early – didn't seem to like the perpetual motion of the car, I guess. My parents were travelling at the time and didn't know they were grandparents until they telephoned my sister who knew our unlikely story. Our second child, a daughter, chose to be born in the middle of an Ontario ice storm. We barely made it to the hospital on time.

Perhaps it is because my own experience of childbirth was so traumatic that I identify so much with pregnant 16th century Anabaptist women. What must it have been like, to be pregnant and in jail? I can't imagine it, and unfortunately, we have no details of it. What we do know is that women who were pregnant at the time of their arrest went free until they had given birth. Usually, that is. In a few cases, women stubbornly clung to their beliefs and had to remain in prison until their children were born before standing trial.

Then there is the story (told in *Profiles*) of Anna Gasser, sister of a hunted Anabaptist leader, who had a miscarriage while in prison. This happened a month-and-a-half after they had executed her Anabaptist husband. Heresy and pregnancy – quite a combination!

Unanswered questions

The majority of Anabaptist women were wives and mothers, ordinary folk who happened to live in a time when one was not allowed to differ in Christian belief. Why did so many of them flee, leaving their children behind when they became Anabaptists? This is a heartwrenching question and one for which we have no real answers.

And some, like Helena von Freyberg, a noblewoman, left not only children (they were no longer young) and her home, but a castle. In Helena's case we have more information, even a piece of her writing, but little about her motivations.

One of the frustrations of researching these women has been that so many of their stories remain unfinished. And yet, if we did not have these "fragments of story" there would be only silence about their lives.

Sometimes life is stranger than fiction. That is true of our Anabaptist foremothers. Ironically, the interrogations and punishments they suffered have provided us with a rich heritage, a real legacy.

As I struggle to reconstruct their stories, this question always haunts me: could I have done what they did? As I try to put my faith into action, I take courage from their faith. Our 16th century foremothers dared to act. Should we not do the same?"

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Linda Huebert Hecht is an independent scholar currently working for the Conrad Grebel College Archives and the MCC Ontario History Project. She and her husband, Alfred, live in Waterloo, Ont., are members of Glencairn Mennonite Brethren Church, and have two married children.



New Writer's Contest

The following three articles are the winners of Sophia's first annual New Writers Contest. Each one will be awarded \$50. The contest's sponsor, Evelyn Labun, initiated the idea in order to provide women with an opportunity to develop their writing skills and to find a voice for what is within them.

Evelyn also writes, though it's usually academic writing. She recently completed her Doctor of Nursing

Science at the University of San Diego, with the thesis "Cultural Discoveries in Nursing Practice: the experience of nurses working with Vietnamese." She is program coordinator at Red River Community College and active in Nurses Christian Fellowship. She's a member of Fort Garry MB Church.

Thank you, Evelyn, and all who entered. Congratulations to the winners.

Crafting Memories

by Roxanne Willems Snopeck

My father is a man of many talents and one of his favourites is woodworking. Alone in his dusty shop he creates beautiful gifts fashioned of oak and pine, carefully fitted, tooled and finished to bring out the rich patina of the grain. Among my most prized possessions is a blanket-chest he made for my husband and me when we bought our first home. Solid oak, cedar-lined, it is both beautiful and functional but, more importantly to me, it is unique.

My mother is also a crafter. Fabrics and yarns are her media and with them she creates rugs, afghans, clothing, quilts and decorative items. My children are thrilled to receive her special gifts, handmade by Grandma, and I know my mother finds a quiet satisfaction in the work of her hands.

Unfortunately, I sometimes fear this creative gene has skipped me entirely. Several times I've attempted to learn how to knit, and have finally given up without so much as a potholder. Crocheting was a joke, macrame went out of style, and paper tole never appealed. If I approach my sewing machine with great caution and restrict myself to straight lines, I can usually end up with a recognizable result, but nothing more. I am forced to admit a regrettable lack of "craftiness."

But perhaps it is only the expression that is different. Like the child who carves "I WAS HERE" into a wooden desk top, I too want to be remembered, to make a contribution. Where my parents use wood, cloth and yarn, I use pen and paper.

In various journals and photo albums, I record the minutiae that make up my life – holidays, birthdays, snowfall, first steps, last diaper, marital spats, longings and dreams, the passage of time. It may not be much different from anyone else's life, but that doesn't matter. It is still mine and my interpretation is unique to me alone. My observations and reactions show me who I am and who I am becoming. And maybe, one day, my children will understand themselves just a little bit better because of it.

My father would argue that his work is nothing special; he has much to learn, his work is flawed. My mother would laugh and say she just likes to keep her hands busy. But they are both wrong. The works of their hands are a subtle, tangible gift of who they are. Woven into the pattern and polished into the finish are clues to their values: their work ethic, thrift, love of beauty, generosity, self-sufficiency. These crafts have a value far greater than the sum of the materials or the intricacy of their workmanship.

And as for me, I write primarily to figure out who I am, and to let my children know where they come from. If, every now and again, someone else catches a glimpse of herself in my mirror, what a beautiful, joyful gift. To me!

The author lives in Abbotsford, B.C.



The Cushion

by Martha Rempel

A glint of gold caught my eye as I turned away from the junk-laden tables at the garage sale. I turned back for a closer look. The gold was a fringe attached to a cushion that had seen better days. The bright painted flowers on the satin were peeling. But what memories it evoked – memories of a day many years ago when my dad so boyishly showed his love for my tiny, beautiful mother.

It was Mother's Day. That morning in church had been an occasion for honouring our mothers with colourful red paper carnations pinned to their dresses. My young girlfriends and I had made those carnations and I was proudly happy to have been able to put a little colour into my mother's often drab, poverty-stricken life.

For the afternoon tea my sister and I had tried out a new recipe from a cookbook the travelling Watkins dealer had left. It was payment for an excellent dinner Mother had served him. This dealer always timed his visits for the dinner or supper hour at our home. He acknowledged this unashamedly, claiming, as many others did, that there was not a better cook in the country than my mother. He generously repaid Mother with products she could not afford, such as drink or pudding powders. This time it had been a new cookbook and we girls were delighted with the new recipes to try out.

For this Mother's Day the recipe was Coconut Cloud Cake. The cake had risen beautifully and the light, moist layers were clapped together with red strawberry jam from our previous summer's pickings. A frothy icing topped it off. We looked forward to serving it to our guests this afternoon.

These guests were a public schoolteacher from our town, his wife and two small boys, who drove out to our farm in their late model car in the warmth of the sunny afternoon. My dad patted the dusty car hood enviously as he went out to greet them. Before long he and the teacher were out for a spin. The women chatted contentedly while we girls entertained the little fellows.

The men were gone so long that my mother became alarmed. Cars were such dangerous vehicles, travelling 40 miles per hour, not like our trusty team of horses and covered buggy.

But worries ceased when the car bumped over the little bridge crossing the irrigation ditch. The men came in, each importantly clutching a package. Obviously they had driven all the way to town, stopping at the small convenience store which was open on Sundays. Dad presented his package to Mother with eager expectancy.

"Open it," he said bashfully. "It's for Mother's Day."

We had never experienced Dad giving Mother presents and hadn't realized his longing to do so was thwarted by poverty.

Now Dad's eyes shone as Mother drew forth a brilliantly-painted satin cushion, lavishly trimmed with gold fringe. My practical, though young, mind sympathized with the unspoken thought of a more prudent gift. Mother's eyes drifted from the gorgeous cushion to the chipped, unmatched dishes on the table. I also waited with trepidation as I glanced from Dad to Mother. Even my immaturity and desire for beauty saw the inappropriate contrast of the silken cushion against the drab couch. My throat tightened as I waited for Mother's remonstrance, *but you shouldn't have!* It never came.

Instead, my mother ran her fingers through the luxurious fringes. Then she plumped up the cushion, setting it gently and almost reverently on the threadbare couch. Her glance into Dad's eyes embodied the kiss which propriety prevented her from bestowing on him publicly.

The author lives in Medicine Hat, Alberta.

illustration: Stephanie Martens



Hidden Beauty

by Ruth E. Johnson

It is 3:00 o'clock in the morning, and I cannot sleep. I creep down the hall to my office-cum-den and, too restless to read or write, begin filing my nails. Critically, I survey the result – all neat and trim, but several specimens are ridged and threaten to split at a moment's notice. My eyes wander down the length of my hands and see how they proclaim, along with the wrinkles (no longer laugh lines), silver threads among the gold, and cellulite, that the bloom is off the rose.

Prominent blue veins mark the rivers of life along the backs of these hands and dwindle off into reddish creeks down the fingers under translucent skin. So-called liver spots dot the landscape. Several joints have silently, but pointedly, swelled in protest at decades of use and abuse. One finger defiantly hangs a left instead of facing straight ahead. All in all, not a sight to encourage one's delusion that one is in good shape for one's age.

I ruminate on what these hands have accomplished. By conservative estimate, they have peeled 10,000 pounds of potatoes and prepared meals for 75,000 empty tummies in these 38 years of marriage. They have processed 10,000 loads of laundry, many of which included feeding three dozen diapers one at a time through a wringer, and then spent countless hours ironing shirts by the dozen and folding towels by the ton.

These hands have held the Word of Life and turned its pages to reveal new promises and truth. Based on what was learned, they have typed over three hundred stories and articles, hopefully to the edification of God's people. I silently ask the Lord to someday tell me how He used those stories to meet needs in the reader's lives. The same fingers have penned countless notes of encouragement and sympathy to the burdened, sick, and bereaved.

The scraps of wool and fabric stored in the basement testify to an endless stream of knitted sweaters, caps, mittens and other clothing. The cotton floss speaks of smocked dresses for daughters and granddaughters; the crochet cotton is left-over from dainty doilies.

And who can tell of loving touches on a fevered little one's forehead, the determined patting to coax burps from a colicky baby, the massaging of a husband's stiff back, the reassuring squeeze of a child's hand as we cross a busy street? Memory plays back the scene at the bedside of my dying friend when I gently took her hand, rubbed it with my thumb, and whispered, "Don't try to talk." She opened her eyes, gave a sweet smile and whispered back, "We'll just rub hands." Hands spoke that day, when words could not, of love and comfort.

The tasks performed by these hands are beyond listing, and it occurs to me that their beauty lies now, more than ever, not in form but in function. They have served me well, and as they have been used to do what they have found to do, I trust they have served the Lord as well. They are silent testimonies to a lifetime of tasks completed. As were my Lord's hands on His resurrection morning.

The author lives in Agincourt, Ontario.



Amazing Grace

by Eleanor Martens

I could already tell at our first meeting that Grace lived up to her name. Her face bore a quiet strength and as she talked of her call to participate in the suffering of others, I sensed the peace and joy her obedience had brought her.

Grace was a Ugandan woman I met in Kampala last January, during a MCC-sponsored tour to that country. I learned from others that she had graduated from Makerere University with an advanced degree in social work in a country where such training was rare and sought after. She could have had her pick of any number of prestigious, well-paying jobs. No wonder her friends told her she was crazy when she rejected this career to heed God's call to serve as a volunteer in some of Kampala's worst aggregates of human misery, its maximum security prisons.

Her face shone as she explained to us that God had "called her from darkness into his marvellous light" and that her only choice was to try to share this light with others. God had assured her that if she gave up financial security her needs would be met.

The writings of Howard Zehr influenced her desire to work with prisoners. They also sent her in search of other Mennonites who exhibited what she believed to be a kindred spirit in working with the poor. This is how she came into contact with Mennonite Central Committee, which has been helping her establish "Shalom House," a place where those negatively impacted by crime, both victims and perpetrators, can find restoration and healing.

Grace also sits on the eight-member advisory board that helps MCC determine its priorities in Uganda. MCC values her volunteerism because it's an example for others in a country where so many are concerned only with "getting ahead."

It was when we visited one of Grace's places of ministry that we saw she has indeed been beaming God's radiant light into places of deep darkness. We were given permission to tour Luzira Maximum Security Prison because MCC helps fund programs there, but mostly because of the warm spot Grace occupies in the hearts of prison officials and inmates.

We had already seen most of this huge facility which holds about 2000 men. We were short on time and about to leave when Grace said we simply had to visit the "condemned" section or the men there would be terribly disappointed.

We felt a little nervous at the thought of mingling with those sentenced to die for crimes of murder or treason. We wondered how they would respond to the rare sight of seven white expatriates, five of them women!

We could not have anticipated the scene that greeted us when guards pulled back the heavy gates to admit us into a high-walled courtyard encircled by razor wire. We saw 150 men singing and dancing, lifting their arms to God in worship. Their faces resonated with joy and conviction as drums, guitars, and flutes accompanied their glorious proclamation of Christ's victory over sin and death.

After a few moments spent pondering this extraordinary sight came the stunned recognition that with their music these men were welcoming us into their midst as Christian sisters and brothers. By the time they seated us as honoured guests and a seven-member choir stepped forward to sing "I have freedom," many of us were in tears. The choir's leader, we were told, once ordered the execution of 200 people.

Several men spoke of how God's Spirit had visited them in prison through the prayers and Bible studies offered by Grace. She said very little, just smiled, but we could tell by their words and gestures how much she meant to them.

We all have heroes – people we admire for their poise, popularity, wealth, or accomplishments. Even Christians will often admit to a grudging admiration for those who, by worldly standards, have "made it", especially when their success comes from hard work and perseverance.

But too often we discover these objects of our adoration are not all we had hoped. We hear of an impure motive, a moral lapse, a shady deal and we join in the cynicism as one more hero hits the dust. The world seems tragically bereft of heroes who don't disappoint us in some way in the end.

Maybe that explains why I'm so attracted to the "alternate" heroes, those who shun the accepted norms of success to seek a radically different path. They don't have a high profile. They're often tucked away in some obscure or unpopular part of the world, too busy doing God's work to be making much fuss about it. But they rate very highly in God's kingdom because they bring hope and life into places of despair. People like Grace, one of the "Mother Teresas" this world will never know.



Eleanor Martens is a regular Sophia columnist. She's a nurse and mother of three children. She and her husband, Ray, are members at McIvor MB Church.



An Interlake Childhood

by Sarah Klassen

My mother was incapable of throwing anything away. Having lived too long with too little, her instinct was to keep every scrap of paper that had a clean space large enough for a list, every letter and card, every bit of string, cracked plates anyone else would long have discarded, worn shoes that might some day be worn in the muddy garden.

Years later when she acquired a fridge, it was always crowded: saucers heaped with spoonfuls of cold peas or corn, a bit of casserole that never got warmed up, a bowlful of macaroni that got shoved to a far corner where it became mouldy. This habit persisted long after such strict economy was necessary. When she prepared food for company, we couldn't find room for it in the fridge.

In an effort to tidy the house she slipped envelopes and coupons under tablecloths, church bulletins found a place under dresser scarves, recipes she'd cut from a magazine with good intentions of trying some day were wedged between a stack of plates and the cupboard wall. I was recruited at a young age to become her accomplice in such activity.

But while our house might have been untidy, it was not unclean, even though the duties of garden, henhouse, cowbarn and fields left her little time to be a housekeeper. Still very young I watched with fascination on Saturdays when, armed with a dust cloth, my mother approached the best piece of furniture in the house — her oak dresser.

Moving with purpose, deftly, she removed the embroidered dresser scarf and everything that had been stuffed underneath it and flicked the dust cloth over the smooth surface, urging it into every corner and every carved embellishment in the wood. I was enchanted by

her assault on dust and wanted to help but my mother said I was too small and wouldn't swerve from that opinion for what seemed a long while.

But one Saturday — I was about six — she gave me the dust cloth and instructions and let me loose at chairs and cupboards and windowsills and, of course, the oak dresser, to my heart's content. I scrambled onto, under, and around furniture as agile and happy as a squirrel.

The happiness lasted a few glorious Saturdays, and then the sameness and regularity of the task struck me with sudden clarity. I informed my mother that I intended to step down: the job was boring. Imagine my

dismay at learning that the job was mine, permanently. With a heavy spirit I faced my future, a dreary existence hemmed in with joyless Saturday duties. I sensed, vaguely, that freedom was slipping away from me and I was helpless to prevent it.

Being, in many respects, a slow learner, I failed to benefit from that experience. At least I failed to remember my mother's skill at delegating. My brother had been delegated to assemble the milk separator that stood in our kitchen and was operated twice daily by our father. As soon as the morning milking and separating ritual were

completed, the machine had to be disassembled and its many parts washed in soapy water, rinsed in hot. My mother did that.

The careful business of reassembling the whole contraption was my brother's responsibility, one he carried out regularly with no sign of unwillingness or unhappy resignation. Most of the time he managed the job capably though I remember one or two occasions when he must have erred and placed the spout for cream where

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the spout for milk belonged. At the evening's separating, its friendly monotonous hum turned to a nasty whine and milk spouted angrily from every crack and crevice in the metal monster, leaving my father drenched. He stopped abruptly, flicking the wetness angrily from his shirt sleeves. My brother endured the deserved scolding stoically and my mother, just as stoically, mopped up the mess. Cream and milk were wasted and so was time.

I was mesmerized by the way the various machine parts fit neatly one into the other, like a puzzle. I felt sure I could put it together as well as anyone, having watched the process often enough, and I yearned to prove my competence. One day my brother was busy with some outside chore and I was allowed to assemble the milk separator.

I was right: the parts were easily put together and when my father came in to separate the fresh warm milk there was no disaster. The next day I was at the job quickly before my brother could assert his prior claim to it. Of course he never did and I found myself stuck once again with a task from which all pleasure had drained, like spilled milk, and been replaced with tedium and that uneasy fear that accompanies loss of freedom.

There were other tasks whose drudgery spread a cloud of gloom over the brightest summer day. Hoeing long rows of potatoes or beets I thought of Elsie Dinsmore. (I don't know how the Elsie Dinsmore books found their way into the Interlake, but they were among the few available to me.) I felt certain she wouldn't have managed to maintain that consistent and patient piety if she'd had to hoe beets all afternoon in the hot July sun during school vacation.

Summer was further clouded by saskatoon-picking. My mother, inspired by visions of jam-filled jars parading

on pantry shelves, would lead the way into the poplar bush that surrounded our farmstead. She'd raise the barbed wire strand so I could crawl through, tie pails around both our waists with old belts she kept for this purpose, and inform me that we would return when the pails were filled. My heart sank as we entered the thick undergrowth infested with brambles and poison ivy and mosquitoes and the thick summer heat.

The district we lived in was populated mainly by English families and I felt, uneasily, that my Mennonite parents were aliens in this bush country. The differences between us and them were many and I quickly became aware of them all: language for one, and religion, the food we ate, the way my mother wore her hair, the beard my father cultivated out of some conviction that this was biblical.

The English families were second or third generation, successful farmers; my parents were newcomers to this country and my father, not cut out to be a farmer in the first place, struggled to carve out of the bleak bush a farm and a living for his family. Both our parents spoke English poorly and were not inclined to be as diligent as I might have wished about fitting into the Anglo-Saxon community. At school I set out to be friends with the English girls, rather than the few Mennonites or Ukrainians. They had more status, I believed, and associating with them I would gain some for myself.

My father lived for long stretches inside himself, struggling with a sensitive conscience that took its cue from a literal understanding of the Bible. He held tenaciously to his convictions and required his family to do the same. My communication with him rarely took the shape of conversation. Mostly he issued instruction or com-



mands: "An idle brain is the devil's workshop," he'd tell his children, or "Anyone who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin," or "Honour your father and mother." There was nothing to be said in response.

The seriousness of my father's promise to be a farmer in this country never left him; it was the reason for our living in this bush. We learned that his rigid convictions and beliefs were never mere theory — they would be acted on and the action would involve us all. This created in me an uneasy fear, since actions arising out of deeply-held convictions are often neither comfortable nor popular. My inner, mostly unspoken, unwillingness to fall in gladly with my father's non-negotiable decisions, left me with guilt that lurked always below the surface and cast a shadow over my childhood.

My mother told stories. I remember how, in order to demonstrate the way Jesus brought to life Jairus's daughter, she grabbed my wrist with a hand to which clung the wet feathers of a chicken she was plucking. I watched, enthralled, as she eviscerated and dismembered the chicken, all the while telling me the fearful story of Abraham climbing the mountain with his son whom he meant to sacrifice. Although there was no Mennonite church where we lived, all the Bible stories were told or read to us so that when we moved to North Kildonan where all the Mennonite children had had Sunday school lessons every week we did not find ourselves biblically disadvantaged.

But she also told me, or tried to, the stories of her youth in a country that to me was the truly foreign one. I sensed, very early, that the origin of my parents was at the root of what set me apart from the children of the English and I refused to listen. "That's Russia, " I'd say. "It's got nothing to do with me."

But my mother was blessed with an implacability when it came to things she really wanted, and she really wanted me to know her story. She described the village Barvenkovo — "It was almost big enough to be a town," — in detail: the two huge flour mills, the school that was also a church, the muddy streets, the farm machinery factory of which both my grandfathers were part owners

the huge cast iron wheel on which the children played, the ornate fence surrounding everything.

Through her persistence these images were superimposed on the blue skies, the stone-strewn grain fields, the endless trail-laced bush, the gravel highway cutting through Manitoba's interlake where I grew up; they are embedded in my memory.

I didn't know, then, that a rather austere landscape can nurture the imagination and the ability to manage solitude; that my mother's stories could become raw material for poems and reinvented narratives; that my father's sternness came from battling who knows what personal demons, and his rules were intended to protect and guard, and therefore represented a kind of love; that

freedom is not to be equated with the absence of duty and routine; that God's grace in both hard and pleasant encounters that shape and enrich us is sometimes easier to detect in retrospect.

Any summer excursion to the Lake Winnipeg Beaches takes me past the farm where I spent my childhood. The pine trees that my brother planted along the road have grown and hide the buildings, most of which are not originals by now. The highway is paved, not gravelled; the landscape is altered and the farms inhabited by families unfamiliar to me.

Driving in summer past the bleak bush — it seems endless now — I peer into the undergrowth and wonder if chemical spraying or late frost have damaged the wild plum and saskatoon blossoms. If I had remembered to bring a plastic pail I might lift a barb wire strand and slip once more into that tangled bush, in search of ripe berries and traces of my childhood.

Sarah Klassen taught English at the Lithuanian Christian College, Klaipeda, Lithuania the past two winters. She has written three books of poetry and is a member of River East MB Church, Winnipeg.

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Women Carry Much of Church Life in China by Harold Jantz

A year and a half ago Beijing occupied a great deal of the world's attention because of the conference on women taking place there.

Some of those who have come to know China well have a saying that goes, "Everything you hear about China is true." Some people focus on China's violations of international human rights standards and they are most likely right.

I was part of a 14-person delegation of Canadian church people who visited China last November, and we came away with a much more positive impression. I would venture to say our impressions are also right.

What we couldn't miss seeing was the important role women play in the life of the church, especially among Protestant believers, who are much like evangelicals here.

Christianity in China has made huge gains since the Communists took power in 1949. Actually the gains have come mostly during and after the Cultural Revolution which began in the mid-60s. At that time all churches were closed. Many pastors, priests, and lay workers were sent into the countryside to hard labour or even into prison. Many died.

But the church grew. Indeed it multiplied, as Christians scattered into countless home meeting places.

Today the Protestant church in China has grown from under a million believers before 1949 to – by conservative estimates – 10 to 12 million. Others believe the numbers are closer to 30 to 40 million. Catholics are believed to have grown from three million to six to eight million and possibly close to 10 to 12 million.

The generally accepted estimate is that women comprise 65 to 70 percent of Christians in China. They serve as volunteer leaders of many of the groups that continue to meet in homes. A significant percentage of the full-time pastors serving churches are women.

In Shanghai we were told that the 13 Protestant seminaries in the country had over 460 female students in 1995, and in some programs male and female students are equally represented.

The pastor of the Mu-en Church of Shanghai, Qigui Shi, recalled that when his church was reopened in 1979, he came back at 2 a.m. to begin preparations for the first service.

At 3 a.m. he heard voices outside the church. It was the women, getting ready to be part of the renewed open life of the church.

Our host in Shanghai was Chen Mei Lin, a woman of great dignity and presence. She described how the Cultural Revolution had interrupted her schooling. She was sent into the countryside to work as a farm labourer. Her parents helped her by sending books so she could cultivate her mind. Now she is deputy director in the China Christian Council.

Peng Ya Qian is a member of the faculty of Nanjing Union Theological Seminary, the leading Protestant seminary in the country. She expressed her interest in feminist theology, but

described the difficulties she encountered when she began teaching on the subject. She actually gave it up for a couple of years. She said she finds it difficult to accept what is being done in the west, but most of her resources nonetheless come from there or from Hong Kong. In her preaching, she said, her approach is to refer to "women in the Bible and how Christ valued women."

Female pastor Gao Ping was part of the group who welcomed us to Beijing. She said that most of the Beijing area's 200 meeting points (in addition to the churches) are led by women. She counsels a lot of women. They come "especially with intellectual problems." Eight women pastors (out of a total of 20) form a part of the Beijing Christian Council.

When we scanned the students in the lay-oriented Shaanxi Bible Institute in the rural city of Sanyuan near Xian, it was clear most were young women. Their studies cost them much. They

also came with great commitment. We were moved by the young woman who said she was one of two people from her church to attend the school. She had come, she said, because she was motivated by the grace of God and impressed by the words of Christ, "The harvest is plentiful but the labourers are few."



Valentina Han: a serene spirit despite a difficult life.

My last memorable impression in China grew out of a search I did in Harbin, the city in northern China that provided a temporary home to Mennonite refugees in the late 20s and early 30s. I wanted to find someone who could give me the Chinese name for the street with the apartment block where hundreds of refugees had stayed. I had only the Russian name.

My search brought me to a teacher of Russian, an elderly woman of Korean descent. It turned out she speaks English too and is the only one of her family living in China. A devout believer, she belongs to a tiny Orthodox church in Harbin. I learned she had spent a dozen years in prison during the worst years of the Sino-Soviet tensions, accused of being a spy for the Soviets and the Americans. Yet she radiated peace.

My search had grown out of stories heard as a child about cousins of my father, a brother and sister, John and Elizabeth Isaak, who had practised medicine in Harbin. To my astonishment, Valentina Han had been their patient. She was a living link with that history. I spoke a prayer of thanks and petition for her before we parted.

On that note I left China. I had seen a church still small and oppressed, but growing at an amazing pace and full of hope in an enormous country. It was an inspiring story in which women, used by Christ, played a key role.

Harold Jantz was for many years editor of the Mennonite Brethren Herald and more recently of ChristianWeek.

He's now a "writer in residence" – at home. He and his wife Neoma are members of River East Mennonite Brethren Church.



Women lining up for the second service of four in the Christian Dong Guang church in Shenyang.

Profiles of Anabaptist Women

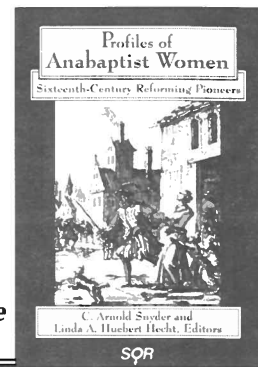
Sixteenth-Century Reforming Pioneers

C. Arnold Snyder and Linda A. Huebert Hecht, Editors
Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1996, 438 pp.

Reviewed by Agnes Dyck

*"History is the essence of
innumerable biographies."*

— Thomas Carlyle



As a history student I remember struggling to recall the causes, effects, and dates of ancient events. This discipline lacked appeal for me until I discovered biographies. History assumed an entirely different look. The characters became more than pasteboard people: I could *remember* what happened to them.

Profiles of Anabaptist Women resulted from the editors' interest in unearthing buried stories of Anabaptist women for our time. Initially, a modest collection of sketches was envisioned, but it soon became apparent that interest in the topic had engendered a substantial body of research about the lives of 16th century women and their role in spreading the Anabaptist faith.

Nineteen European, Canadian, and American scholars contributed to this volume of individual and small group stories. They are organized into three sections: Swiss Anabaptist women, South German/Austrian Anabaptist women, North German/Dutch women.

Most of the articles are supported by considerable documentation which could prove helpful for further research. The index is well-organized. Including names of the writer(s) with each article would have been helpful instead of the list given at the end of the volume.

Sources of information for these biographies include court records, letters, hymns, and martyr testimonials. A third or more of Anabaptist martyrs were women. They represented a wide variety: in financial means (some were poor, some aristocrats), in social class (a benedictine nun!), in occupation, in marital status (single, married, widowed), in literacy (some were unable to read, others were educated).

The fate of Anabaptist women reads like a list expanded from Hebrews 11. They were stalked and hunted down, sometimes buried in unsanctified ground, forced into secrecy, dispossessed, tortured, imprisoned, raped, banished, drowned, beheaded and/or burned at the stake.

Linda Huebert Hecht explains this phenomenal persecution in part: "...in sixteenth century society the religious, social and political lives of people were intricately connected; religious resistance was viewed as political and civil disobedience."

There are accounts of miraculous escapes: Hadewijk of Friesland was led out of prison by a voice and miraculously rescued so that she was able to tell her story. Some women recanted after threats and intimidation; others survived persecution unscathed. One can only speculate about the many women whose stories were not documented in court records, letters, and songs.

This book provides a panorama that is difficult to summarize in a short review. Of special interest to me were glimpses into Hutterite beginnings. Jacob Hutter, prominent Anabaptist leader in the Tirol, married Katharina Purst of Sterzing. Throughout their brief marriage they fled the authorities in what we know as beautiful Alpine country.

Herdsmen's huts still dot Swiss pastures and the chronicles tell how Anabaptists hid in huts on the mountains and were secretly supported by their fellow believers.

Jacob Hutter was executed shortly after his marriage to Katharina; the manner of his execution does not bear thinking about. Katharina Hutter recanted in the process prescribed by authorities, but when she was again arrested after her husband's death she openly criticized the state Church and was clearly on the side of the Anabaptists.

She escaped from prison and for almost two years lived in fear of being discovered. In 1938 she was arrested again and as one who had rejoined the Anabaptist movement or "slid back" she was executed immediately.

Elfriede Lichdi concludes, "For us there remains the memory of two people who in all their suffering displayed a remarkable strength of faith."

But there is a happier side to Hutterian Anabaptist history. Authorities considered the tendency of imprisoned Anabaptists to sing hymns for mutual encouragement a serious threat so they were sometimes kept in solitary confinement for this reason.

Many of these hymns are lengthy chronicles about individuals who persevered despite persecution; they are still being sung by Hutterites today. A 13-verse hymn written by "Annelein of Freiberg, Who was Drowned and then burned, 1529" reads in part:

*If you withhold your food from us
Everything is lost and useless.
Without you we bring forth nothing.
Through grace we trust in you,
It will not fail us.*

Annelein was incarcerated at age 17 and spent five years in prison before she was released and banned from the Tirol. Contrary to other religious groups, Hutterites were unique, according to Marlene Epp, in their loving acceptance of survivors of rape.

How should we view these courageous martyrs? They were not perfect people but their single-minded determination to serve the truth as they knew it deserves to be reflected upon and emulated. The editors have done us a great service by unearthing and compiling these stories; perhaps they'll lead to further indepth research into this aspect of our Mennonite story and its far-reaching consequences.

Agnes Dyck is on Sophia's editorial committee. A retired teacher, she volunteers her teaching skills at Rockwood Institution once a week and at MCC's Victim Support program. She's an avid reader and member of Mclvor MB Church.

Of Diaries, Journals, and other Chronicles

By Dora Dueck

It was June 12, 1942. A 13-year-old Jewish girl received a red-and-white plaid notebook for her birthday. Eagerly, she began a diary, starting with the moment she had spotted the book lying among her presents.

Less than a month later, the girl and her family went into hiding. She continued her diary, the entries now addressed to an imaginary friend "Kitty" with whom she shared everything. She recorded "how we lived, what we ate and what we talked about as Jews in hiding."

The Gestapo raided the secret annex on August 4, 1944, and the girl died in a concentration camp. Later, the diary was discovered. The girl's life was given back to the world in what has been called "the single most compelling personal account of the Holocaust," *The Diary of Anne Frank*.

A young Mennonite woman, Anna Baerg, daughter of the manager of Apanlee, a large estate in the Molotschna Mennonite colony, began keeping a journal in 1916. "Who would have thought when I began to keep a journal," she wrote two years later in the midst of the upheavals following the Russian Revolution, "that it would have such weighty matters to report." When paper was scarce, she used labels from evaporated milk cans and relief packages.

Anna was limited physically by a hunched back, but her spirit was sensitive and observant. She also wrote poetry. Her journals, some of which were later published, offered significant insights into the changing Mennonite world of Russia, into immigrant realities, into the heart of a gifted Christian woman.

One woman I know ends each evening by writing the day's events in a notebook. She's been doing this regularly since 1969. It's a reminder of all the good things that happen, she says, as well as life's storms. It helps her remember details, at least significant ones. "The first crocuses may be mentioned," she laughs, "though not the 20th rose." She enjoys reading back over earlier years.

Some women draw from their lives to speak to others. One such person, well known among Mennonite Brethren, is Katie Funk Wiebe. Through articles and books she has placed her personal experiences of widowhood, teaching and aging, and her theological yearnings and discoveries, at the service of others. "To read Katie is to hear her voice," Luetta Reimer says in a tribute, "Yet thousands of readers have discovered that she speaks simultaneously for them, crafting words for their own hearts."

These are just a few examples of women who dare to put their lives to text.

Dare? Is it so frightening, then?

It can be. To set down one's life, whether for very personal reflection, or as a memoir for another, demands vulnerability and honesty. To embark on the adventure may feel, at times, selfish, or arrogant, for one talks mainly of oneself. One names, and what is named is declared *mine*.

There may be women who long to record their lives, but repress the urge because they are too well-schooled in humility. After all, as Mary Cisar notes, "Autobiography glorifies the first person singular, perhaps exposing a dark lining of ambition or conflict."

Further hindrances that Cisar identifies are: confused ideas about what is significant, a lack of "the greater literacy...and leisure" that autobiography implies, or the failure to perceive that one's life makes sense.

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Another barrier to writing personally is the reality that women's lives, centered in family as they often are, can scarcely be wholly told without involving other people. Diaries, journals, memoirs, any kind of life-writing in fact, reveals (if it's authentic) that families, or this particular one, at least, isn't what it "ought to be." It is easier then, safer, to keep family truths and troubles away from the evidence of words.

Still, women inclined to it, by calling or compulsion, will keep writing. It may be a gardening diary, travel notes, a daily notebook, regular letters to a good friend, or a sporadic journal. They find that writing authenticates their lives. They use their scribbles variously as a lifeline, a confidante, a source book, a companion.

Their notes are often a kind of prayer, an offering to God of what they saw and felt through the day. They may use them for spiritual exercises or to flex their way through problems. They may glean treasures they find in Scripture or other books. They jot down the cute things their children have said, or surprises and disappointments. They preserve family heritage.

They record, fitfully at times, their small and individual version of the biblical wilderness wanderings. They keep discovering what they don't yet know, and uncovering what they do. To the dailyness of their lives they add the beauty of reminder.

Dora Dueck is a member of the Sophia editorial committee. She and her husband, Helmut, have three children and are members at Jubilee Mennonite Church.

The LORD
is my chosen portion
and my cup;
You hold my lot.

The boundary lines have fallen
for me in pleasant places;
I have a goodly heritage.

(Psalm 16:5,6 NRSV)