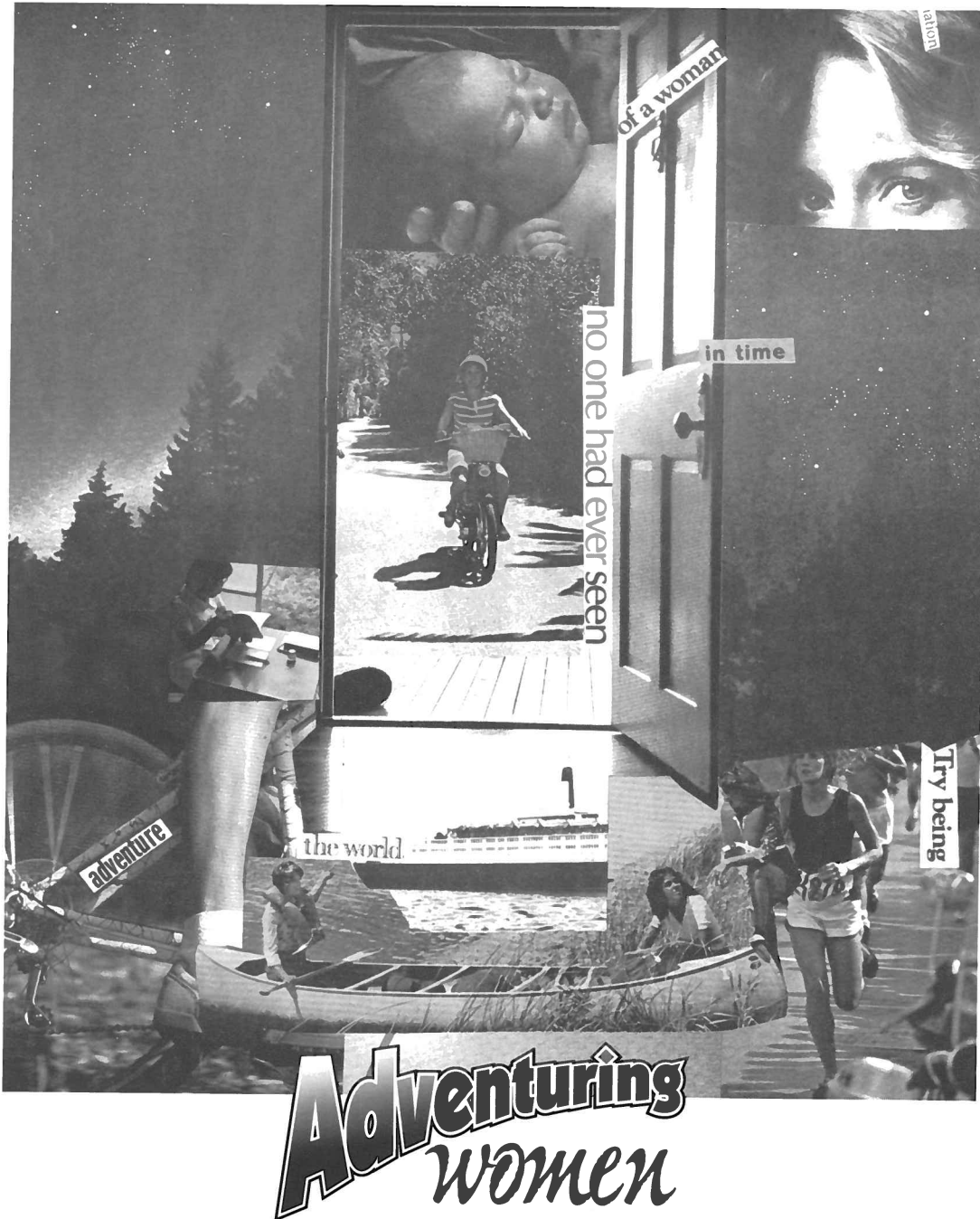


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S O P H I A

W I S D O M

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



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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.

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Don't miss out next issue! Themes for 1999 include: March - Worship; June - Marriage and Other Endeavors; October - Special issue from Ontario; December - Volunteerism

Cover: Lis Vensel

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SOPHIA Mission Statement

Sophia offers a forum for Christian women to speak to one another about the joys and challenges of living faithfully in an uncertain, changing world. Its pages give voice to women's stories - their experiences in church and society, family and workplace, their aspirations and disappointments, their successes and failures. It invites expressions of joy and sorrow, concern and outrage. In doing so it hopes to affirm women in their quest for spiritual, emotional and physical wholeness and for the full expression of their gifts in all spheres of life.

Sophia was conceived and brought to birth by Mennonite Brethren women and celebrates Christian sisterhood. Its desire is to welcome differing voices. It hopes to challenge women and men of all ages as they live together in Christian community. The name SOPHIA (wisdom) expresses our desire to search and know the wisdom of God through the Scriptures and our experience as followers of Jesus Christ.

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).



EDITORIAL

Ultimate Adventure

by Lori Matties

I have sometimes envied people who seem to know exactly what they are supposed to do with their lives. They work away at a task that seems just suited for them, and though they occasionally struggle with its difficulty, they never really doubt that they are doing what they are supposed to be doing. I suppose we could say they have been "called" to that task.

For many of us, calling is an ambiguous and sometimes uncomfortable idea. I have done various tasks with varying amounts of exhilaration and frustration, most often motivated not by a "call" as much as by the necessities of life and a sense of duty.

As I grow older, though, I am comforted by the thought that perhaps calling happens in a variety of ways and not always in the kinds of work we expect. I think of the people described in Matthew 25, who went about feeding the hungry and visiting the sick and imprisoned, and then were surprised when Jesus congratulated them for doing those very things to him.

In that sense, calling is subversive. It doesn't fit the expectations of our culture, which teaches that we should set our sights on activities that may make us wealthy or powerful or famous. No, I think hearing the call of God demands an ability to imagine an alternative world - one where God is making things whole, where broken things are being mended and where new possibilities arise out of old ways of being.

A story at the beginning of Luke's Gospel illustrates this beautifully (see Luke 1). It's about two women who dare to imagine that God can do something new not only in their own lives but in the life of their nation and for all future generations.

These two women risk everything to participate in what they believe to be the inauguration of a new era.

Though Elizabeth and Mary are of priestly and royal lineage, they are peasants. Elizabeth, because of her childlessness, has long been subject to the ridicule of her neighbours, who consider barrenness a sign of a woman's sin. Mary is barely more than a girl. Her future is entirely tied up in her betrothal to Joseph and the hope that she will bear him male children. Both are members of the underclass because of their gender and their poverty.

And yet they understand that a world made whole is one where gender and status do not dictate privilege. In fact, just the opposite, Mary sings. God scatters the proud, brings down the powerful and sends the rich away empty while lifting up those of low estate and filling the hungry with good things. Such is the mercy of God.

I am sure the poignant meeting between these two kinswomen brought comfort and courage to each of them. Don't our hearts burn within us when we share with one another a common vision of the Spirit? Don't we gain new trust and boldness when we know that others see as we see? Elizabeth's words on greeting Mary become the first prophetic utterance to proclaim Jesus as Lord and Saviour. They empower Mary to articulate her own blessedness as the one chosen to bear God's only son. Mary's hymn has become for all generations of God's people a foundation of faith, hope and, yes, instruction, in God's reign of reversals.

The gift Elizabeth and Mary give us is the ability and willingness to imagine what is possible for God. They extend to us the hope of ordinary

people opening their lives to God and finding themselves participating in God's extraordinary saving grace. They give us the community of the faithful, among whom we find the trust and courage to speak good news to a world broken and lacking the imagination to dream beyond what its hands can grasp.

My hope is that we, too, as we wait once more for the coming of the babe of Bethlehem can find ways to imagine the extraordinary possibilities of God.

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- Support our community.
- Strive for excellence in all we do.

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From Rumaruti to Nanyuki

by Ingrid von Kampen

Dear Ruth,

Many warm greetings! I hope all continues to be well with you. It hasn't been very long since we last spoke, but for me so much has transpired and there is so much I am wanting to tell you. I imagine you sitting in your comfortable wicker chair, sipping tea under the giant Jacaranda tree, having saved your letters for this quiet time of the day.

We left Rumuruti some days ago and are now well into our journey. All the fear and hesitation I experienced before leaving have faded away and I am absorbed in the tranquility around me. We are twelve travelling together, seven people and five camels. BJ and David have returned to Kenya to live with and learn from nomadic tribes here. Both have grown up in Africa and then studied in America, he engineering and she veterinary medicine. Recently they decided to take their camels to an agricultural fair in Nanyuki to show farmers how useful they could be on the land. BJ and David then graciously invited Robert, the MCC accountant from Switzerland, Mark, a vet from New Zealand, and me along on the trek. Khallif and Adan are the camel drivers. Khallif, who is younger than Adan, is silent and serious. Adan is a small, wizened man who has the presence and compassion of a saint. Under his colourfully embroidered hat, his eyes dance with excitement and affection. He is an intuitively masterful guardian of even the smallest details of our lives and journey, and his presence allows us all to feel safe and secure.

The camels are so bizarre and so beautiful, with personalities equally incongruent according to the mood of the moment. They seem so exotic, bearing all the mysteries of ancient civilizations. My mind easily imagines them arrayed with rich velvets and heavy tapestries, adorned with precious gems and laden with frankincense, aromatic spices, incense and myrrh.

The nights are wonderful, and we wake up feeling cradled in the palm of God's hand. The sun's rays begin to warm the canvas as we huddle together in our tiny tent. The sound of the fire crackling and the thought of hot milky tea are enough encouragement to get us out of our comfy sleeping bags. After readying ourselves, we begin what could be a rather tedious ritual of packing the camels. They can sometimes become quite temperamental and unreasonable, but Adan lovingly coaxes them in Swahili,



and eventually they comply.

The mornings are crisp and cool, and our walk begins in silence. The horizon seems so generous and infinite. We watch the sun rising over the great plains, silhouetting the snow-capped mountain in the far distance. We hear only the sounds of our footsteps, occasionally a bird singing, the camels snorting, their big soft feet gentle on the hard crusty earth. I walk with David who has Farah tethered to him. Farah, whose most prominent characteristics

are his arrogant attitude and a floppy lip he sustained in a camel fight a few months ago, is my favourite. He is huge, handsome, playful, unpredictable, rebellious and very endearing. He is used to following a woman and so has his head lowered over mine, and because of his droopy lower lip is drooling on my head.

For a time the land was rugged and barren, uneven and hard, able to sustain only shrubs and a few acacia

trees. After some days of walking, a little more vegetation appeared. Adan insisted on walking ahead of the rest of us, and when we caught up with him he showed us the huge puff adder he had killed. Soon after, we crossed a wide river with a rocky bottom, giving the camels a little more than usual to contend with. When we stopped at noon, the camels munched enthusiastically. I lay down in the tall grass, feeling the hot dry wind and listening to Adan and Khallif telling the story of how, on the night before while they had been up late chatting and drinking tea they

*We hear only the sounds of
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feet gentle on the hard,
crusty earth.*

noticed the camels becoming a bit restless. The night was hauntingly still and the light of the moon bright when they saw a large male lion walking through our camp. Some of my insecurity surfaced, and I heard God's voice say, "I have called you by name, you are my own." The smell of the hot dusty camels soothed me as I watched the clouds.

Afternoons on the equator are hot, and our movements become surreal and heavy as in a slow motion picture film. We walk on and on and see no one. The slow rhythmic steps of the camels through this vast landscape compel me to feel an extraordinary sense of timelessness. I reflect on the sacredness of a life. I think of an old MCC poster that talks about being careful how one treads as the lives of people are holy ground. I am completely at peace, invited to live the mystery.

As evening approaches the camel's shadows begin to lengthen and the air becomes heavy with humidity. Mount Kenya, shrouded in cloud from late morning to early evening, begins to appear, and we can again feast our eyes on its grandeur.

Adan chooses a camp site and the camels, who are subdued from a day of wandering are happy to be unburdened. Khallif hobbles them so that they won't stray while browsing on trees and ground cover. We set up the tent and gather wood to start the fire for the evening meal, a stew of cabbage, carrots, potatoes and onions. It is Lent, and I have chosen to fast. In this land it seems so appropriate; it is a point of connection between me, a follower of Jesus, and my Muslim neighbours.

The evening is serene, and the intense warmth has given way to a relieving coolness. Slowly the land is flooded in moonlight, and we gather round the crackling fire. After dinner, Adan fills our huge enamel mugs with warm milky tea spiced with cardamom, ginger, cinnamon and cloves. The taste of the camel's milk, the smell of wood smoke and wonderfully stimulating conversations gleaned from days spent in quiet contemplation fill the evenings. I have an overwhelming sense of contentment, as if a balm of soothing oil has been poured over me.

Dear Ruth,

Greetings! I have as yet not been able to post my letter to you, so you will probably be receiving these two letters at the same time. I'm sorry about the delay. Over the past few days the countryside has become transformed by the rains and the most brilliant, vibrant shades of green are emerging. This has caused some areas to become very muddy and we've had to walk

through ankle-deep gumbo for some very long stretches. The poor camels became quite miserable and exhausted as they were being led through precariously slippery patches.

Yesterday our climb took us up eight thousand feet into the lush, wooded, rolling hills, and the view before us was breathtaking. We camped in a little hollow created by a protective forest, which opened into a grassy meadow. I sat for a while in the last hour of evening light, watching the sun weave its ribbons of gold through the branches of the giant trees. I wondered at the feeling of sacredness – the touch of the creator's hand. I felt a sense of communion

with others who had also encountered divine presence in this place.

This morning we left before dawn. The constellations above us were bright, and around us a gossamer mist hung low into the countryside, creating a canopy of quiet serenity over the earth. Slowly the sky was becoming that colour you feel when

the sun is not yet visible but its coming is evidenced in the luminescence of the blue and the brightness of the stars.

We trekked through rich farmland created by the watershed of majestic Mount Kenya. I thought about the many people who receive wisdom here as Moses did on his mountain, and I thought about the people who come here to rest when they know their time to die is near.

As we were walking toward the village further up into the mountain, we heard some wooden bells and murmuring voices behind us. We turned and were greeted by Somalis, nodding and smiling, also walking their camels to the fair. A few minutes later the children of the village came running out to meet us. Their excitement and laughter were a welcome re-entry to the noisy world of human coexistence.

Ruth, I am so grateful that I have been able to come on this safari. The walk has deepened my conscious awareness of God. I know that I have been profoundly changed and am inspired to live a more contemplative life. Having uninterrupted time and space to dwell in God's holy presence reminded me of the story of the lapidary who was given a very large raw diamond to refine. Daily, for two years, he studied its many possible interpretations until he knew how he could, with minimum cutting, find and wholly preserve the gem that lay inside.

Love,
Ingrid

.....
Ingrid von Kampen has spent many years in Africa working with MCC. She and her husband, Willie, are the parents of three children. They attend River East MB Church in Winnipeg.

For all of my growing-up years, I lived in the same town, in the same house, wore old jeans and T-shirts every day, took half a sandwich and an apple for lunch, went to the same summer camp, rode the same 10-speed for 20 years. And when I graduated from high school my mother had to “kick” me out of the house to get me going.

I still love to wear old jeans (now leggings) and T-shirts, my Birkenstocks are ten years old and I still eat sandwiches for lunch, but I now get impatient if the day hasn't revealed at least a new idea. A two-page resume is almost impossible for me, since I haven't stayed at any job longer than three years.

Life is an adventure and I don't want to miss out on anything. I was lucky, as a child, that my parents loved to travel. They enthusiastically packed up five girls and caravanned us around the country. Camping trips to Banff focused on hiking every trail in the area. The day wasn't complete without some view of a glacier, mountain lake or panoramic vista.

When I was sixteen, whitewater canoeing captured my soul and imagination. Canoeing had already become a favourite summer activity because of the beauty of the Canadian Shield and the challenges of portaging, navigating and general survival. But, ahhh, the sights and sounds of white water, the rocks and eddies, the sheer excitement of riding the crest and never being able to control the end result.

In that tumult and motion, I found God. God, whom I had felt only barely present with me on church pews, now celebrated my adventures and cheered when I pulled in that “draw,” narrowly missing being plastered permanently to a boulder. I experienced an energy that could only have been the divine. I rejoiced with Sophia Wisdom; I, too, was filled with delight at what God had created (Proverbs 8).

That sense of God's immanence in moments of challenge and creativity overflowed to other aspects of life. In my first year of seminary, I became involved with the Fellowship of Reconciliation. I joined the sanctuary movement (the church's protection of Central Americans seeking refuge in the U.S.) that was so strong in California in those years. Going to the vigils and hearing countless Guatemalans and Salvadorans tell stories of torture and

Finding Sisters: Companions for a New Journey

by Wendy Kroeker



escape opened up a whole new picture of the Gospels and the life of Jesus. I was converted from my middle-class complacency into someone struggling to find justice, to discover the meaning of Jesus' promises on the “The Mount.” Taking that path was not always popular. I encountered outright jeers, the risk of deportation from the U.S. and the loss of certain friendships.

Unfortunately I can't say that I've always maintained my vigilance or my hope that the world will eventually be a place where all can live without fear. Finding a supportive community has not always been easy, but it has been essential in my quest to follow the way of Jesus.

One of my sisters, in particular, has supported me despite often disagreeing with my theological perspectives. Almost ten years ago she gave me a wonderful gift. She invited me to join her and her husband in the birthing of her second child. (This was before I ever desired to have children.) For hours I walked with her and massaged her until in great pain she birthed her son. Why would someone go through all that for children? Her choice to birth a *second* child came to symbolize for me a hope for life that grounds us in what makes us most human. When we are in the midst of a community's joy and struggle, we are the most human and most strongly connected with the One who has created us.

Perhaps that is what I most needed to experience

when my husband and I were approached about going to the Philippines with Mennonite Central Committee. It meant quitting a job that I really enjoyed. But I thought I had had enough cross-cultural experiences and heard enough "returning worker" stories that my adjustment to the Philippines would go relatively well. I felt prepared for the intense heat and the cockroaches.

Within a few months, I did adjust to the heat and the many *large* cockroaches. What I wasn't prepared for, and what has turned out to be one of the biggest challenges I have faced, beyond motherhood, was a total rethinking of who I am. Because I have always chosen work that pushed my edges and have expressed my opinion even when it went against the majority, I thought my world was dynamic, ever-changing. But I discovered that I had become very comfortable in the path that I had chosen and had found my supports and friendships among like-minded people.

Now I was in a new place where I didn't have a job, where no one knew me, where I had to learn a new language in a culture where people are reluctant to speak directly. These were fixings for a crisis. What was I doing there? I had not really cultivated the rituals of reflection, journal writing, time alone, meditation and prayer. My faith, my sense of person, had been cultivated in a context of public risk, intensity, new experiences, constant motion. Now I was in a culture that cultivated relationships and trust slowly. Would I find my place?

Those first few months were the most difficult I have ever experienced. I was stripped to my core and only slowly found ways to reconstruct who I was. What resulted were some of the richest months I have ever experienced.

Finding a supportive group was essential for me, and one fell into my lap almost accidentally. I was introduced at a women's luncheon on the university campus. When it was said that I had a master's degree in theology, one of the women asked whether I would be open to leading a "feminist, women's Bible study." The result was that I spent every Wednesday lunch with ten to fifteen women going through biblical women's stories as well as feminist theological issues. What a time it was! We laughed, cried, shared potlucks and questioned everything. I learned so much from those women.

One memorable Easter, we were reading through the passion narratives that included women's stories. As we discussed the women around the cross of Jesus, one of them said, "Isn't it just like men to leave when there's a crisis? They've left because they think their lives would be in danger. What?! You think that the women didn't have anything to fear? Would women leave their children in a cri-

sis? Their relationship to Jesus was just like that of a mother's to her children."

These women strongly believed that even when women's lives are at stake, their first thoughts are for those they love. In North America, we might be quick to discuss this from the perspective of the "martyr syndrome." But these women were anything but martyrs. They showed a strength and resilience that profoundly impressed me.

A second group I encountered was a local justice group that spent a lot of time investigating community issues around environmentally destructive mining practices and increased military presence. As the group began to trust me, they invited me to join them on their fact-finding missions.

One memorable time involved a long drive and then a four-hour hike into the mountains to participate in a discussion concerning the military takeover of a community and their residence in the day-care centre.

The hike was in some of the most beautiful country I have seen, but the group was sombre and untalkative. As we entered the community we were met by 25 soldiers in full regalia. My heart felt as if it would pound out

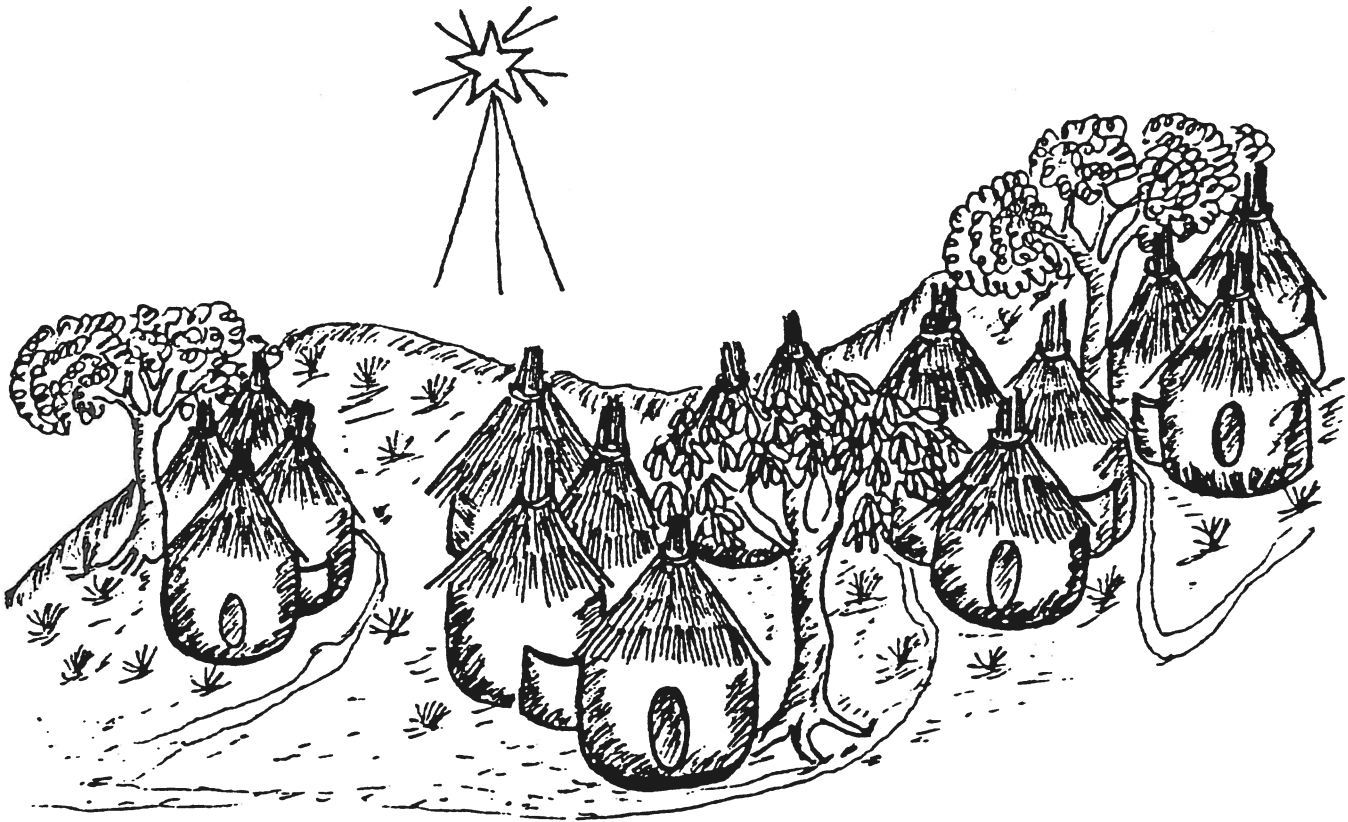
of my chest. We were ushered in, and the debate went on for a good many hours in a calm fashion. As the sun was beginning its descent, so we began ours. This time the group was lively, with lots of running and laughing. When we returned to the vehicle, the leader turned to us and said, "I didn't know whether we would get out of there."

Many times I didn't know the risks I took until it was all over. The group always made great efforts to ensure my safety. What does it mean to tie up your life with the issues most dear to people halfway across the world? I only know that I felt very alive and a part of something that really mattered.

Sharon Welch, in her book, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, talks of our existence as a dance with life. Our lives, our contexts, have limits, for human conflict will always exist. But "it is possible for there to be a dance with life, a creative response to its intrinsic limits and challenges" (pp 159-160). When we allow ourselves to be wrapped up in the "web of life," we find a richness there. My participation in the human struggle, never quite knowing what it will entail, is life-giving to me, and it is there that God speaks to me.

.....
Wendy Kroeker and her husband, Gord Zerbe, and their two young children recently returned from two years in the Philippines with Mennonite Central Committee. She is currently working on finding her "place" back in Winnipeg and enjoying living without a datebook. In January, she begins a new job with Mediation Services as a mediator/trainer.

Finding a Supportive community has not always been easy, but it has been essential in my quest to follow the way of Jesus



A Galactic Adventure

by Jean Reimer

The word "adventure" titillates. It makes us think of swashbuckling, romantic, daring, exotic and perhaps dangerous exploits and encounters. It evokes the colours, foods and habits of other countries, the novelty of new roads to walk and unexpected surprises around the next bend, the wine-in-the-blood satisfaction of odds and perils overcome, the triumph of a Quest completed and dragons slain.

My first high adventure was stepping off the plane to the sharp, spicy, warm, humid and earthy smell and feel of the air of West Africa. I'd entered another world, nothing known or predictable lay before me, and the thrill of novelty and fear ran like fire through my veins.

A different continent, a different people: glossy brown skin - I

stood out like a leprous ghost - exotic foods, different cultural customs and values, a tongue-twister of a language, different thought patterns and views of the physical and spiritual world, different concepts and legends of God's character and activities. How to adapt? How to learn all this? How to do and be anything meaningful here?

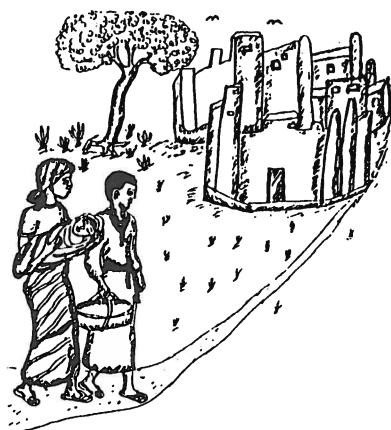
I learned quickly that I'd never become a Gangam. I would always be a white woman, a stranger living in Northern Togo, in Gangam-land. To be truly Gangam, to know them from the inside-out and truly share their life, I would have had to be born Gangam. But on the other hand, we were so much the same; we were all human beings built of bone, blood and muscle, sharing the same joys, terrors, pains and pleasures of birth, life and death in this world called Earth.

Living among the Gangams was a peanut gallery venture, though, compared with the most extraordinary, greatest cross-cultural adventure ever undertaken - that of Jesus' arriving and living on earth. He came from a sphere beyond the planets, he'd never had a human body before, he'd never lived under any of the physical laws of the earth, much less under any humanly organized social/cultural mores and rules. He was a spirit, God, crossing the galactic boundaries to become something totally other - a creature bound to a planet. God decided it was necessary to be born human in order to enable humans to become spiritual beings and at death to cross the galactic boundaries into God's home sphere.

We in the Western world are so accustomed to the Christmas story



that it holds little awe or power for us. A jolt from another culture's perspective can help to rekindle the incredible reality of Jesus' birth and life among us as God-human. See the nativity story through Gangam eyes; let these nine pictures, drawn by a Gangam artist, give you a fresh view of Jesus' coming to us. Be glad anew, and worship.

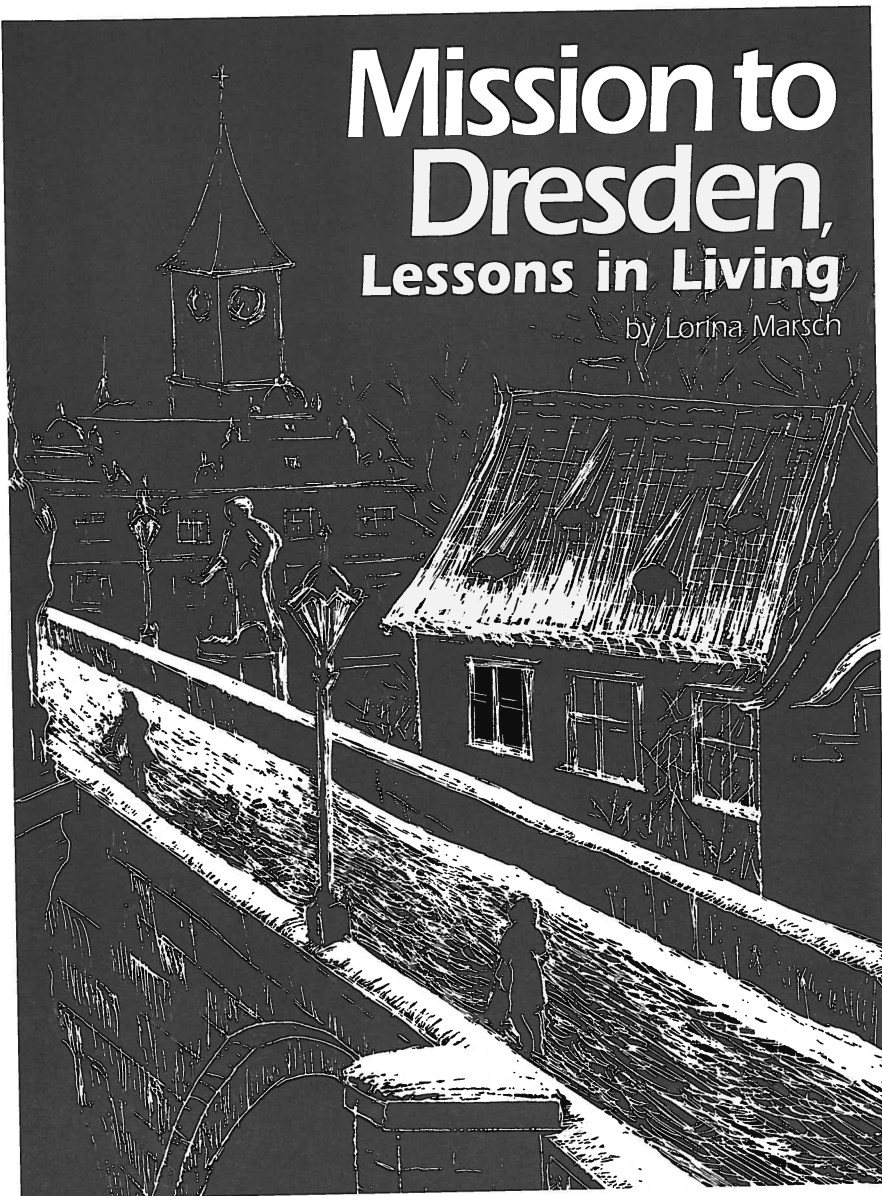


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 Jean Reimer, a graduate of Toronto Bible College (now Tyndale College), spent sixteen years in Africa among the Gangams, doing Bible translation and literacy work for Wycliffe Bible Translators. She attends the EMB Church in Steinbach.

These nine drawings illuminate the following Scripture texts: Luke 1:26-38, 2:1-20; Matthew 2:1-15, 19-23; Luke 2:40.

Mission to Dresden, Lessons in Living

by Lorina Marsch



The late November sun is just sinking toward the horizon behind me, showing an heroic attempt at colour, as I sit at our computer in Roland's office, thinking over the adventure of this past year. Yes, when our huge jet settled onto the rain-slick tarmac at the fog-hued airport here in Dresden (a city in former East Germany) last December, we were ready for a challenge. But what a challenge it became!

Taking over a parsonage, situated underneath the church sanctuary, the contents of which had been bought by the mission board from the former missionary couple for our use, has glaringly revealed the rifts in our gallant attempt to shake ourselves loose of materialism once and for all. I have found it unexpectedly hard to live on someone else's carpet and upholstery, to accept the existing colour scheme as a given even when it does not match our things. Perhaps I should have known that I would mind terribly going from a double sink with garbator to a sin-

gle shallow sink with a pail beneath it for peels and pods, these to be composted in the bins with their three-year cycle only metres away from our front door.

Even the rest of the garbage is often too much for me: plastics, metals, paper and glass, used clothing and textiles, paints, solvents and batteries, all to be sorted and stored separately and delivered to different places. Everything mentioned is recycled without charge, so we add only what is absolutely necessary to the table leftovers and any other wet garbage, which goes into the trash bins to be collected by the city garbage truck. They don't have far to go...the garbage dump is on our street toward the outskirts of the city. Depending on the direction of the wind, it revisits us odorously with a vengeance.

But Dresden is a beautiful and historic city, half of it wooded, some of it overgrown. We live within the stone walls of one of the forty graveyards within our city limits. When the gates are locked by security officials – at eight in summer and at six in winter – we are locked in with acres of graves, the nearest one not ten metres from our front door. Although workers are always busy among the giant trees and groping vines trying to cut back the choking undergrowth between the sad plots and often tilting stones, some of the cemetery still looks unkempt and neglected. For exercise, when the weather is too dreary to entice us to drive somewhere, we walk in the newer, better-kept parts, but even so, it tends to be depressing.

Dresden is not only historic, much of it is in ruins and in dire need of reconstruction. Even the inhabited dwellings, boringly built apartment blocks and reclaimed edifices, often beg repair and renovation. The buildings are of stone, the older ones dark to the core from smog produced by the coal industry during the communist era and therefore immune to sandblasting.

When you come around the corner near our place, the church complex looks positively inviting with its salmon-coloured exterior and large windows. And the little sanctuary around the back, seating 150, is a jewel to behold! What has been accomplished here through the vision of our fore-runners, the team-work of our people and the help of God is truly amazing. And the building is only the framework to the real miracle.

Our people – we now know about 150 by name – are

a mixture of faithful and not-so-faithful members, solid Christians who belong to other churches, youth tireless in their outreach for Christ, interested atheists, former communists, families witnessing to neighbours and acquaintances, fundamentalist and charismatic believers, lukewarm Christians, several as yet undecided young people and about twenty eager children, with two babies expected this month! With a membership of 35 and a Sunday morning attendance of eighty, we can expect all of the above categories to be represented within the congregation weekly. The excitement in the Bible study groups is contagious; it has rejuvenated our hearts!

So what does it matter if we find it harder than we expected to live simply? While we sorely miss our friends and our congregation in Canada, we are comforted by the wonderful people and a vibrant, though also fragile, church here in Dresden. A year has not yet passed since our transition, yet we feel at home and experience great satisfaction in our work. That is not saying we are measuring up to our own expectations.

Never before have we been so aware of our own incompetence in church work. Here we have to depend on God more than ever. We cannot do without prayer. Often, all we can do is observe the Spirit of God at work. But what an adventure it is to be in on it, to be allowed to put our own pittance alongside of the power of God, to realize there is a heavenly dynamo at work. That fact provides the framework within which we are free to do our best; that power challenges us far beyond our personal capacity for accomplishment.

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Lorina Marsch (former Sophia board member and Rundschau editor) and her husband, Roland, are serving as missionaries with Mennonite Brethren Missions and Services, nurturing a young church in Dresden, Germany.

This Adventurously Expectant Life

by Helga Doermer

The days are far too short and the nights too long. In dreams I wrestle with theologies and hammer out term papers, only to awaken to the work undone. My two sons think I've gone mad and my husband shrugs his shoulders. I've gone from full-time mom to full-time student. My fifteen-year-old asks over and over again, "Why are you doing this, Mom?" Some days I know exactly why I am back at school. Other days, with assignment due dates hanging over my head, I stare at him blankly, unable to remember what drew me to this journey.

Three

years ago, a restlessness I could not shake took hold of me. Inside, I longed for a food that satisfied a different kind of hunger. Food for mind and soul; that was what I needed. Leisure reading could not stop the craving. I needed more.

The fall of 1996 I began to bag three school lunches. For a while I couldn't believe what I had done. Overwhelmed by reading lists, assignments, a tightly packed schedule and a 6am alarm, panic set in. I could feel the breadth of the chasm separating me from my last experience of school, fifteen years before. The crisis hit three weeks into the first term. I sat in front of a frozen computer screen unwilling to allow reality to sink in. Hours of work disappeared into the mysterious region of no return. That moment is etched clearly on my mind. Suspended in time, it was a moment of decision.

Did I want to walk away or start again?

Two years later, I can look back and sigh with relief. That first obstacle was overcome. Of course, no direction we set in life is ever without its roadblocks and blind alleys. There is always something around the next bend to keep us attentive. Five weeks later, the demons that had lain dormant since my last graduation woke up and set off my anxiety alarm with the tale that I needed to get good

marks. Silencing them meant finding the place within myself that loved to learn. The second year became a year of soul searching and

carefully dusting away experiences that kept me from unearthing my lost uncommon self. And this year...

Once in a while, people ask, "What do you want to do with this?" My answer keeps shifting and changing. The truth is I have no firm vision in my mind. I carry with me only possibilities. For now it is enough. This is a part of the resurrection life I have received from God. This is the "adventurously expectant" life to which I have been invited (see Romans 8:15, *The Message* translation).

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Helga Doermer, Sophia editorial committee member, is studying in the Master of Divinity program at the University of Winnipeg. She and her family attend Eastview MB Church.

Escape in the Night:

How Ten Bangladeshi Babies Came to America

by Eleanor Martens and Goldine Pankratz

*I*t has all the ingredients of a best-selling novel: plot, drama, suspense, cathartic conclusion. If you nudge Goldie Pankratz just a bit, you might hear firsthand her spellbinding account of an adventure she will never forget.

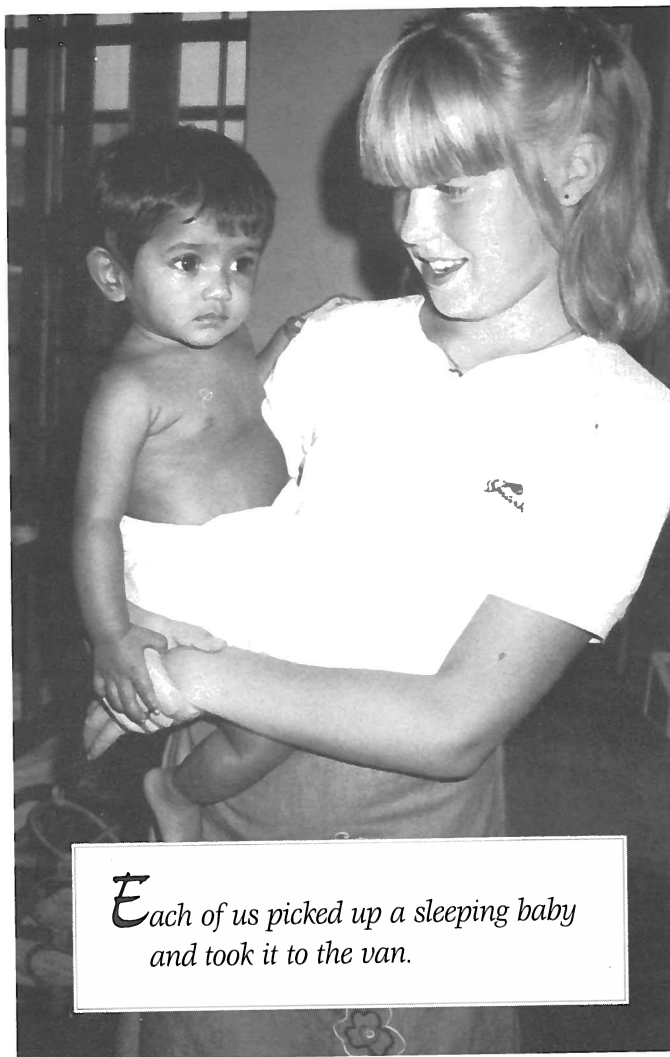
She still remembers the day in June 1983 when she got the call telling her to hurry. Within 24 hours she and three other women were to be ready for an intercontinental voyage. Their mission: to escort ten babies from an orphanage in Bangladesh to Grand Rapids, Michigan, here they were to be adopted by American families.

Goldie and her family were living in Bangladesh on a three-year assignment with Mennonite Central Committee. She and a friend had been making weekly volunteer visits to the orphanage to help care for the sickly, love-starved babies. They would hold and feed them. As a nurse, Goldie had taken a special interest in their health needs and was treating many of them for scabies using a treatment she had helped develop for Dhakka street children.

The adoption plan had been known to them for some time. Bethany Homes, an international Christian adoption agency, had worked very hard at matching Bangladeshi infants with suitable parents in America. But the negotiations had become hopelessly bogged down in bureaucracy and red tape. Cross-cultural adoptions were less popular than they used to be and so for political reasons had to be kept secret. Hopes had been raised and dashed so often that those involved had all but given up.

Now, miraculously, clearance had been given. They were to be ready to leave by 11pm the next day! But who would go? Earlier it had been decided that the four adult women would be the escorts. But school was just ending for the summer. Why not include four younger girls who could help care for the children and then spend the rest of the holidays with their families in North America? So it was decided that Carmen and Rachel, the Pankratz daughters, would also go.

But even that had to be kept under wraps. Goldie



Each of us picked up a sleeping baby and took it to the van.

recalls sending them off to school that last day without telling them that that very evening they would be leaving for North America. While they were away, she packed their things, feeling "ecstatic, nervous and excited all at the same time." She recalls feeling this chance for an "exodus" was a "direct gift from God."

Her first year in Bangladesh had been difficult. Unlike her husband, Jim, she had not received a specific work assignment. She struggled with feeling "useless." As a Western woman she also found it oppressive to live in an Islamic country where women's roles were so restricted. She needed a break and was hoping the summer at home would renew her body and spirit.

But the "R&R" would have to come later. The trip itself would be no picnic! Could they really transport that many children across the Atlantic? They ranged in age from 9 to 14 months. Only 3 of them could walk. What if they got sick? What if the whole thing got called off again at the last minute?

Some preparations had already been made. A Bangladeshi tailor had been commissioned to make "snugglies" so that the escorts could each carry two infants, one

on the back and one in front (that was before it was known the girls would be going). Disposable diapers, a very precious commodity in Bangladesh, had been absconded from any available source. Numerous "missionary barrel" outfits had been collected. The plan was to dispose of them as they became soiled along the way and to save one special outfit for the moment of meeting with the new parents.

Goldie recounts that last day at the orphanage: "It was a very emotionally charged day. The orphanage workers (*ayahs*) were told about the departure that morning. A few of them were mothers of the babies who were leaving and so there was lots of sadness and many tears. Tension and fear that we may not leave loomed over us."

Jim was busy too. Early in the day he drove the MCC van to the orphanage and left it there so it would be ready for take off. The rest of the day he spent at the travel agency and the U.S. embassy, finalizing tickets and passports, eventually, for the sake of convenience, charging all 18 flights to the Pankratz's personal Visa account!

Then came the final hours. Goldie recalls: "The ten babies were put to bed with their travel clothes on. At 10pm we arrived for them. The staff, especially the mothers of the children, were sobbing quietly, pulling the shawls of their saris over their mouths to keep the sobs quiet. It makes me tearful just visualizing it again. Can you imagine saying goodbye to your babies forever? I believe the hearts of the mothers were severed that day."

"Each of us then picked up a sleeping baby and took it to the van. The four oldest ones were awake and looked afraid. It was very spooky as we had to be absolutely quiet. We knew that pandemonium would break out should the babies start to cry. We physically pushed the van out of the gate and onto the street. When we finally dared to start the motor, four of the terrified kids began screaming. This created a chain reaction. Despite the stifling heat, we kept the windows closed all the way to the airport!"

Dhaka International Airport was pandemonium itself, packed with throngs of departing Bangladeshis with their hundreds of well-wishers. "We were greeted by a Bangladeshi authority, the manager of the orphanage and a U.S. Aide officer, who ushered us through a separate exit to the plane. It was at this moment that all the important papers were thrust into my hands and I was informed I

was 'in charge.' It was not the time to protest. I was already so charged up nothing new could faze me."

The staff was kind and seated the group all together in one corner of the 747. None of the babies were crying at this point. "It took what seemed like forever to leave. When we finally took off long past midnight, my neck was stiff from the tension of the previous day and my stomach was churning. I was sure we'd have to go back. It wasn't till we were in the air for at least 20 minutes that any of us gave the thumbs up sign. By now most of the babies were awake, crying and needing diaper changes."

"During this flight there was no time when all the kids were asleep at the same time. Our own children were very tired and curled up on empty seats and went to sleep.

We four adults barely dozed. The babies did not adjust to the change in water, so refused to eat or drink. It was a very long flight and when we finally got to London, it was still June 12! We emerged haggard and physically worn but the adrenalin charge was terrific!

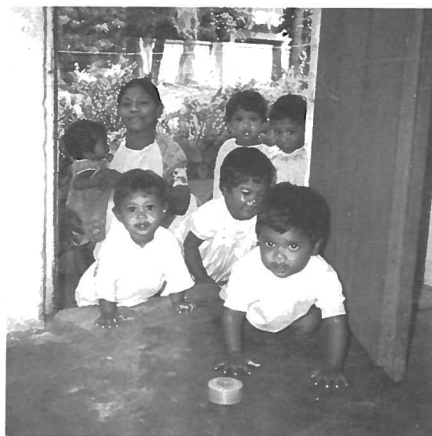
"Jim had booked us a day room for the twelve hours before our next leg of the journey. With each baby needing a change, bath and feeding, we had our work cut out for us!

"The hotel bathtub was filled and we formed an assembly line. Each baby was passed from the bather to the dryer to someone who diapered and then to someone who dressed the child. For kids used to being bathed by pouring water over their heads, being immersed in a tub caused a huge stir. They screamed!

"After we had loaded all their (and some of our) dirty smelly clothes into a huge garbage bag for disposal, we tried to feed them and ourselves with food the flight attendants had given us.

We enjoyed the delicious bread, cheeses and fruit we hadn't tasted for so long, but the babies wanted their usual mushy gruel, which we did not have. We tried pablum but they spit it out. We tried soaking bread in warm milk and a few nibbled. I was very worried that they would get dehydrated especially as some of them already had diarrhea."

Now it was time to head back to the airport. The girls would be leaving the group to fly directly home. From this point there would be four fewer escorts. "The babies were so confused and unhappy. Our arms ached from comforting and carrying. We were very sleep-deprived but feeling cleaner and psyched! We had left the Third World and were on the home stretch! It's all downhill from here isn't it?



"What a disappointment when, after excitedly transporting our ten cranky charges to the final gate, we were told the flight to Grand Rapids was cancelled."



"The British Air agent was not pleased to see us despite my attempt to explain our mission. She said it would be impossible for us to sit together despite my insistence that it would be most unpleasant for the other passengers to have to sit near us. While we waited at the gate for this situation to resolve, a stout, chain-smoking, middle-aged man who had been pacing nervously nearby while glancing at the children suddenly stopped and said to me: '____, I sure hope you are not sitting near me!' Now I knew we had to get appropriate seating."

After a lengthy boarding process, the group ended up scattered in the plane. But just before departure the steward beckoned, led the bunch up a winding staircase and into the first class dome.

"We were stunned and cried for joy! We now had a lovely quiet room all to ourselves with our own bathroom and steward. I remember the feeling of gratitude for a 'grace' experience. The steward was an angel to us."

At the Chicago airport ten volunteers offered to take the babies through customs. The escorts changed into their best clothes for delivering the babies. They were almost there!

"What a disappointment when, after excitedly transporting our ten cranky charges to the final gate, we were told the flight to Grand Rapids was cancelled!" They ran to catch another flight, but that one was delayed. "It was at this point that poor Robbie, the whimpering, sickly baby I was holding, could no longer contain himself. I heard and then felt an explosion of warm diarrhea seep down his legs and onto my lap. I felt sick. Both of us were a mess. We smelled so bad. I tried unsuccessfully to wash us off with paper towels. Neither of us had clean clothes. But we had

to carry on. The plane was boarding and I had all the passports and visas."

This time the flight attendant insisted that each baby had to be held, an impossible task because the escorts were now outnumbered two to one. "We had no choice but to ask our fellow passengers to assist us. Most agreed, including the handsomely dressed young man sitting beside me. I apologized for the smell and, despite his protests, insisted he allow me to protect his clothes. When I dismantled two disposable diapers and spread them across his waist like a huge apron, he laughed. But I doubt he was sorry because not ten minutes into the flight we both experienced another explosion."

The group arrived in Grand Rapids at 10pm, three hours late. They were the last ones to leave the plane. "To our great disappointment, we were suddenly surrounded by adoption workers on the plane and the babies whisked away from us. It is difficult to express how hurt and upset we were at not being able to hand the babies over to the parents ourselves. But we did as we were told and followed the entourage down the long hallway to the waiting room. In the distance we could hear cheering.

"I cry every time I think of this event. Couples were sobbing with joy. Parents and grandparents were huddled together in awe of their new baby. They had brought new outfits to dress them in, and Fisher Price toys. The parents of my two smelly babies didn't seem to notice the odour. They were just so happy and grateful. One woman, who was recovering from a hysterectomy and was still in a wheelchair, was receiving her first child."

Then it was all over. Within 30 minutes Goldie and the other escorts had left the airport. They were able to hug the families but were never called for any kind of follow-up or debriefing, nor were they able to keep track of the children. "I always felt that something was missing to bring closure to this important chapter of my life. The next day, as I flew to Toronto to meet my parents and children, I remember thinking, 'Who would believe our adventure?' Or was it just a dream?"

*Each baby had to be held,
an impossible task
because the escorts were
outnumbered two to one.*

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Goldine Pankratz is a nurse. She and her husband, Jim, recently moved from Winnipeg to Fresno, California. Eleanor Martens, also a nurse, works at Hope Centre, an inner-city community health centre in Winnipeg. Eleanor and her husband, Ray, are members of McIvor Ave. MB Church.

A Few Reflections on Engendering the Past: Women and Men in Mennonite History a Weekend Symposium hosted by the Chair in Mennonite Studies of the University of Winnipeg, October 16-17, 1998.

by Dora Dueck

The "Engendering..." conference was intended as a follow-up to the "Quiet in the Land?" conference in Millersville, Pa., in 1995. I did not attend the Millersville event, but I remember the excitement of those who had been part of it. Something significant had happened: an entire conference to discuss the experiences of women in the Anabaptist tradition!

This conference was shorter, smaller (14 papers) and less energetic. Nevertheless, it moved forward from "Quiet in the Land?" in framing the issue as gender, which is the experience of both women and men. (Women have been "problematized," said Prof. Marlene Epp; men haven't.)

Epp presented an insightful paper called "Heroes or Yellowbellies: Masculinity and the Conscientious Objector." If masculinity and militarism are intrinsically linked, she asked, how is masculinity constructed or deconstructed in a pacifist community? She noted the use of battle language for CO reports about planting trees or fighting fires, as well as fundamentalist language of "fighting sin." The decisions of the many Mennonite men who participated in war, she said, should also be analyzed through the gender lens.

Another paper that intrigued me was Marion Kobelt-Groch's "Anabaptists, Gender, and Children." In her research

on Anabaptists of the 16th century, Kobelt-Groch searched for what could be discovered about children in the community. Parents who rejected infant baptism were choosing an Anabaptist life for the child, she noted; children could be variously a danger (they could betray an adult being baptized), a form of constraint (preventing the parents' decision, or helping destroy the Anabaptist solidarity of the parents), or a bait and decoy for the persecuting authorities. It was harder, the evidence reveals, for women than men to heed the Anabaptist call to renounce all earthly associations, as these associations often involved their children.

Several of the papers focused on specific areas of women's history, such as missionaries to Puerto Rico, leadership in the 16th century, and sewing circles, all of them continuing, as it were, to fill in the gaps in Mennonite history.

A paper by James Urry on "Gender, Generation, and the Politics of Social Identity with examples from Russia and Southeastern Manitoba" asserted that gender is just one aspect of social structures, and is, furthermore, a modern rather than agrarian concern, having to do with individuated identities. He presented the categories of age and marital status as equally, if not more, important than gender.

This paper aroused some discussion in two areas. Urry said work in Mennonite agrarian communities was divided along gender lines: women did the cooking and milking, for example. Several men stated that they certainly milked cows in their growing-up years! (None confessed to having cooked, however.) Some of the other presenters seemed miffed at Urry's apparent downplaying of gender as a category. "Who's he talking to?" asked one. Another declared, "He should read more!" Unfortunately Urry could not attend the conference (his paper was read for him) and so was not able to defend either his paper or his reading habits. Sometimes disagreement and the debate that follows can helpfully sharpen issues, and I regret this couldn't happen here.

For me, the conference highlight was the closing banquet. It combined good food and good company with *Sophia* committee members and friends, listening to the music of Clara Schumann beautifully performed by Irmgard Baerg and Henrietta Schellenberg, and Armin Wiebe's reading from his *The Salvation of Jasch Siemens*. Guest speaker Katie Funk Wiebe was as good as I've ever heard her, humorous, informative, and inspiring. Sometimes our newest places of discovery, she reminded us, are in the past.

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Dora Dueck, *Sophia* editorial committee member, is a member of Jubilee Mennonite Church in Winnipeg. She is currently studying History at the University of Winnipeg.

Rosenthal Revisited

By Neoma Jantz

After my parents died several years ago and left me an inheritance I decided to go on a kind of pilgrimage. I joined the Mennonite Heritage Cruise, which spent two weeks in September exploring former Mennonite settlements in the Ukraine. While I was not looking for "a sacred place," I was curious about that land of mystery, which was both Canaan and Egypt for many Mennonite people.

We were a mixed crew of about 150 Canadians and Americans floating on a cruise ship down the Dnieper River, ranging from the religiously devout to the distant, yet all in search of our roots.

I had a particular destination, the village of Rosenthal in the Chortitza (Old) Colony first begun in 1789 by settlers migrating there from Prussia.

My mother was born in this village in 1913 in the home of her grandparents Peter and Katharina Dyck, whose house I knew was still in use. My grandmother died there during the typhoid epidemic, leaving my grandfather a widower with four small children. In 1923 he and his new wife and children came to Canada. There was always an element of mystery to this chapter of my mother's girlhood, of which she spoke very little because of the pain and rejection it recalled for her.

Our ship stopped at several ports, and from these we took bus trips along the various routes of our choice. As well as taking the prescribed city tours to see restored churches, museums, palaces, and monuments, our main purpose was to visit the dozens of villages clustered into colonies such as Chortitza, Molotshna, Zagradovka and Crimea. We had excellent resource persons and good guides to prepare us and interpret for us the landmarks we would see.

We knew we were causing something of a sensation when our bus would pull into a poor village and our group would scatter to locate a house, exclaim over the remains of a decrepit brick fence or take pictures of a former

church or school, a mansion or factory. Some of us picked up cherished souvenirs like bricks, roof tiles, soil samples, acorns and flowers. We compared our findings, pored over genealogies and listened to tragic and heroic stories. Gradually there emerged a sense of the place described in our history books and in the black and white photographs preserved in our albums.



Greta Pankratz

Here are some of the impressions I discovered with my eyes and my heart:

I saw the beautiful land our grandparents grieved over, with its two meters of top soil where "you could grow peaches and wheat on the same field." When Mennonites first came to these virgin steppes the grass was so tall it would hide a man riding on a horse. The forested hills and rows of oak, acacia, elm and chestnut planted by the thousands still grace the area.

I realized the level of sophistication and prosperity that resulted in the mansions and estates enjoyed by numerous wealthy families. The simpler homes suggested a wide range in economic status and prestige.

The importance of education was evident in the well-

built schools known for their excellence, often still functioning today as local schools. There were also former teacher training institutes and *Muster* (model) schools.

The inventiveness and industry of the people produced factories, mills, stores and business ventures that were widely known and acclaimed. For example, the Thiessen mill in Dnepropetrovsk produced some of the best flour in the country and employed several hundred people. We saw the Red cattle introduced by the Mennonites still being herded home at evening.

The responsibility of caring for the disadvantaged was shown in the hospitals and other institutions.

I saw that the original church buildings, many used later for local agricultural or political purposes, had ranged



Neoma in front of her great grandparents' house in Rosenthal.

from the impressive gothic designed edifices, to the humbler structures, yet always prominent in the colonies.

There were also sites with not a trace remaining, a grim reminder of how total and final was the destruction caused by the revolution and wars that followed. And there were many evidences of the present sad state of the economy and the hardships of the current inhabitants.

And always a nagging question surfaced in my mind: "What if?" What if my grandparents had not escaped when they did? What if they had been shipped north to Siberia along with so many others? Would they have survived? Would their faith have survived? Could you still exist here with any sense of connection to your former identity?

Very few of the old Mennonites are still known to live in this area. We met one, Greta Pankratz, who lives in the village of Alexanderkrone. As our bus pulled into her village she seemed to be waiting for us together with her daughters and grandchildren. A wrinkled, sun-browned woman with gleaming gold teeth, she called out a greeting to us in German, "Welcome, my dear brothers and sisters." We had only a brief time to chat about her history and current circumstances. She said that her heart did not feel at home in the Orthodox church but that she had her Bible and literature sent by a relative in Germany. As we sang "*Gott ist die Liebe*," passed the hat for her and tearfully embraced her farewell, I felt that we were again abandoning one of our own, one who had been given a totally different lot in life from ours.

There were several other Mennonite "originals" that we encountered. Some were women doctors in the Zaporozhye Mennonite Church who were given a large gift

of medical supplies brought by members of our group. One of these women explained to me that for a long time after Mennonites had left the area, the possessors of their homes made no improvements to them for fear that the former owners would come back to reclaim them.

And finally, I had a sense of my mother's regret. While I stood in my grandparents' yard and oriented

myself to the surroundings, I realized their farm estate was on the "high street" right beside the prestigious *Maedchenschule* in Rosenthal. My grandfather had married the girl next door, one of equal status to him. He was a rather pampered son with a faith settled more in tradition and status than piety.

When he narrowly escaped the bullets of Nestor Machnov, he made a thorough commitment of faith and joined the *Allianz* church disdained by his family. Then his beloved wife died, and he chose as his second mate a woman "up on the hill" – a poor but devout daughter of a common labourer.

The escape to Canada allowed them a new start, but the wide disparity between his "upper class" beginnings

and his life with his second wife never allowed him the freedom or permission to speak to his eldest child, my mother, of his first marriage.

I do not judge him for his silence; the complexities of that time and circumstance are not to be weighed on the scales of my understanding.

They are part of a huge picture, a long story, that is part of my inheritance.

I was grateful to have come to this knowledge and found that my pilgrimage had been worthwhile.

We knew we were causing something of a sensation when our bus would pull into a poor village.

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Neoma Jantz and her husband, Harold, have three grown daughters. They are members of River East MB Church in Winnipeg

Advice from a Failure

by Anne Martens

The following article is a compilation of insights from a much longer article, as well as notes taken during a personal conversation with Dora Dueck, a member of Sophia's editorial committee, in which Anne Martens shared her answers to the question that had been put to her: "Can the circle be broken?" The "circle" referred to is experiences in childhood in which the mind is programmed in a very negative way. The answer, she says, is a resounding Yes!

The path, she says, is "arduous and difficult" but Anne's own life is a testimony that it can be done, and with real joy and creativity too. We offer these excerpts as insights for another kind of adventure many women undergo, the journey of healing.

I have stolen the words for my title from the very first book that helped me inchworm my way to success.

From my own experience I know it's possible to break the never-ending circle. In my case the hurt that came to my young life was mostly battery plus verbal abuse along with a time of shunning. An abused person never seems to outlive the feelings of inadequacy, the fear of doing wrong, and the guilt that comes with it. Often the scars are carried secretly, and the fear is, can I ever be normal?

There is, however, "a path from the lowest depths to the loftiest heights."

The first thing you must do is change your thought pattern. As soon as you grasp this truth, you will have begun your journey. "Wait a minute," you may object, "it's not I who have to change. It's others." But change must begin with me. Healing begins when a person wants to be healed and is willing to take the first step.

You may feel anger at what is written here, but let me lower the boom still further: you are also responsible for your current situation. That morsel of truth took me twenty years to accept, twenty years of exciting Christian living lost to me.

Change for me came by way of books, and they came to me as though ordered specifically. Your path may lead another way, but once you have begun your journey you will find any number of helps coming to you and you will

not want to stop until you have reached your goal.

Listen to yourself. Hear how well you pull out the old defense mechanisms; listen to the repetitive phrases in every argument. The battered or abused have a legacy of distorted images from their childhood, shaped by their fear, anxiety, and guilt. Chances are you have coloured situations much the same as I have. I'm not saying these horrible situations didn't exist, but step back, listen, observe, and change what is changeable now. Change the mind's thought pattern.

Jo Coudert's book, *Advice from a Failure*, helped me take a giant step forward when she said, "Of all the people you will ever know in a lifetime, you are the only one you will never leave, nor lose. To the question of your life you are the only answer. To the problems of your life, you are the only solution."

Accepting that I was responsible for my life made me hungry to know God. I learned to listen to the voice of the Lord, to really listen so the chatter of my mind quieted.

Try reading Psalms 18 to 80, using the *Living Bible* perhaps (which seemed more my kind of language, not distant, but real).

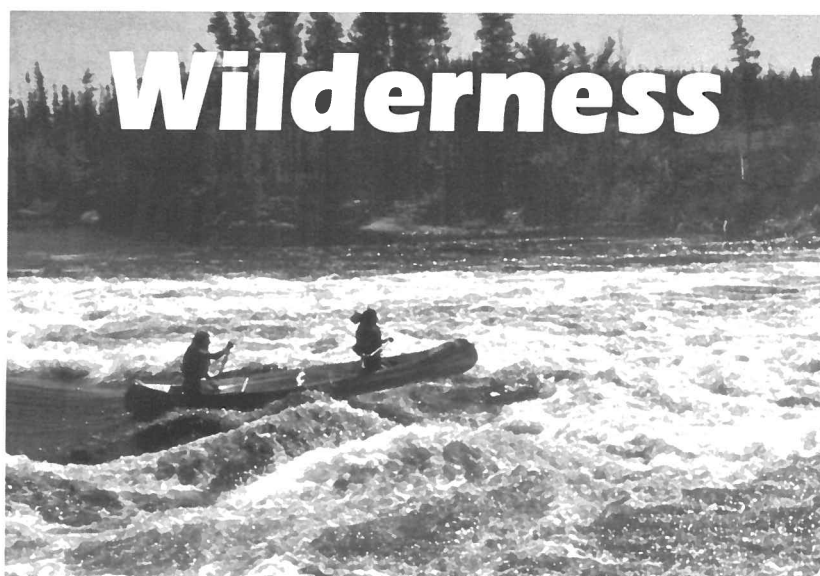
Visualize the words. Stay with "He makes me lie down in green pastures" of Psalm 23 until you hear the buzz of the bees in the patch of clover nearby. Watch the butterfly alight on a flower and register the sounds you hear before you go to the next line. "He leads me beside the still waters." Stop. Watch a waterbug on the calm surface of the lake. See the widening circles reach the shore. Look beyond to the horizon where a million diamonds dance in the sun.

Begin each day with praise. I learned this from Norman Vincent Peale's writings. I was spiritually dead inside, and so this was difficult for me. But the summons each morning was, "Go to the window and thank the Lord for this new day." I obeyed, and my spirit began to awaken. I learned to sing psalms aloud, and felt myself moving forward.

Gather sayings of hope. Write such sayings on scraps of paper, record them in a book. Gather pictures you find aesthetically beautiful. When the mind falls back into its old routines, these sayings, these Scriptures, these lovely pictures, will quiet your mind.

Faith releases the power of the subconscious. Recognize you are a child of the Sovereign who has called you by name. These truths set me free.

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Anne Martens and her husband, Victor, are members of Elmwood MB Church in Winnipeg.



A Challenge of Body and Mind

by Sara Jane Schmidt

Some of my friends really think I'm crazy. Why on earth would I leave the comforts of home to spend three, six or even ten days in the middle of nowhere, along with a billion biting bugs – or hungry bears – possibly in the rain, or snow, packing tons of gear through swamps or over mountains, paddling for hours, risking life and limb in rapids or (as on our most recent trip) in a windstorm with trees crashing all around, eating “cardboard” food and maybe getting lost?

All the above have been true at some point in my wilderness adventure career of the last twenty-one years. But so have days of paddling on glass-calm water, spectacular scenery, close-up views of wildlife, incredible solitude and silence, bugless days and nights, gourmet creations, thrilling rides through the rapids, intimate firesides and the honest exhaustion that comes with physical exertion, not to mention the feeling of “I did it!” when it's all over.

My family was decidedly un-campy, but the taste of camping I got at Winkler Bible Camp, where the Dead-horse Creek (aptly named) wasn't good for much more than swinging over on “tarzan” ropes, whet my appetite for more. On my list of attributes for a husband, a love of outdoor activity was a clear requirement. Our honeymoon included a three-day back pack (lots of liquid sunshine on that one!).

So what takes us “out there” over and over? Generally, it's love of nature and physical challenge. But it's other things too, such as being really away from humans

and with the wildlife. It gives us opportunities to be resourceful, using what we have (of course, duct tape is a must!) or what we can fashion from what's around. There's no point worrying about what the weather will be in three hours. Just watch where that thunder head is going so we get off the water in time. Or plan only how to negotiate this set of rapids, never mind the falls two kilometers downstream.

Folks who have never been “out there” think of all the potential disasters and discomforts. But disasters are equally possible at home: car accident, ice storm, flood, house fire, etc. (Plus, time and again we've proven there are more mosquitoes in my city backyard than anywhere in the Canadian shield!) A wilderness trip makes one conscious of how close we are to the edge of life. Therefore we revel in the sights, sounds and experiences of each day. We learn to live with the rhythms of nature – light, heat or cold, wind and rain – and act accordingly. It takes a few days to get in the groove and ignore the clock, but it sure feels great to live that way. On a trip in northern Saskatchewan last June, with almost perpetual daylight, we were sometimes still doing dishes at midnight! Along the way we have encountered aboriginal people, which has given me a fuller appreciation for their culture as well as some understanding of the obstacles they face in their lives today.

Another special aspect of wilderness tripping is the

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Christmas Stories from Russia

collected by Agnes Dyck

My parents, Johann and Helena (Wiebe) Dyck, fled Russia in 1929, arriving in the Altona area in March of 1930. Their welcome by Mother's relatives was muted – the thirties had just begun. However, they were grateful to be free of fear and to have enough to eat. Elvira Derksen's family was not so fortunate. The following is an excerpt from a reading given at the Fifty Year Freedom Jubilee, August 16, 1998, in Winnipeg. Elvira Derksen and her husband, Victor, are members of McIvor Ave. MB Church. They are actively involved in refugee concerns.

When my family tried to flee in 1929, my parents' brothers and sisters were already in Siberia; I was five years old. I remember that my mother was expecting my brother, and she was so weak, and there was not enough to eat so she withheld herself, so that Dad would have the strength to work. The fear of Dad's being taken away was always there. Sometimes we would take Dad's family pictures and run behind the barn. I don't know what that would have helped. We were so afraid. My parents encouraged us too, that if Father were sent one way and Mother were sent another way, we had relatives in Canada. In Russia, the children were usually put in orphanages. So Mother and Father always told us if that happened to us as a family, we had relatives in Canada. I don't think we had an address or anything.

I remember how often we wondered in the evening: "Oh, are they coming tonight?" It was very scary. And then one night the KGB came. It was a quarter to three. I still remember how they knocked on the door, and I woke up and sat up in bed. They touched my dad's beard and said,

"Get up!" and so he had to get up. I was sitting on the bed watching it all. Mom and Dad had just a few rubles, which they divided. Dad said to the men, "Why are you taking me?" They said, "Be quiet, or else!" They took many men out of Chortitza at that time (75 to 100 at a time).

This was just before Christmas, 1937. My dad's hobby was making guitars, and I remember how I went to these gatherings where he played with other men. It seemed so special, to be walking with my tall father. For that Christmas he had made a guitar for me. But we had to sell it for money later. I think I'll remember that all my life. The whole thing was so cruel, so brutal, no reason for it. Life became very harsh. It was just a struggle to get enough to eat. Mother would go to work and we lived in one little room. There was a lot of sadness, but on the other hand children can take a lot. There was always a lot of love and a lot of care. Those women who were in the same dilemma looked out for each other.

Another Christmas story from Russia was told by Susan Werschler to a group of women at a McIvor Ave. MB Church Christmas banquet. Susan is my cousin, and her family stayed with mine when they first arrived in Canada. She and her husband, Milton, are members of McIvor Ave. Church.



Christmas in Russia in 1939 will always be in my memory. The Russian police had recently taken my father away. Mother was left alone with five children. We all knew that at Christmas there would be no gifts on our plates at the table as was the custom in Russia. How mother must have prayed at that time! How heavy her

pentecost

by Melody Goetz

heart must have been to know there would be nothing to give to her children. Then, two or three nights before Christmas Eve, there was a loud knock at the door. Our hearts just froze. So often when there was a hard knock at the door in the evening it was the Russian police. After it was all quiet, we opened the door, and there to our great surprise was a fair-sized parcel, with two words written on it: *Frohe Weihnacht*, "Merry Christmas." The parcel contained many beautiful things, including halvah and Russian candy. How our eyes sparkled! I am sure Mother had tears in her eyes. It turned out to be a wonderful Christmas after all. Much later we were told who gave us the gift. They are all gone now and, I am sure, rejoicing in heaven. Their Christmas treasure has followed them and many years later there is still someone here to testify about a gift that became a lasting Christmas treasure.

Today we are blessed with many things. We do not have to worry about food. Should we then forget our past? Should we not praise our Father for the miracles he has done and will do if we trust him?

*These are the gifts of Christmas
that I will pass on to you
May you find rich contentment
in everything you do.*

*May all life's greatest blessing
be waiting at your door,
and may good health and happiness
be yours forevermore.*

*And may my Christ and Saviour
fill your hearts with love,
Then you will have gifts of Christmas
that truly come from above.*

so this morning in church a woman is standing behind a microphone faltering to speak about the One who lives within. & swirls around us like some Wild God, & listing all her experiences with spirits – some bad, some good – & how they frighten her, both with their presence & their mute-ness, & I want to stand up (& the tears will come then, like fresh flowing water down my face) & begin – "I used to wish for death when I wakened during the night or into the morning, but the other night, curled up like a bird fallen from its nest, the Words came to me, floating along the wind *for his Eye is on the sparrow & I know he watches me* & that small moment flooded into the rest of the day & the resultant weeks like a holy baptism, like the end of all things that believe in hopelessness, like the beginning of my winged & feathered Life...

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Melody Goetz writes poetry and fiction. She and her husband, Roger, live in Yarrow. They attend an Anglican church in Abbotsford.

Wilderness Challenge

Continued from page 19

opportunity to form relationships in an intense setting. You really get to know someone over the course of a week-long trip, especially when the chips are down. Hours by the campfire allow for deeply satisfying conversations that range from the sublime to the ridiculous, with no distractions.

For about the last seven years running, I've also been on women-only canoe trips. The camaraderie is definitely different from mixed groups. Among other things it provides that special opportunity for skinny dipping and generally living in the buff (being careful not to get burnt!). After this summer's edition I concluded that sometimes this really is a good thing for us women to do alone. There's no doubt that when men are along we depend on them for most of the brawny work, such as portaging canoes. However, we can do it too, in our own way and at our

own pace, and it feels good to prove that to ourselves. And we eat really well (four or six cooks are better than two!).

Finally, we experience God differently out there. We appreciate God's handiwork in nature and are given a glimpse of Eden, as in an evening spent with a gorgeous view from among stately pines, a fabulous sunset or lightning show, surrounded by the echoes of loons, whippoorwills or coyotes, watching a beaver patrol the water or a weasel looking back from a nearby tree. We also become more aware of our dependence on God who sustains life from moment to moment and learn to trust more fully.

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When Sara Jane Schmidt is not in the wilderness she plays and teaches piano. She and her husband, Rick, have two teen-aged children. They are members of Jubilee Mennonite Church in Winnipeg.



A BROTHER'S PERSPECTIVE

On Hands

by Doug Schulz

Hands mean everything some times. A funeral director told me a woman asked if she could just touch her husband's fingers once more. One arm severed from his mangled body was all that remained recognizable after a horrific accident. Then I understood the absolute tenderness we human beings crave and show through our hands.

My mother was right when she said so much begins with the holding of hands. No wonder we want the end to be that way. The night my father was killed by a stroke, I held one of his hands. Fiery fever heat. Then, clammy cold. So quickly. That was over two decades ago. A generation. Now my children watch me hold the hand of the woman I decided that very night I would ask to marry me. I wonder at times – not because I'm morbid but because I conduct memorial services of young and old – which of us will be left with warm hands when the other's heat is extinguished?

Ah, the power of hands to show our love. Another friend recounted an experience. He was shopping in a large supermarket when a burst of laughter – obnoxious and strange – reached him from far across the orderly rows. The noise died; my friend resumed his chores, traversing the lanes of the store until the grating cackle came again. It was evident that some unmannered cad was now only an aisle or two away. Listening carefully, my chum heard an unpleasant voice droning a verse of something, then blasting out those unearthly squawks.

Normally mild-mannered, my acquaintance set out in anger to confront this public peace-breaker. But when he charged 'round the end of the

aisle, he was the one stopped short. There stood a poorly-dressed couple in front of the greeting card racks. A man with large hearing aids was intoning lines from one of those colourful, comical kind of cards. The woman, also wearing hearing aids, and holding a white cane in one hand, stood staring sightlessly past the man's face. When he finished his chant, he threw his head back to laugh. Now she quickly placed her other hand upon his eyes, his lips, that happily quaking visage of a loved one who poured the joys of life into her heart. She read his pleasures with the eyes in her fingertips.

Without hands, the world is dust, but never clay; it's made of stuff we are powerless to shape. Think of it. Only hands make most musical instruments musical. Dust silently adorns piano ivories, but dust with God's spirit in it – the human body with a soul that muses – creates sounds on those keys to touch elements of earth with glories of heaven.

Indeed, without hands, humanity would be artless, uncouth, and grace-starved. No wonder saints and sinners alike place fingers over awe-opened mouths and enter a holy hush under Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling, where the human hand reaches out to God's, portraying an elevated purpose for our planetary existence. The power of truth and beauty may flow from hands – from the master painter's brush, or from any man's or woman's honest attempt to give a gift to the world.

Hands help us understand life and communicate with each other. Notice how language is often dull and unmoving without hands. But add even simple finger gestures and you can demonstrate hatred, signal enthusiastic approval, plead for silence, snap a

group to attention, or point direction to things good and bad. We marvel at how effectively some people "talk with their hands." A former missionary told me his son had forgotten the Spanish he'd acquired when they lived abroad. Then some Latin American visitors came. "When they use their hands, Dad," the boy said, "I understand it all."

The ultimate power of hands resides, of course, in the language of touch. Words may put us "on the same page" intellectually, or even "bind our hearts" emotionally. But we also desire something for our bodies. Some tangible contact. Some connection of soul and flesh so that we might experience affection in a tactile testament. No wonder some of the most compelling words in Scripture are these: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we beheld His glory full of grace and truth" (see John 1:14). It's a touchable God!

Therefore, to feel God-connected, we'll need to reach out hands in works of art and worship, and in acts of tenderness, compassion and – where appropriate – passion. Good thing we are given these fingered tools that create love in the world in so many ways. How holy, how exquisite, this life contained in skin. I fold my hands and pray that I may always give and receive touches that feel like some grace of God.

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Doug Schulz, former pastor at Cedar Park Church (MB), in Ladner, BC, works as a "community pastor," providing memorial planning and grief counselling for families without church connections, and as a chaplain at Delta Hospital and another local care home. Doug and his wife, Annie, a piano teacher, have three children in high school. In his free time, Doug walks, writes and wonders about eternal verities.

Stolen Life: *The Journey of a Cree Woman*

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by Rudy Wiebe and Yvonne Johnson,
Alfred A. Knopf, Toronto, 1998.

Reviewed by Agnes Dyck

"I was in prison and you visited me."

Beginning with *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, Rudy Wiebe's past writings have drawn attention to the plight of aboriginal people in Canada. With *Stolen Life* he has documented the horrific details of the life of a Cree woman, Yvonne Johnson, who wrote to him from prison after she had read *The Temptations of Big Bear*. Big Bear, she said, was her great, great grandfather. Consequently, she and Rudy Wiebe collaborated on her story, using her journals, letters, court records and her long conversations with him. Visits with lawyers, family members and acquaintances also proved a rich fund of information for the authors.

Wiebe noted her gifted language skills and mentored her through an often torturous process of documenting her story. This book is not for the squeamish, but in allowing Johnson to be noticed and viewed as a complex human being, as more of a victim than a victimizer, Wiebe has done her a great service.

Suffering a double cleft palate, Johnson had been unable to speak and express her needs in her formative years until a compassionate judge ordered medical help for her. In addition to her physical disability and her abusive home environment (rape, incest, alcohol abuse), she suffered from the ostracism of the community's standard racial prejudice.

A brief review cannot do justice

to this powerful account of one native woman who somehow seems to embody all that has gone awry with aboriginal people. One could deal with the backwash of traditional family life and structure here still evident: the constant restless wanderings from one home to another, the rigid patterns of family authority, the tradition of hospitality that has deep cultural roots and which, however, has often become an onerous obligation.

Furthermore, the justice system as portrayed here would be ample material for reflection on this writing. A possible approach might be the apparent injustice of Johnson's sentence and her family's denying and blaming role in her life story.

Johnson's long years in prison (she was sentenced to 25 years for murder in 1991) have given her insight into the complex twists and turns of her past. She has become aware of her and her family's strategies in dealing with abuse and understands how traditional aboriginal beliefs about the hierarchy of authority brought about her mother's punitive attitude toward her. She writes compassionately about her family abusers and others who have caused her pain. Out of her early years of being depersonalized she has emerged as a gifted word artist with a sense of regret for her past and a resolve to function as a truthful and loving human being.

*This review also appeared recently in
Mennonite Brethren Herald.*

Maria's Century: *A Family Saga from 1855-1935*

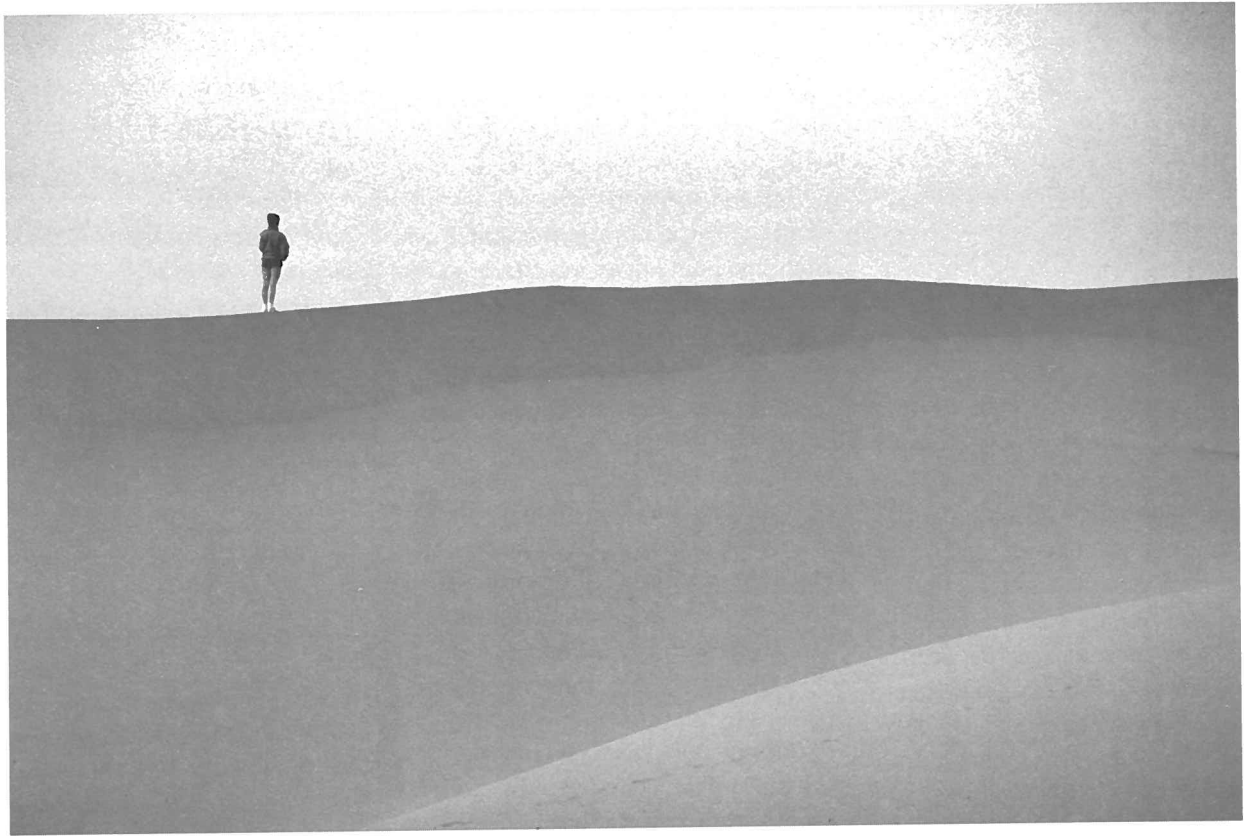
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by Hilda J. Born,
Imprint Press Publishers, Abbotsford,
BC, 1998.

Reviewed by Lorie Battershill

The past remembered often provides opportunity to get perspective on life, allowing us to understand where we have been and how factors from the past have influenced life and the culture we live in. *Maria's Century* is such a record. Although it was written primarily as a record for the family of Maria Martens, it makes fascinating reading for anyone interested in the past, particularly those who share Maria's Russian Mennonite heritage.

Born in 1900, Maria Martens remembers, in amazing depth, the details of her day to day life throughout the 20th century. As we approach the new century, histories such as this one provide us with opportunity for insight. This insight comes, not from deep analysis, but from faithful memory keeping.

In her preface to *Maria's Century* Helena Braun writes: "The reader is invited to enter into not only the daily happenings, but to hear with the inner ear the joy and heartache behind the words.... That is what it means to be part of the past and the future at the same time." Through its faithful record *Maria's Century* provides insight into the lives of women, both of today and yesterday.



*"Stand at the crossroads, and look,
and ask for the ancient paths,
where the good way lies and walk in it,
and find rest for your souls."*

JEREMIAH 6:16 NRSV